

A man and a woman are shown in a close, romantic embrace. The woman, on the left, has long blonde hair and is wearing a red dress with white polka dots. The man, on the right, has dark hair and is wearing a black shirt. They are looking at each other with soft expressions. The background is slightly blurred, showing a window with a blue sky and some ornate wall decorations.

# HIS FOREVER GIRL

LIZ TALLEY

*Cherish*

# **Liz Talley**

## **His Forever Girl**

### **Аннотация**

This forever is off to a rocky start! Meeting Tess Ullo is definitely a sign life's improving for Graham Naquin. After their spectacular night together, he knows there's a lot more to explore between them! Good thing he's aced the interview that will bring him home to New Orleans, his young daughter and Tess. Too bad things don't go the way Graham hoped. That job he lands running a float-building company? Tess thought it was hers so she quits to work for the competition. As they face off in business, he admires her talent...and keeps thinking she's the one for him. Now he has to persuade her!

# Содержание

Was this a good idea?

5

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

90



# Was this a good idea?

Tess wondered if she really should extend this impromptu date with another drink. It was Monday and she needed to be at work early. But, even though Graham had a kid and felt not so much her normal type, she had this crazy, weird connection with him. She couldn't *not* stay.

And it had been a long time since she had no-strings-attached fun with a hot guy.

When their round of drinks arrived, Graham clinked his glass against hers. "I'm glad you stayed. Feels as though we're dancing around—"

"Hooking up?"

He gave her a serious look. "Is this what we're doing? Hooking up?"

Heck, she didn't know. But this night with Graham felt right. It felt like something more than just fun. It felt like magic. Like Graham was her perfect match. "Maybe."

Moving slowly he lightly brushed her lips with his. Her pulse sped at the first touch, and she leaned in for more. She knew with absolute clarity that she didn't want just one night with Graham.

His Forever Girl

Liz Talley



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A 2009 Golden Heart Award finalist in Regency romance, **LIZ TALLEY** has since found a home writing sassy Southern stories. In her current books, she's visiting one of her favorite cities—New Orleans. Liz lives in north Louisiana with her hero, two beautiful boys and a large number of animals. She enjoys laundry, paying bills and creating masterful dinners for her family. She also lies in her biography to make herself look like the perfect housewife. What she really likes is new shoes, lemon-drop martinis and fishing off the pier at her camp. You can visit her at [www.liztalleybooks.com](http://www.liztalleybooks.com) to learn more about the lies she tells herself, and about her upcoming books.

Special thanks to the Elsensohns at Mardi Gras Decorators for sharing the business aspects of Mardi Gras.

This book is dedicated to my nieces and nephews—Audrey, Ava, Sam, Davey, Mikayla, Byron, Christian and Devvin. I don't always see you, but I carry you in my heart.

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt](#)

**CHAPTER ONE**

TESS ULLO SLID ONTO a stool and knocked her knuckles against the weathered bar. “The usual, Ron. Stat.”

The bartender with ripped biceps and a sweet smile sauntered over. “That kind a day, hon?”

“God, yes.” Taking Granny B to the doctor and running all the errands the older woman had piled up on her list wasn’t for the faint of heart. Tess’s Italian grandmother wasn’t of the sweet variety—more like the salty-with-a-side-of-vinegar kind. For seven hours, Tess had “helped” her grandmother find a bath mat the perfect shade of periwinkle. All that running around came after hearing Granny B tell the technician doing the mammogram about her sex life with Tess’s long-departed grandfather. Tess would never look at the picture of the stern-faced man dressed in his Navy uniform in quite the same way. Scarred wasn’t even the word for what she felt. “Took Granny B out today.”

“Yikes. I’ll make it a double,” Ron said with a twinkle in his eye.

Tess gave a wave to Petra Ostrav who worked in the paint department at Tess’s family company. The diminutive woman sat close to her lover, Paola, a beautiful Chilean dancer who headlined at a top-notch gentleman’s club. Otherwise there were not many patrons on this late Monday afternoon. Maybe it was the weather—misty rain fell outside the open plantation windows of the bar located not far from the French Quarter in the Marigny district. Or maybe the small crowd was because it was Lent and the devout were being, well, devout.

Two-Legged Pete’s was a regular joint for the employees



of Frank Ullo Float Builders—owned and operated by Tess’s father—so she usually knew someone when she dropped by. Of course, she’d been a more frequent patron at Pete’s recently since Mardi Gras was over and she’d stopped seeing her on-again-off-again boyfriend, Nick. She’d caught him with Merri Wynn right after Christmas. Nick had defended himself by claiming they weren’t exclusive, but Tess didn’t care. Still felt like a slap after they’d spent the previous weekend talking about a possible future together.

Her phone buzzed and she slid it from her purse. The text was from Gigi Vastola, her best friend.

Can’t get away from the office. Sorry, babe.

Damn it.

Tess had wanted some girl time with her bestie, but she understood. Gigi worked with a law firm on Canal Street, climbing the ladder toward partnership, which meant her friend often got trapped after hours preparing cases. No biggie. They’d catch up later. Tess would have one drink then maybe head to spinning class...or home to watch *The Bachelor*.

The door opened and Tess caught the movement out of the corner of her eye. She cocked her head and looked—like everyone else in Two-Legged Pete’s—at the man in a raincoat shouldering his way in. A navy suit and a conservative tie showed beneath the black trench. He sported a fresh haircut and had a

jaw of granite.

Nice.

But very out of place for a casual joint like Pete's.

Tess snuck a peek at her middle-of-the-week jeans and long-sleeved sweater. Although the sweater had a pinprick dot of bleach on the hem, the bright green made her eyes look deeper. And she'd worn her UGG boots so she didn't look totally sloppy.

Jeez. Why was she taking stock of herself? Because a good-looking dude walked in? Or maybe it was because Granny B had pointed out she needed to do something with her hair and wear more flattering shoes.

She glanced at the table of women who looked like bank tellers. Every woman stared at the guy, too. One woman tucked a curl behind her ear, and another wiped the mascara shadow from under her eyes.

Even Ron sucked in his gut.

The stranger nodded at the bartender, who in turn gave him a quite charming smile. The man slid onto a stool three down from Tess as Ron flew toward him like a magnet toward a metal pole.

"Hello, there," Ron said, showing his dimples.

Good Lord.

"Hey," the man said, reaching into the open coat for what she presumed was a wallet. "I'll take a J.B. and Coke, easy on the ice."

Ron lifted an eyebrow. "J.B., huh? My kind of man."

Tess snorted. She couldn't help it. She hadn't seen that kind of bad flirting since Gigi got drunk and tried a top-ten list of bad

pickup lines on every man at the Columns on Valentine's Day. Okay, that was only a month ago, but still Ron not only took the cake...he'd already licked the spoon.

Typical Ron.

"Hush," her friend said, slinging an arm her way, but not daring to take his eyes off tall, dark and hewn-from-granite.

Tess giggled. Yes, she actually giggled.

Damn it.

The man looked over at her and smiled.

Oh, hell, no. She'd pull out dimples, too...if she had any to use. She smiled as if they all shared one big joke.

"Ron's a consummate flirt," she said, jabbing a finger at her bartender bud. "You'll fall prey if you stand too close."

"Oh, please. You stand closer than anyone, mon amie. You love my flirting." Ron grabbed a bottle of the amber liquid from the back shelf and held a glass to the light.

The stranger laughed and the sound tickled Tess's stomach.

Whoa, girl. Down.

"True," she said, pulling her own drink toward her. Ron made her gin gimlet just as she liked it—simple syrup, muddled cucumber, tarragon and Hendrick's. Delish. "When it comes to flirting, you're the don."

"Ron the Don? Sounds like a wrestler." The stranger quirked an eyebrow. He turned toward her allowing his gaze to travel lightly over her. A shiver ran through her. Dear Bessie, he had the prettiest blue eyes that would exactly match the bathroom rug her

Granny B had spent eons searching for. Good humor twinkled in the periwinkle depths, and Tess felt more than the warmth of the gin in her girl parts.

Dang, he looked good enough to sop up a biscuit with, and Tess didn't even eat biscuits. Carbs were the enemy, after all, but this man made her want to change her mind.

"What brings you to Pete's? We don't get much tourist traffic," Ron asked, pouring a generous amount of whiskey into the tumbler then topping it with soda.

"Job interview. Someone at the company mentioned this place when I said I wanted a local pub." The man pulled the drink to him, sipped and nodded in satisfaction.

"Really?" Ron said, swiping at the bar with a towel and sliding a surprised look at Tess, keeping her in the conversation. "Good to know we're getting recommendations around here."

The stranger made a sound in the back of his throat that sounded like an agreement, and Tess sipped her drink, trying not to out-and-out stare at the hotness mere feet from her. She had to be ovulating because her hormones had shifted into overdrive and clamored for her to put on some lipstick and sidle closer.

She ignored her hormones because they made bad decisions. In fact, last time they'd led her to a strange bed, overly polite note and a cold cup of coffee the morning after. Tess had stopped letting her girl parts dictate her love life.

The man glanced at the TV that was broadcasting something with racing dirt bikes. "Any way I can talk you into turning to

the Rangers game? Wanna check the score.”

Ron looked like someone had farted. “Hockey?”

“Nah, baseball. Preseason.”

Despite her declaration to keep her distance, Tess slid onto the next stool. “Feliz is pitching. They’re checking out his arm after rehab.”

The man smiled at her.

God, his smile was good.

No, not good. Sexy. And not just sexy but up-against-a-wall-naked sexy. Tess was certain she’d seen such a smile only twice...and the aftereffects had resulted in its moniker. Though up-against-the-wall-naked sex wasn’t as hot as it sounded. Required a lot of balance.

“Ugh, baseball?” Ron groaned but lifted the remote. “The only thing good about baseball is the way the players look in those tight pants.”

“I’ll concede that point,” Tess said, dragging her purse over, telling herself she moved closer to the man only because it gave her a better view of the TV.

“That’s what all the ladies say,” the stranger said. So was that a message to Ron? Or to her? “And, uh, I guess some guys.”

Ron found the right station. Texas was up 5–2 in the third inning. The Rangers’ designated hitter was at the plate, swinging and missing at low and inside.

“Shamburg’s gonna throw that pitch at him all night,” Tess said.

“A lady who knows baseball.” The man looked pleased at the revelation. But, really, there were lots of girls who liked baseball. Okay, maybe not lots. But others.

“I’m not obsessed but I watch.”

Ron nodded. “Yeah, she keeps stats.”

The stranger raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“I like the Astros best,” she said, tugging a notebook out of her purse. “I’ve gotten into a habit of studying batting averages and making predictions. My brother was a bookie during his college years and paid me to help him. Old habits die hard...and now I like the whole challenge of dissecting the game.”

“Bookie? Does he still—”

“Nah, he’s a priest.”

The man’s laughter made her stomach twitch. He looked even better laughing and the bar lights caught the rain droplets in his dark hair. Her hand rose to wipe them away, but she caught herself in time and instead lifted the pen, jotting down the starting pitcher and his ERA.

“I’m Graham.” Hotness extended a hand.

“Tess.” She tucked the pen and pad into her purse and took his hand. It was damp but warm. “Nice to meet you.”

Now that they’d introduced themselves she definitely wanted to keep the conversation flowing, but couldn’t come up with a topic. Maybe more baseball?

“Hey, there. I’m Angela,” a woman drawled from behind Tess. Graham spun on his stool. “Oh, hi.”

The woman who'd earlier tucked her hair and put on lip gloss stood behind them with a gleam in her eye. Like a predator.

Graham pulled at his tie.

"Would you like to join me and my friends? We're celebrating a promotion, and we've ordered stuffed mushrooms and smoked oysters." Angela gave Graham a come-hither gaze that made Tess shift on her stool. Jeez, the woman was good.

Graham looked ambushed and his eyebrows lowered a fraction. Tess could almost hear the wheels creaking, turning, churning, trying to figure out how to respond to the overt invite.

"Well, I'll take some of those stuffed mushrooms," Tess joked.

Angela shot her "the look"—the one that said something needed to be stuffed, and it wasn't the mushrooms.

Graham looked like a man who had swallowed a lemon. Okay, maybe not that uncomfortable or sour, but Tess could tell he didn't want to go with Angela and couldn't say so without being rude.

Aw...he was a sweet guy. Tess should help him.

"Actually Graham and I have been catching up," Tess said.

A few seconds tripped by and finally her handsome stranger nodded. "Yeah, it's crazy and such a coincidence, but Tess was my blind date to Sadie Hawkins back in '97."

Tess rolled her eyes. She had been eleven years old in '97, but she wouldn't correct him. If Graham said they went to Sadie Hawkins together, they went to Sadie's together. "Small world, huh? All because he asked Ron to turn to the Rangers' game."

Graham gave Angela a small regretful shrug and then gave his attention to Tess. "You know, stuffed mushrooms would be good before we go to dinner."

Dinner?

Well, all righty then.

"Perfect," Tess said, with a sunny smile.

Angela stood there for a moment, looking unconvinced. Graham turned back to her. "Thanks for the offer, Angela, but I don't want to crash your girls' night out. Go celebrate, and I'll send a round of drinks for you and your friends."

Angela gave a shrug and fake smile. "That's sweet of you."

"The least I can do after that nice invite."

"Send the waitress. She's been on break for fifteen minutes and we're empty," she said to Ron before sashaying to her friends.

"You're the nice guy my mom's been begging me to find," Tess cracked, admiring the way Graham's dark hair brushed the collar of his white dress shirt. The tugging at his throat had loosened the striped power tie and he'd unbuttoned the top button showing gorgeous tanned skin at his throat. His five o'clock shadow gave him a rakish air. "But you don't have to feel obliged to take me to dinner."

"Of course I don't. But come to think of it, you do remind me of Ainsley Braddock, my Sadie's date."

Huh. What did that mean? He wasn't taking her to dinner?

Disappointment stung her. Which was crazy. She didn't know this man from Adam. Which she always thought a stupid saying



because she didn't know Adam. Okay, she had a cousin named Adam, but—

“I would love to take you to dinner. That is, if you're free.”

Tess nodded, wondering if it was a mistake to look so eager. Her stomach growled and she decided dinner was dinner. And if it were with a handsome stranger, she'd have news to share with Gigi when she called her later. There was something appealing about being spontaneous, something exciting about having dinner with Graham of the power tie and wing tips. “A friend was supposed to meet me after work but couldn't get off. I haven't eaten yet so...that sounds fun.”

Graham lifted his glass and clinked it against the one she held in her hand. “Then it's a date.”

They both drank and Ron shook his head. “How do you do it? Any time I go to a bar, I go home with a tab and that's it.”

Tess laughed. “Joanne would be pissed if you came home with anything other than a bar tab.”

“Pregnant women are such downers. She used to be fun,” Ron grumbled.

A perplexed expression gathered on Graham's face.

Tess helped him out. “Ron isn't gay. He's just an indiscriminate flirt. Always chasing that tip.”

Ron lifted a shoulder. “I never said I was gay.”

“You implied it,” Graham said.

“No, you made an assumption based on my comment regarding men in baseball pants.” Ron's eyes danced with

laughter. He loved flipping stereotypes.

“Ron has a twisted sense of humor,” Tess said, finishing off her gimlet. The crisp taste and slight buzz made her feel invincible. Or maybe that was due to the fact she’d picked up a hot guy in a bar. Okay, only for dinner, but even so, she felt better about her crap day with Granny B who had ended it by declaring Tess would never see a single piece of jewelry in her will. “Do you want to order stuffed mushrooms? If so, we better put in an order. Daryl’s slow.”

“Hey, good food requires patience,” Ron said.

Graham centered his attention on her. “Let’s roll. I’m hungry for more than an appetizer.”

“Meow,” Ron purred, before moseying toward a customer at the other end of the bar.

Tess’s cheeks blistered even though she knew it was a joke.

Graham’s gaze slid over her, lingering particularly on her mouth. Tess licked her lips before she could catch herself—and he definitely noted the movement. “I’m not familiar with the Marigny area so I don’t know any restaurants close by.”

“I’m not dressed overly nice, so we better stick to casual.” Tess glanced outside. “Looks like the rain is gone and the stars are out. Why don’t we walk toward the Quarter? It’s not far and you know there’s something there to tickle the fancy.”

Tess hopped off the stool, tossing a ten and five on the bar to cover her drink and give Ron a decent tip. Joanne had only a month to go until she delivered their first child, and money was

tight for the couple.

“I’ll defer to the local.” Graham withdrew a credit card and drummed his fingers on the bar while Ron slid the card through the machine. Then he stood, lifting an attaché case. “Let me lock this in my rental and we’ll head out.”

“Have fun, you two,” Ron called holding up his bar towel and giving it a wave.

And so Tess walked out of Two-Legged Pete’s with a good-looking man and the expectation for good food, good wine...and maybe something more.

Or maybe she wanted it to be more than what it was.

Either way, it was better than watching *The Bachelor*.

## CHAPTER TWO

GRAHAM NAQUIN POPPED the trunk of the Chevy Malibu and placed his briefcase inside, slamming the lid with finality.

So...he’d picked up a random chick in a bar.

Outside his current comfort zone in a huge way. In fact, it was something he’d vowed not to do for a while. His focus was on getting his crap together.

In the past couple of months, he’d abandoned the impulsive, carefree Graham, electing to play everything safe. Hadn’t worked all that well for him so far, but he liked thinking he was a man who considered every decision thoroughly before moving forward. But tonight he hadn’t even tried to apply the brakes. Nope. He’d tossed out that white lie about Sadie Hawkins and

backed it up with re-extending the offer for dinner.

He almost felt like himself again...like lady luck winked at him and dealt him a winning hand. Like things were going his way finally.

Smiling at Tess, trying like hell to convince himself an impulsive dinner date was a good idea, he waved an arm in the direction of the French Quarter. "Lead on."

In the damp air, Tess's beach-streaked hair had curled around cheeks scattered with freckles. Her eyes were the color of wet moss, and not much about her implied overt sexiness. More like friendly puppy or kid sister.

Okay. Not exactly friendly puppy. Or sister.

Tess also had full lips and a stubborn chin. Her perfectly-proportioned breasts were nicely outlined in her sweater and her caboose was tight. She wore those weird brown boots all the teenagers wore and jeans that looked comfy and trendy at the same time. She smelled like apples—sort of fresh and fruity. She had an all-American vibe, but there lay a promise in the sway of her hips, a hint of mystery in her smile. Tess reminded him of that one Christmas he'd found a forgotten present beneath the tree.

She'd sucked him in, stretched him outside his intentions...and damned if he wasn't intrigued by the connection between them. It felt like something he'd never felt before. Or maybe he was on a high from nailing his interview.

"Wish I were dressed nicer so we could go somewhere

swanky,” she said as they fell in step on the deserted sidewalk.

“I see how you roll,” he said, laughing when her eyes widened.

“No, I’ll totally pay for my own dinner. It’s just you’re dressed nice and if it’s been a while since you’ve been to New Orleans...”

“I come to New Orleans often enough...just not since November. Besides, New Orleans is a city where even the cheap eats are good.” Graham looked back toward the edge of the Marigny District, spotting the huge warehouse he’d toured that afternoon in the distance. Something warm and right settled in his gut at the thought of returning to his first love. The sound of tugboats blowing their horns on the Mississippi echoed the certainty in his soul.

“So a job interview brings you to the Big Easy?” Tess asked. The puddles along the worn streets tossed back reflections of the buildings. Occasionally someone rode by on a bike or a cab passed as the rhythm of the city reestablished itself after the early spring rain. The squeal of brakes, the rev of engines and the occasional shout of laughter accompanied the music spilling into the streets. The earthy smell of New Orleans which had once been like bacon and eggs to him filled his nose.

“Yeah, I worked for NASA for six years, but with all the federal cuts, my project was canned. Since I have to relocate, I wanted to come home. Something called me.”

“That’s almost romantic,” she said.

“Except it was an actual phone call,” he said, with a wry smile. No one had ever accused him of being romantic.

Her laughter tightened something within him. He glanced at her profile. Her nose tilted up, button cute. He liked that. Cute. Like he could drop kisses on it all night. Then and there, he revised his earlier impression. There was something sexy about Tess.

“Did you get the job?”

“Not yet, but I have a good shot because I have experience in the field. Years ago I started a company doing what this guy does, plus I got my MBA on top of my engineering degree. But who knows? Felt like the interview went well and the guy’s pressed to find someone soon.”

“Good for you,” she said, tossing him a smile. “Where do you live now?”

“Houston.”

“So you’ll be transferring here?”

He nodded. “I have some job leads in Houston, but my family lives here. Well, my brother lives on the Northshore, but that’s essentially here. You originally a New Orleans’s girl?”

“Born and raised. Can’t you hear the accent?”

Each region of the Crescent City had its own dialect. “Not from the Westbank or New Orleans East. Uptown?”

“Close enough. My parents still live in Old Metairie.”

“I went to Jesuit. You?”

“Country Day.” Whoa, swanky, yet Tess didn’t give off that vibe.

“Class of ’93.”

Tess whipped her head around. Obviously the woman excelled in math. “Then why did you tell Angela you took me to Sadie Hawkins in ’97?”

He laughed. “Because you didn’t look old enough to have gone in 1993.”

“So you thought you looked young enough for 1997?” She laughed again. Her laugh was low and raspy. Another thing he liked about her.

“Touché,” he conceded as they turned on Decatur Street, skirting the edge of the eclectic, high-rent neighborhood. “So where shall we eat?”

“You have a favorite?”

“I have lots of favorites.” And he did. Galatoire’s. Dickie Brennan’s. Elizabeth’s. Irene’s. GW Fins. And on and on and on. “Somewhere with a good po’boy? Haven’t had good Nawlins bread in forever.”

“Central Grocery is closed but we can try Maspero.”

“Let’s go for it.”

She turned her head again and he wondered if she thought he’d meant on some level other than dinner. Maybe he did mean it that way. Things had been so stressful lately with being out of work, depleting his savings and dealing with Monique’s demands he’d pulled out of the dating scene months ago. He hadn’t been to dinner with a woman in a while...not counting his brother’s girlfriend the night before.

What would it hurt?

Tess had nice curves, a good sense of humor and kept baseball stats. Not to mention she'd agreed to go to dinner with a stranger. Many would think her actions dangerous, and maybe to an extent they were, but something about her spontaneity and her self-assurance struck admiration in him. He liked a woman who knew what she wanted, who didn't shrink from the fray, but waded in bold and in control of herself.

She reminded him of his ex-girlfriend Monique in that way—decisive and thoroughly modern. But that's where the comparison ended. Tess had a sweetness and honesty Monique lacked. He patted his breast pocket where he usually put his phone. Thinking of Monique reminded him of their daughter—he needed to call Emily before nine o'clock.

As they got closer to Maspero which sat across from Jackson Brewery, almost on the corner of infamous Jackson Square, the crowds thickened. Tourism reigned supreme in New Orleans. Here and there tourists gawked at street performers while others swigged beers in foam cups and eyed the open storefronts selling offensive T-shirts and Mardi Gras beads.

When they arrived at the restaurant, they found a short line. Graham gave the hostess his name and then motioned to the bar with a raise of his eyebrows.

"Yeah. Abita Amber," Tess shouted, a warm smile curving her mouth.

That smile made him forget all his troubles. He needed to recapture his previous mood. He'd nailed the interview—he'd



read that much in the old man's face. Graham had been in the zone, dressed to impress with the knowledge to back up his proposals. Everything in New Orleans was falling in place. Including getting his social life on track.

Stop overthinking and walk toward good things in life, Graham.

He paid and went outside, handing the icy beer to Tess, clinking the bottle with his. "To new beginnings."

"And to your new job."

"I'll drink to that," he said, lifting the bottle to his lips. In that instant he felt something swell in him he hadn't felt in so long, not since he'd left New Orleans six years ago. Maybe it was joy. Or freedom. Or both. He wasn't sure which it was, but he embraced the warmth, that feeling of possibility. All that lay withered inside him revived, swelling to life with sweetness.

After cashing out his 401K last month so Emily could continue going to the Montessori school she'd been attending for the past two years, he needed to feel good about something. To chase hope of a better future and pin it down.

Ten minutes later his name was called and they slid into wooden chairs at a table facing the floor-to-ceiling doors looking out on Toulouse Street. Passersby strolled, collars up against the wind sweeping in with the cool front. A slight draft wafted in but it wasn't enough to keep them from picking up the menu.

"I already know I'm blowing my diet on a shrimp po'boy," Tess said licking her lips, a move that heated his blood.

What would she taste like?

Apples?

Or something spicier perhaps?

“And maybe some gumbo, too. Suddenly I’m starving.” She looked up at him.

Yeah. Him, too.

He cleared his throat and tried to tame his desire for her. This wasn’t a date...or maybe it was. He wasn’t sure what they were doing.

“You don’t have to buy my dinner,” Tess said, with a little shake of her head. “This isn’t really a date.”

“It’s not?” he asked.

“I don’t think so. Maybe it is.” She gave a wry twist of her lips. “In all honestly, I don’t know why I said I’d go to dinner with you. You’re a total stranger.”

“It’s not that different than meeting someone from a dating website if you think about it. In fact, it’s almost like an old-fashioned date. Two people meet, they’re attracted to one another, and then they—”

“You’re attracted to me?” she asked. A faint pink bloomed in her cheeks and the refreshingly honest question made him like her even more. And he already had a healthy like for her. “Yeah, that sounded sort of middle-schoolish. Been hanging out with my nephews too much.”

“Actually I thought it was understood I’m attracted to you. Otherwise I’d be sharing stuffed mushrooms and wings with

Angela and the girls.”

“Well, good to know. I’m pretty hungry but I’d hate to think this was a mercy date.”

“Far from it,” he said, unable to contain the desire he had for her.

His salacious gaze didn’t put her off. In fact she smiled wider before turning to the waitress.

After they ordered po’boys and a cup of gumbo, a comfortable silence descended. He took the time to study her. Her eyes weren’t really the color of moss so much as the color of a magnolia leaf: rich, fertile green. The freckles weren’t overly pronounced, merely sprinkled across her rounded cheekbones. She had delicate eyebrows and small earlobes from which winked simple solitaire diamonds.

Tess cleared her throat. “So if this is a date, you should tell me more about yourself. I know you went to Jesuit, grew up here and worked for NASA, but what about your...hobbies?”

“Hobbies?”

Tess made a face. “That lame, huh? Guess I have issues with uncomfortable silence.”

“Felt like a comfortable silence to me.”

“Really? Hmm...” She smiled, opening a package of crackers from the bowl on the table. “Sorry. Should have taken Angela up on the appetizers. I’m starving.”

He’d been eyeing the crackers himself, so he mimicked her. “Me, too, but I didn’t want to look like I had no self-control.”

“No sense in standing on ceremony. As my nephews say, YOLO.”

He crooked an eyebrow.

“You Only Live Once,” she clarified.

Perfect reason to ignore the flicker of logic edging in on his good time with Tess. YOLO. He liked that. “Okay, a little about me. I read the newspaper every morning, don’t have a Facebook account, like dogs over cats, have a seven-year-old daughter and I’m a Scorpio.”

“You have a daughter?”

“Somehow I knew that would stand out to you. Yeah, Emily. She’s beautiful, smart and can tie her own shoes. Big accomplishment. She lives here in New Orleans with her mother and I don’t see her often. Another reason I want to move back.”

“Wow, a kid, huh?”

“Deal breaker for you?”

“No, I’ve just never dated a guy with a kid. Not that we’re dating. This is a special circumstance. Or something.”

“Or something. But we’re going with it, right?”

“Definitely. I’m having fun.”

The waitress arrived with their gumbo, and with unspoken agreement they dug in. The gumbo was decent and minutes later both cups were empty.

Graham pushed his bowl to the side. “So tell me about you.”

“Nothing special. Graduated from Carnegie-Mellon in industrial art design, work for my dad’s company and live in a

loft in the Warehouse district. I ride a bike to work most days and I do the New York Times crossword puzzle every Sunday even if it takes me until lunch. I don't have children, pets or a lactose intolerance. Big Italian family, no ties to mafia, though my brother likes to infer it."

"The priest?"

"No, the surgeon."

"Accomplished family," he murmured.

"Exactly what my father expects. I'm the baby of the family and the only girl. I have three older brothers who excel at their careers, but I'm the only one who followed in my father's footsteps."

"Three older brothers?" He feigned loosening his collar.

She laughed as the waitress set huge po'boys in front of them. "You don't have to worry. They're all my size and busy with families. I see them only at Sunday dinner. Now Granny B, she's the one you should worry about. She once accosted the mailman for being cheeky."

"Cheeky?"

"Yeah, had something to do with Publishers Clearing House and apparently he didn't take Granny B seriously. The woman is a menace."

"But you love her," he said as she crossed herself and then dug into her meal.

"That's required, too," Tess joked, but the warmth in her eyes said differently.

He picked up the sandwich and took a bite. "Oh, mmm."

"Yeah," she agreed wiping cocktail sauce from the corner of her mouth. "I forgot how damn good these are."

Graham couldn't stop thinking about how good it felt to be home...to be with this cool chick. He really liked her casual openness along with the mystery. Tess was like a box his grandfather once had. On the outside simple, smooth lines but once the key turned, the inside held carvings of exquisite beauty.

And he really wanted to open her.

And do bad things to her.

The waitress delivered the check and they both reached for it.

Tess grabbed the small purse she'd hung on the back of the chair. "Let's split, okay?"

"I like to think of myself as a gentleman," he said, reaching for his wallet.

"How are you not a gentleman? Really, I feel more comfortable splitting the check."

"But next time I pay and we do this for real," he said, surprising himself with the offer. But why not? He'd get her number and when he next came to New Orleans—whether it was in a moving truck or merely to visit his family—he'd call her.

"Deal. Next time we dine, I'll wear an LBD and heels."

No clue what LBD was and his face must have given it away.

"Little black dress," she said.

"In the words of Ron, meow," he joked.

They smiled at each other, possibility hovering over them.

“Want to have a drink at the Carousel Bar?” she asked. “It’s not far.”

He thought about his rental car and wondered how safe it was. He’d thankfully purchased rental insurance—this was New Orleans, car theft capital of the South, after all. Then he looked at Tess’s lips. She’d swiped them with lip gloss and he caught a whiff of strawberry or something similar. Yeah, he wouldn’t mind dessert. “Sure. I’m not ready to go back to my hotel room.”

Hotel room. That sort of sat between them.

This time Tess’s smile held a secret...and a challenge. “So don’t go back. Come with me instead.”

### CHAPTER THREE

TESS LOOPED HER PURSE STRAP over her shoulder and wondered if it was a good idea to extend the impromptu date. As the person in charge of scheduling the Mardi Gras float rotations, she had a 9:00 a.m. meeting with the art director of Bacchus regarding the 2016 theme. Plus she had to start on the proposal she’d promised Miles Barrow, the captain of Oedipus, too. But, even though Graham had a kid and felt not so much her normal type, she had this crazy, weird connection with him. She couldn’t not go. “Let’s roll.”

They strolled out the door and down Decatur until they reached the street that would take them to the Monteleone Hotel and the infamous bar slowly spinning like a carousel. Through the windows she could see they weren’t busy. Monday night wasn’t ideal for partying in the Quarter, but New Orleans never felt

deserted. The city still moved around them, lights flashing and the streetcar making a run down Canal.

They slid onto stools and ordered cocktails.

"I love this place," she said, turning to him and trying to decide whether she wanted to take him home. It had been a long time since she had no-strings-attached fun with a hot guy.

"Yeah," he commented with a self-deprecating smile. "I'm glad we extended the date. Feels as though we're dancing around —"

"Hooking up?" She smiled, taking a sip of the drink sat before her.

"Is that's what the young kids call it?" His gaze lowered to her lips.

"Oh, please. You're gorgeous and single—don't even pretend you don't take a girl home now and again."

"Me?" He grinned, with a shake of his head. "I'm just a lowly computer-geek-turned-engineer. My idea of a hot night is Dr. Who and a pint of Ben and Jerry's."

"Geek?" She snorted, taking in his perfectly tailored suit and frat-boy tie. "Even if you qualified, don't pretend you haven't been thinking about getting into my jeans."

He jerked his gaze to hers. "Into your jeans? I've been thinking about how to get you out of your jeans."

She mocked a shocked expression.

Graham's eyes widened as if he might have gone too far. "I didn't mean to imply—"



Tess laughed before pressing one finger to his lips. "Please imply. I've been pretty much contemplating the same thing. You without that jacket, tie and no doubt plaid boxers."

"I'm wearing boxer briefs," he drawled, his eyes dipping again to her mouth.

"Goodie," she purred with a flirty smile. "I'm not used to hooking up with a guy when I'm this sober."

She hoped like hell he didn't think she was so capricious she'd screw any man who bought her a drink. She wasn't. She expected at least two drinks. Laughing at herself and the sudden case of nerves, she picked up her martini and took a gulp.

"Is this what we're doing? Hooking up?"

Tess glanced over at him. She didn't want to seem too eager. Heck, she still wasn't sure if hooking up with Graham was a good idea. It had only been at Christmas she'd dumped Nick. Maybe she needed to give herself some time...or maybe she needed to have a nice little rebound fling.

Or maybe this was neither of those two things. Maybe this was something more than just fun. Felt that way. Felt like magic. Felt like Graham was her perfect match. "Maybe."

Graham watched her, his Nordic eyes sliding down and dipping briefly at her neckline. "I've wanted you since you told me Feliz was pitching for the Rangers tonight. I think we'd be fantastic together."

Tess leaned toward him. "Wanna find out?"

His lips looked soft. She'd never thought such a thing about a

man before, but at that moment she wanted to feel them on hers. Why not see if the tension between them was as electric as she suspected? Why waste time wondering what they could know in seconds?

Graham set down his drink and leaned close to her, pushing an errant strand of hair from the corner of her mouth. "You talking a little chemistry experiment?"

Her breath quickened and her eyes dropped to his mouth. "No sense in taking this any further if we're not...compatible."

Lightly he brushed her lips with his and she caught his taste. Yeasty and warm with beer. Her pulse sped at the first touch, and she leaned in for more.

But Graham was a tease.

He dotted little kisses along her jaw, making her stomach flutter with excitement.

"Oh," she breathed, the warmth spreading as he moved steadily back toward her mouth.

But then he decided to stop teasing and covered her mouth with his, sliding a hand around her neck to clasp the back of her head, tilting her so he could gain better access.

Like rain on the parched earth, Tess welcomed the onslaught of desire. She opened her mouth, only slightly, her tongue flitting out to taste him, evocative and flirty, but Graham tasted rich as expensive wine or fine chocolate. Addictive.

He responded to her invitation and hot desire slammed into her like a midnight train eating up track when his fingers stroked

the nape of her neck and his tongue stroked hers.

Tess didn't want to stop, but she did.

Because if she didn't stop now, she might not be able to. Because if she didn't stop now, she might straddle him right there on a stool in the Carousel Bar.

Wouldn't be the first time, but nothing had ever come of any guy she'd hooked up with randomly...and for some reason she didn't want Graham to go down as a guy she'd never meet again. She wanted to wear a little black dress and killer heels she didn't need but had to have because they made her legs look long and lean. She wanted moonlight and champagne...or at least a really good pinot grigio. She didn't want just a one-night stand with Graham.

And that surprised her.

Pulling back, she whispered, "I think I got my answer. You?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm definitely going to need your number." He touched a finger to her nose in a move that should have been corny but was anything but.

"So you want to walk me home?" Her voice was thick...almost seductive, so she cleared her throat.

"Some water," the bartender said, setting down two icy glasses in front of them. "So I ain't gotta call the fire department."

She picked up the glass and toasted the bartender who winked at her before moving on to a guy waving a twenty on the other side.

"He has a point. We can't do that again without charging

people admission,” Graham said, looking as if the kiss had shaken him down to his wing tips. His smiled at her and picked up his water, a tinge of awe in those blue eyes.

And like a hit of smack, he made her suddenly crave more of him. She wanted to inhale him, taste every square inch and lose herself in something primal and good and irresponsible.

Maybe meeting Graham at Two Legs was a moment-in-time thing. What if there would never be a black dress, nice dinner and moonlight? What if Graham didn’t get the job? Never walked back into her world again?

Would she regret the missed chance to immerse herself in him?

Yeah, she would. So...

“When are you leaving?” she asked.

He gulped down the ice water, his strong throat moving as he swallowed. She wanted to kiss him there. Where the pulse beat in his neck, right above the loosened tie. “Tomorrow morning.”

Indecision.

She hated when she felt this way. Hot and fast? Or slow and...?

“You want another drink?” he asked, nodding toward her half-finished pomegranate martini.

“Not really.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding disappointed. Grabbing the hand she’d tucked in her lap, he cradled it. Stroking her inner wrist, he contemplated his empty glass. She could tell he didn’t want the evening to end...and neither did she.

“Pay for the drinks, Graham,” she said.

Hooking an eyebrow, Graham turned to her.

“Unless you don’t want me to see you in those boxer briefs?”

Like magic, his wallet appeared. Tossing enough cash to cover the drinks and tip on the bar, he pulled her to her feet. “You sure?”

Tess slid her hand up his lapel, cupping his jaw and dropping a light kiss on his lips. “We’re not going to overthink this.”

He pulled her toward the door. “Cab?”

“My place isn’t far. Let’s walk.”

“Or run.” He spun her into his arms, pressing her against the rough brick, not caring a homeless man slept in the alcove a few yards away.

Tess tugged his head down, her mouth eagerly meeting his. This time she wasn’t stingy with opening her mouth and it inflamed her even more. He pressed himself against her, sliding his hands down to her hips in order to pull her against his erection. Warmth turned to frenzied fire.

“Oh,” she breathed, her hands knotting in his short wavy hair. “Maybe we better hurry.”

He smiled against her.

“Yeah, y’all should,” the old bum squawked. “Unless you want a little company.”

“No, thanks,” Graham called, wrapping an arm around Tess and pulling a five out of his pocket and dropping it in the man’s tipped-up hat. “Something for you, sir.”

“Not as good as what you’re about to get, brother,” the man cracked.

“True,” Graham called out over his shoulder, not slowing up as they crossed Canal Street. Several blocks later she pulled her keys from her purse, struggling to keep her hands from shaking. Right before she pushed through the front entrance of the building, Graham caught her elbow. “You sure?”

She looked up, surprised he’d try to stop now. “You trying to talk me out of having hot, uncontrollable, slightly dirty sex with you?”

He swallowed, his teeth flashing in the darkness. “That’s what’s on the menu?”

“It’ll be better than the stuffed mushrooms you turned down. I promise.” She held the door open with no regret.

“I like your confidence.”

\* \* \*

GRAHAM ROLLED OVER and glanced at Tess asleep in the moonlight. Long lashes lay against her upper cheeks. The smattering of freckles were more pronounced against her luminous skin. Wild locks of dark gold mixed with light brown caught in the light. She looked so innocent.

And not so much like the hellcat who had pinned him down, taken control and brought him the most excruciatingly pleasurable orgasm he’d ever experienced.

And it wasn’t just the skill Tess possessed in bed, it was the passion she plied it with. She’d taken his breath away as she made

love to him with both reckless abandon and deliberate focus. Her girl-next-door vibe hid a consummate lover.

Thank God he'd invited her to dinner.

She'd fit him perfectly. The projections and reliefs of her body meeting his in such a way he'd felt like a jigsaw puzzle finally completed. Sounded hokey, but he felt that way. He'd never met someone like Tess—a woman he'd had an immediate connection with. Walking into her world felt like a fate thing.

"Mmm," she groaned snuggling against his body, her lovely breasts brushing his chest as she wound an arm around his lower stomach. "That was soooo good."

"Beyond good," he said, pushing a hank of hair from her face.

She opened those gorgeous eyes and blinked sleepily up at him. "I fell asleep. Sorry."

"Why?" he whispered, sliding a hand down to cup her bottom. She arched against him, sliding a leg over his, fitting herself to him and giving him better access.

"I don't want to sleep tonight. I want to make love all night. That was an appetizer. Remember?"

"Right." He pulled her atop him, sighing as she allowed her legs to fall to either side of his hips. With her breasts plumped against his chest and her smiling eyes studying him, he almost believed he could fall in love with a woman in less than twenty-four hours.

Lifting his hips, he teased her with his stirring erection. "Ah, Tess, you might kill me tonight."

“Then we’ll die happy.” She lowered her mouth to his, dropping tiny kisses against his lips. “I don’t want morning to come. Let me have these hours.”

He cupped her ass and moved her against him. He wanted to be inside her again. But not yet. Not until he tasted every inch of her. Not until he made her shudder and arch against him. Not until she screamed his name, grabbed the sheets and lost every ounce of sanity she possessed.

He might be a geeky engineer, but he was a determined geeky engineer who prided himself on his attention to detail...and he was about to get it so right with Tess.

Flipping her, he pulled himself back, staring at her in the faint light before dropping his head and tugging her nipple into his mouth. He glanced up as she sighed and closed her eyes. Minutes later after making her writhe beneath him, he slid down her soft belly. “Your appetizer was good, baby.”

Her only response was a moan. Graham ducked his head and rained kisses around her belly button. “But I’m hungry for dessert.”

“Oh, sweet—” Tess arched against him as he slid lower.

“You taste so good,” he murmured, his hands lifting her hips. Tess’s hands slid to his hair, fisting in the depths. “Graham.”

He sighed as he lowered his head and dropped kisses along her hip bone. “I’m so glad I walked into that bar and saw you. It’s like getting the sweetest of gifts, Tess.”

“Oh, Graham,” she begged, wiggling her hips. “Please—”



And so he gave her what she wanted.

\* \* \*

BY THE TIME Tess slid from her bed, she'd managed a good hour or two of sleep and that was it. She'd be toast for her meeting, but she had no regrets.

All night, she and Graham had laughed, dreamed and made love on those new sheets, and it had been the most wonderful night of her life.

Seriously.

She'd had lovers—ever since she'd let Justin Hogue go all the way with her the night of her senior prom—but she'd never had one like Graham. She couldn't believe how good they'd been together. Everything he did felt ten times more incredible than with any other guy. Tess had hit the jackpot with the unlikeliest of guys, and it felt a little surreal...and maybe a little scary. Sex had never been so mind-blowing before.

She glanced at the suit folded on the funky polka-dot chair that matched her apple-green duvet and smiled. Buttoned-up, wing-tip boy. Who'd have thought?

Joy bubbled inside her as she walked naked into the bathroom and turned the knobs in the shower. Waiting for the water to heat, she glanced back and found Graham still asleep, sprawled on his stomach, the sheet barely covering his splendid backside.

She stepped into the marbled shower stall and sighed as the hot water coursed down her body. Minutes later she felt two arms slip around her.

“Got room for me?” he murmured in her ear, causing goose bumps to shiver down her length.

She turned, wrapping her arms around his neck and grinning at him as he brought her body against his. “Always.”

“You’ll change your tune when I use all your hot water.”

“I have a tankless hot water heater. I don’t run out.” She rocked her hips against his.

“Oh, my naughty Tess. We could have some fun in here, huh?”

Wiggling her eyebrows, Tess turned and handed him the loofah. “Do my back?”

“As long as I can also do your front.”

Tess sighed and the shower that normally took her ten minutes stretched into twenty-five.

Finally, wrapped in a fluffy robe, Tess stood cradling a steaming mug of coffee in her kitchen. Graham walked in, towel tucked around his waist.

“When do you leave?” she asked, pulling a carton of eggs from the depths of her mostly empty fridge. If she had some onion and spinach, she could make an omelet. But, alas, only a few cartons of yogurt and a pint of creamer.

“As soon as I take a cab back to my car.”

“Don’t bother with a cab. Since I have a meeting with a client today, I’m not taking my bike. I can drop you off.”

He smiled and something in her chest grew warm. “Damn, I thought I would ride on your handle bars, but I guess since I have to wear my suit...”

“Handle bars? I totally have a basket you could sit in,” she joked.

“Hope it’s still there.”

“The suit or the car?” she said, grabbing a pan from the dish rack.

“Both,” he said, sliding his arms around her and dropping a kiss on her ear. “Is it going to sound totally crazy to say this was the best night I’ve had in forever?”

She leaned back into him. “No. I feel like we’ve known each other for longer than a day. It’s strange, but I’m loving it.”

“Yeah, I’m loving it, too. This feels right. I can’t wait to come back to New Orleans. I can’t wait to take you out in that black dress and then bring you back here and take it off.”

Tess set the eggs and pan on the stove and turned in his arms, lifting on her toes so she could kiss him. “I can’t wait for you to come back, either.”

Kissing her thoroughly, Graham smiled at her, his blue eyes full with something deeper than she expected. “I’m going to get the job, and then we’re going to celebrate. This is a fate thing. I can feel it in my bones.”

“You think so?” Tess searched his eyes, afraid they were going too fast. After all, though she knew every inch of his body, she didn’t know much else about him. There was no room for talk of something serious, right? Just because they’d fit together so well, just because he’d made her heart gallop, her body sing and her soul shine brighter, didn’t mean they were moving toward the

L word.

No. Tess couldn't allow herself to go over the cliff after one night with a man. That was movie crap. Not real life.

But when she looked at Graham, she could almost believe in love at first sight.

"I know so," he said, kissing her again, taking away any doubts she had about a guy walking into a bar and tying a girl up in ribbons of fate.

Tess pulled herself away and jogged to the bar between the kitchen and living area. Picking up her phone, she handed it to him. "Here. Put your info into my phone. Where's yours? I'll put in mine."

They tapped the info into each other's phones. He handed Tess her phone and she set it on the bar and directed him to the table. "I'm not the greatest of chefs but I can manage eggs and toast. Then I have to run. I need to go by my office before my meeting at nine o'clock."

"That's fine. I need to get going, too. I'm stopping by Emily's school and I need to hit Houston before rush hour. And you never told me where you work. Is it—"

The harsh shriek of the teakettle going off interrupted him. Tess turned around and snatched it off the burner, accidentally touching the hot kettle to her wrist.

"Ow!" She set the kettle on another burner and ran some cold water over her arm. Total klutz...or maybe she was nervous about talking about taking whatever this was to another level...or maybe

she was scared it was all too good to be true.

“Let me get ice,” he said, scrambling to the freezer.

Thirty minutes and two pieces of burnt toast later, Tess stood outside her apartment dressed in her best go-to-meeting business dress that happened to match the deep pink burn on her wrist. Graham wore his suit, tie stuffed in pocket, shirt open at the neck. His tousled dark hair made him look exactly what he was—a businessman who’d gotten lucky...and not much sleep.

To Tess he looked terrific.

They kissed, a slow, sweet kiss laden with goodbye and tinged with possibility.

“I’ll call you soon,” he said.

“Good,” she said, running a hand along his jaw. “I’ll be waiting.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

A month later

FRANK ULLO SHOVED the lab report from his oncologist’s office into the top drawer and spun his chair toward the bulletin boards. Pinned up were various sketches of Mardi Gras floats dated from 1967 to present. Elaborate plans cobbled together into breathtaking beauty. His life’s work sprawled across a wall—a reminder of what he’d built and sustained...and what he was about to hand over to the man sitting on the other side of his desk.

Doubt fluttered in his gut before he centered himself. He had to keep emotion out of this decision. Had to remember what he did now was for the best...even if it was a bit chickenshit of him.

Then he touched the photo on his desk as he often did. A tap for luck. In the silver frame smiled three dark-headed teenaged boys and a fierce little girl who snarled at the camera. Frank cherished this particular picture of his other life's work: his children. Each boy stared back at him, intelligent, smirking with their father's Italian temperament. Their chins jutted out with their mother's Irish stubbornness.

And centered in the middle was Therese, his Tess.

His hellion with dark blond hair and eyes blazing a path to the heart. A difficult child, Tess challenged everyone around her as much as she blessed them with her warmth. The girl never took no for an answer and wrapped her older brothers around her proverbial pinky. Tess was never a princess...more like a bruiser in soccer cleats with a crooked hair bow and bandages on her knees. Tess—his sunshine girl with an unceasing passion for all she did.

And he felt very, very sure she would hate his guts for what he was about to do.

He tapped the photo again, making sure it faced him. Then picking up the phone, he dialed Billie. "Hey, ring Therese. I need to talk to her."

Billie gave him her usual monotone. "Whatever you want, Boss."

Frank pressed his hands against the ink blotter and looked across his desk at Graham Naquin, the man he'd hired to become the next chief executive officer of Frank Ullo Float Builders.

“This ain’t gonna be easy. My vice president of operations don’t know about this.”

Graham folded his hands across his stomach and squared his chin. He was maybe too handsome for this job, too slick and together. Doubt nickered at Frank, but he squashed it.

“It’s never easy for employees to accept change,” Graham said. “My coming on board will take some adjustment but I’m determined this will work. I’m a good fit.”

“You are. But this employee’s a little different because she’s my daughter.”

Mr. Spit and Polish actually grew green around the gills. “Your daughter—who is the VP of Operations—doesn’t know you’re hiring me to run the company? Don’t you think you should have told her before you hired me?”

Frank didn’t like to be questioned, but Graham wasn’t altogether wrong in his comment. “Yeah, but I got my reasons. She ain’t ready to run a company. I’m not saying she’s deadweight or anything. She’s good at her job, but she don’t have the head for making tough decisions. And let’s face it, we still live in a man’s world.”

Graham’s eyes widened and he got kinda choky-looking. Briefly Frank wondered, yet again, if he’d missed the boat on the whole equality thing.

“I’m not sure I feel comfortable with this situation, Frank. You should have been up front about her earlier. I’d rather not start the job with animosity in the workplace. Transparency is always

best in business dealings.”

Frank shrugged. He couldn't just say “I have cancer and I'm trying to protect my daughter.” But that was his main reason. Wasn't like he wanted to hand over the reins of his company to anyone, but in a few days he'd have a stent placed in his ducts to alleviate the jaundice he'd been suffering. Then he'd start weekly chemo treatments to help shrink the tumor and prevent further metastasizing, and that would make him feel like shit. He'd have to rest and stay away from people who could make him sick. The least he could do for his employees and family was to leave the company in capable hands...and Graham Naquin seemed almost too good to be true.

The kid had graduated in mechanical engineering and then started a float company with two others—Upstart thrived and was currently the biggest thorn in Frank's side. Graham could take Frank's company on his broad shoulders and free him from the day-to-day minutiae. And hopefully, the energetic engineer holding a new MBA could revitalize a business mired in its own success.

Frank didn't want to place that burden on his Tess. She already thought she could handle more than she actually could. “I wasn't trying to dupe you, if that's what you're implying. Things are delicate, you see.”

“I think there is a lot you're not telling me, Frank, and that worries me. If there is something I need to be aware of, you need to be forthcoming about it. Don't set me up for failure, especially



with your family.”

“The only one of my children who works here is Therese, and she’s a good girl even if she is headstrong. She’s young, you know? But family is more important to her than ruffled feathers. Give her a day or two and she’ll see she’s not prepared to deal with the business end of this company. Her head’s in her art, designing the floats and dazzling the krewes. We all have our talents, right?”

Graham pressed his hands down his thighs, smoothing his trousers, and then refolded them in his lap. Nervous for a man who exuded extreme capability. But Frank would give him being a little nervous. Frank had known this would be hard.

A knock sounded at his office door and Tess stuck her head in. “Hey, you wanted to see me?”

“Come on in, honey,” Frank said, motioning her into the room. She wore her customary jeans and T-shirt and a flash of guilt struck at not making the meeting more official, at not giving Tess a chance to get her professional game face on. Another mistake he’d weather.

Graham’s eyebrows drew together and he spun around as Tess stepped inside. Frank saw his body go rigid. “Tess?”

Tess’s eyes widened and her mouth gaped for a second. “Graham?”

For several seconds they stared at one another in shock.

“Wait, you know each other?” Frank hadn’t considered Tess might know the young man he’d chosen to run their family

business. Graham had lived in Houston for the past six years, but since the man had grown up in New Orleans, it wasn't impossible. But this seemed more than casual.

Tess ignored his question and closed the door before advancing toward his desk, her gaze crackling. "What are you doing in my father's office?"

Graham stood. "You're Therese?"

"I prefer Tess." She crossed her arms and shot a look from her father to Graham. "Yeah. So back to the original question—what are you doing here? I assumed you didn't—" And then her mouth snapped shut as something altogether different flitted through her gaze. In that moment, Frank realized however his daughter knew Graham, it hadn't ended well. Which meant this situation wasn't going to be slightly uncomfortable. Nope, it was atomic-wedge uncomfortable.

"I—" Graham made another choked face and shook his head. "You never told me your last name. You put, uh, Two-Legged Tess in my phone."

"Thought it was cute and memorable. Big fail, huh?" she said, voice like poison darts. Even Frank wanted to duck.

He cleared his throat. "Two-legged Tess? What the hell are you two talking about?"

Graham sat like he'd been hit by bad news. "I met your daughter at the bar you recommended to me after the interview. Two-Legged Pete's."

"Wait a sec, you told him about Pete's?" Tess asked, her eyes

narrowing as something in her head started clicking. Her voice faded as she murmured, “At a job interview.”

Her head whipped around, her arms dropped, fists at her sides as she faced the new CEO. “You had a job interview with my dad. A job interview for what?”

Graham sank in the leather chair. Or was it cowered? “Christ, this is crazy. How are you Frank Ullo’s daughter?”

“Why are you interviewing for a position I don’t know about?”

Both of them directed their gaze toward Frank.

“Okay, okay. Tess, have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the chair beside Graham.

“I think I’ll stand.” She crossed her arms, her chin jutting out. “I don’t want to sit for what you’re about to tell me because obviously I’m the last to know about what’s going down at our family company.”

“This is exactly the reason I had to make this decision.”

Her eyes glittered like icy, cold emeralds that reminded him of his wife Maggie’s when she was pissed. “What decision?”

“If you’d sit, I’d tell you. But as usual you’re acting like your mother,” Frank said, annoyed a simple announcement and introduction could get bogged down in drama before he’d said his piece. But what had he expected from Tess? Reasonable wasn’t her middle name.

“If it means that much to you, fine.” Tess sat. “So what’s the deal, Dad?”

“The deal is a change that’s been forthcoming here.”

“Really?” she said at a near growl. Graham averted his gaze to the sketches on the wall.

“You know I’ve been talking about retirement in the past several weeks. Now’s the time. I wanna pull back and enjoy life with your mother before I cash in my ticket.”

Tess said nothing...just stared at him. Frank nearly shifted in his chair, but refrained because he was a man, damn it. He didn’t shrink under the disdain of any woman...much less his youngest child who hadn’t even reached age thirty yet. Hell, she was still a kid.

“And?” she asked.

“I hired a headhunting company to look for someone who could—”

“You hired a headhunting company?” Tess arched one eyebrow. Frank felt the steam coming off her. She had never been laid-back, but she had a good temperament on most days. Everyone at Ullo liked her. She got what she wanted, but it was because she always leaned on people rather than pushed them. Honeyed words and all that. Still, when crossed, her Irish-Italian temper simmered out of control.

“That’s what I said, Therese. These guys go out and find—”

“I know what they do. You should have inferred my question to mean why not who.”

Frank had to think about that because he hadn’t had a fancy liberal arts education—he’d been raised on the streets and got his business smarts from what had always worked for him. “I hired

a headhunter because I can't leave the company with no one to look after it. You need help and your brothers have their own careers."

Tess slapped her hands together. "Perfect. I see where this is going now. You want a man to run the company instead of trusting your own flesh and blood. You're just that egotistical and misogynist."

"I don't know those words, but if you think this is because of what you ain't got between your legs, you're wrong." Leave it to Tess to think this was about gender. Okay, maybe ten percent of his reasoning had to do with her being a woman. He wanted Tess to find love, settle down, have some babies—something hard to do running a company like Frank Ullo. But mostly this was about protecting her. She couldn't shoulder the entire burden of this place alone.

Tess had amazing talent and a keen intellect, but she possessed very little business acumen. For the past seven years, ever since she'd graduated and come to work for him, they'd done wonderful things together. Tess had found better materials for their floats, and her clever design work had krewes lining up, willing to pay big bucks for Ullo to design their floats. Frank had handled the business end and thus far it had worked like a well-oiled engine. He didn't see any reason to change things. She had to understand that. "This is about doing what's best for our company."

"How can you say that?" she asked in a small voice. It was as

if the anger had dissipated, leaving a shaken shell in its place. Somehow this was worse. Anger he could handle. Hurt? Not so much.

“This ain’t personal, baby,” he said, leaning forward, keenly aware the PET scan report he’d received from the doctor a week ago sat in the drawer beneath the blotter. It pulsed into his psyche, reminding him how little time he had to settle things...how little time he had to insure his family stayed healthy, wealthy and stable.

“Wrong. It’s extremely personal.” Tess stared at the family crest ring he’d given her for her college graduation. “More than you even know.”

Graham had very wisely stayed out of the fray, but now he looked at Frank, something wavering in his eyes. Briefly, Frank wondered what he didn’t know about Graham Naquin...and what the man had meant to his daughter.

“I shouldn’t be here for this conversation, Frank,” Graham said.

“Of course you should. You’re going to be working with Tess. Better to clear the air and get us all on firm ground.”

“No, he’s right. This is between you and me,” Tess said, her voice low. “This is about you not trusting me.”

Frank shook his head. “You’re being dramatic, Tess. This is —”

“No. You hid this from me because you knew what would happen. Don’t act as if you didn’t know I’d be upset. You created

the drama, Frank.”

Frank snapped his fingers. “Don’t call me Frank. And this does concern Graham. He’ll be working with you.”

“As what?”

Frank shrugged, almost too scared to say the words. “Technically, he’ll be the chief executive officer. Your job will remain the same. He’ll need you to help him—”

“No.” Tess slammed her hand on his desk. “I don’t accept this.”

Frank narrowed his eyes. “You don’t have a say.”

“The hell I don’t. I’ve worked here all my life. In case you’ve forgotten, my last name is Ullo. You’re skipping over me, your daughter, to hire someone else. I don’t accept that.”

“This is my company. Not yours.”

Tess reeled back as if he’d slapped her.

Graham shifted in his chair. “I’m stepping outside.”

“Yes, go.” Tess jabbed a finger at the door.

Graham ignored her and looked at him. In his eyes, Frank saw frustration and something else that looked like regret. “I’ll take a walk and return in half an hour.”

“Take a walk off the pier, why don’t you?” Tess said, before turning a frosty gaze to her father. No more defeated Tess. This was his pissed-off sunshine girl who had scored the winning goal in the state soccer finals. She didn’t know the words give up.

Graham didn’t take the bait. He merely shook his head and walked out.

The door snicked closed and Tess put her hands over her face. “Why are you doing this, Dad? I’ve been working so hard to earn... I thought you wanted me in this company. I thought it was understood that I would take over when you retired.”

“There are things you don’t understand, honey,” he said, softening his tone.

“So why didn’t you come to me and discuss the issues you had? Instead of doing that, you went behind my back. In fact, you interviewed him on the day I took Granny B to the doctor so you could hide it. I suppose you swore Billie to silence, too?”

“Billie doesn’t know everything that goes on in this company.”

“Ha.” Tess sank back into the chair. “Well, the solution to all this is simple—tell Graham you were wrong. Tell him thanks, but no thanks. I’m totally prepared to run Frank Ullo Float Builders, and you can do a step-down retirement over the next several months. This is what I’ve been preparing for over the past seven years—an Ullo running our company. I’m going to pretend like you didn’t say the company belongs to you.”

“But it does.”

“Technically, but it’s ours. Our family’s.”

“I’m not firing Graham. He signed the contracts this morning.”

Her gaze went feral. “What I say doesn’t matter?”

Frank closed his eyes. Knowing that telling Tess would be hard was way different from actually doing it. He hadn’t told his children about his pancreatic cancer diagnosis, except for his son



Joseph who'd been his consult during the whole process. Frank still wanted to talk to Maggie about how to handle telling them. Hell, he still hadn't come to terms with the thought of not making it to next Christmas.

But he wouldn't use his illness to make Tess relent. He knew he wasn't the best father in the world, but he'd never resorted to manipulation with his children. He ignored the small voice that said he'd tricked Tess to get his way in the first place. "You matter to me more than you know, but in this instance I will stand firm. You're not ready to run the company. Plain and simple."

"But why? If you knew you were going to retire this soon, you should have brought me in and prepared me. You should have taught me what you do. None of this makes sense. You were always so proud I followed in your footsteps. I just thought..." Tess covered her face again with her hands.

For a few moments neither of them said anything.

"I'm not staying if you hire him." Tess dropped her hands, her gaze resolute.

"So you'll quit?" Frank had never even contemplated the possibility his daughter would leave if he didn't give her the wheel. "Like a child taking her toys and going home, huh?"

"No. I'm not being unreasonable in leaving a place where I have little respect."

"You know that's not true."

"Doesn't feel like it, Dad." Tess swallowed hard. "I refuse to remain where there is no future for me."

“Tess, there’s always a place for you here. This is your home, your family.”

“No. This isn’t how family feels. Instead it feels like I don’t matter at all. Feels like you gave me some shell of a job to keep me in New Orleans, to keep me under your control.”

Now Frank felt as if he’d been slapped. “You love what you do.”

“Yeah, I do. I love this company, but I’m not staying while you wrap it in a bow and give it to some jerk a headhunter found for you. Really, Dad? It’s like a frickin’ nightmare, that’s what this is.” She rose. “But that’s the way it’s going to be. As you pointed out, this is your company and you can do what you want with it, but you might as well have disowned me.”

“Don’t be unreasonable, Tess.”

“Call it what you want, but I don’t work here any longer.”

“Tess,” he said her name like a prayer. Never had he wanted to hurt her. Why couldn’t she see that?

Because she didn’t know his reasons. She didn’t know he had one foot in the grave and the other in quicksand.

“Consider this my notice. I’ll finish out the day and gather my stuff.”

“Don’t do this. You’re in the middle of designing for Bacchus and we’ve got props in bay that need your direction. What about the meetings you have this week? What about our customers?”

Tess shook her head. “Dave will see the designs through, and you now have Graham to figure out the rest.”

Like a soldier, his daughter squared her shoulders and marched to the door.

“Tess, don’t do this. Everything will be the same as yesterday. I promise. Graham is a good man.”

She paused, her hand on the doorknob. “You’re wrong, Dad. It’ll never be the same again because you don’t trust me. Good luck with Graham. In my experience he’s not so much a man of his word.”

She gave him a sad, sad smile. And then she walked out.

## CHAPTER FIVE

TESS STALKED OUT of her father’s office feeling like she’d entered a boxing ring with a world champion. One punch and she was out. Her mind couldn’t wrap around what had happened moments ago.

How had her Tuesday gone so wrong?

It had started well with new bodywash in her shower, a good coffee from Cuppa Joe’s and the sun on her shoulders as she biked through the awakening French Quarter. Fog had burned off the river by the time she’d reached the warehouse, and every line on her sketches that morning had been true. It had been a banner morning that had turned to hell in the blink of an eye.

Graham Naquin.

Bastard. Usurper.

The irony of the man she’d thought her forever guy being the person taking the helm of Ullo was like someone shoving a spoonful of crap into her mouth and expecting her to say

“mmm.” But this was one spoonful she wasn’t going to swallow.

How dare her old man hire him? Him. The very person who had almost broken her heart. Okay. Had broken her heart. Which sounded strange since she’d known him for such a brief time, yet for a while it had felt every bit as real as what her parents had.

She’d eaten a lot of ice cream trying to get over the false start with Graham. In fact, she’d wolfed down a half gallon in twenty-four hours. That’s how much cream and sugar she’d needed to soothe the hurt of rejection.

And now this. She would have to run to California to work off what was likely about to be spooned down in mourning of the thing she loved most about each day—her job.

Dear God, she was no longer employed at Ullo.

As Tess pushed through the metal door into the stairwell, her knees gave way. Sinking against the cold cement steps, she struggled for a breath.

This wasn’t happening.

No way.

She was an Ullo. She’d grown up skipping through the phantom floats hulking like huge freighters bobbing at a wharf. Tess had worked summers perfecting sculpting foam, schlepping papier-mâché onto props and wiring fiber optics. She’d taken extensive art lessons, chosen a major in industrial art and ignored the tryouts for the Junior U.S. Soccer team...all so she could work for her family’s business. All because she wanted to be the one child who pleased their father by caring more for Frank Ullo

Float Builders than for herself. She'd sacrificed so she could do what was right, what would be best for their family business.

And it had been for nothing.

Unshed tears gathered in her throat. She wanted to cry, wanted to lie down right in the dusty stairwell and sob until she ran dry. But she wouldn't give the world the satisfaction of knowing her disappointment. Of the betrayal.

Her father didn't think she was good enough.

"Damn it," she whispered into the air around her.

"Tess." The door opened with a whoosh, nearly nailing her in the shoulder. Billie's head popped into the stairwell.

"Hey," Tess managed to say, hoping like hell the tears in her eyes weren't noticeable.

"What in the name of Sam Hill is going on?" Billie asked, darting a look at the inner recess of her office. "Your father said you quit."

"I did."

"Why?" Billie looked like someone had run over her cat.

"Ask my father."

"Don't you think I did? He buttoned up his lip like a preacher in a whorehouse. Said you no longer wanted to work here and to send a note to Accounting so you could collect your last check. Sister, what's going on?"

"Nothing you need to worry about, Billie. This is between my father and me."

"It has to do with that good-looking guy Frank hired, doesn't

it? I knew something was going on when your dad got all secretive, wanting me to show him how to use the fax machine and getting all those calls from Texas.”

Tess pulled herself from where she slumped. “Yeah, you’re about to be working for that good-looking guy.” The words hung in her throat. She didn’t want to think about Graham Naquin. She’d spent far too much time thinking about the son of a bitch already. She’d just stopped longing for him. Or mostly stopped moping around waiting for his call.

“Huh?”

“Dad’s retiring. Might as well be the first to tell you.”

“Retiring? No. He hasn’t even made a peep about—”

“Well, he is. Soon.”

“I had no idea.” Billie’s face crinkled as she soaked in the ramifications. “So Frank basically hired this guy over you? His own daughter?”

“You’re a sharp cookie.” Tess gave Billie a half smile that hurt like hell to deliver.

“Smart cookie. Not sharp,” Billie muttered, sadness etched on her face. “I can’t believe this, Tess. I’m sure he has a good reason. Something’s wrong. I’ve had this weird feeling. He’s been saying strange things, and I wondered what was up. But this?”

“Not a good enough reason. I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m not about to watch him give Frank Ullo to some asshole.”

“He seemed okay to me. Together, polite, nice ass.”

“Yeah, well, he’s an ass all right. Good luck,” Tess said, giving

Billie a quick squeeze. Billie had been with her father for forty years so Tess couldn't fathom the woman not knowing about Graham Naquin, the interview and Frank's plans. That her father had kept them from his most trusted assistant boggled the mind. "I'll see you around, 'kay?"

"How? You won't be here. What am I going to do without my Tess? Who's going to make chocolate-oatmeal cookies and post pics of delicious man candy in the ladies' room? How are we going to function without you?" Billie wouldn't let go.

"Just like you did before I worked here."

"Don't do it, honey. It's your pride standing in the way. Pride's a tricky thing." Billie pulled back and looked at her with eyes the color of chocolate chips. She had always reminded Tess of the teapot in *Beauty and the Beast*—if it had a wry sense of humor, a dirty mouth and a way with advice. Billie always seemed to know what to do—but not this time.

This time Tess wouldn't be cajoled into accepting her father's decision. She was many things, but she wasn't a blinking jackass. Her father had gotten his point across with bloody accuracy. He had no faith in Tess, therefore Tess had her back against the wall. It was either give in and hate herself, or quit, get a new job...and gather together the remains of who she was.

"I have to do this, Billie. I'm good. I have to prove that. Not only to Dad, but to myself. I don't need Frank Ullo. Frank Ullo needs me."

"Of course we need you. You know that. Don't go, Tess. Work

through this. Change is always hard, but when you come through on the other side, you see it's for the best."

"Hiring someone else is not for the best, Billie. Change or no change. Dad chose a stranger over me, and I got the message loud and clear."

Billie shook her head. "Oh, honey."

Tess jogged down the stairs, heading toward her desk which sat with several others in a sectioned-off area of the warehouse. Tess liked to be near the action—the place where the ideas on paper became full-fledged art ready to roll down the parade route carrying the krewes and the thousands of throws revelers begged for. She'd loved the nook she'd carved out, and though the warehouse often grew noisy, she enjoyed feeling like a cog in the machinery that created magic for millions of people during the four-week Mardi Gras season. She focused better in an area she could move around, a place where she could see her visions carried out.

"Hey, Tess," Dave Wegmann said, spinning in his chair, scratching his balding head. "Reeves Benson called about the Hera bid and wants you to call him back. Thought I'd sneak down here and take a peek at what Petra did with the globe."

"He left a message with you?" Tess asked, trying like hell to pretend today was any other day. No way would she break down in front of Dave. He'd been here for as long as she remembered, first as a sculptor, then he'd moved to painting. After two back surgeries, he'd taken design courses and started working as the



art director. Tess had learned all she knew about float building at Dave's knee, and when she'd come to the company, they'd split the load of design, meeting regularly to schedule work and solidify the vision for each krewe's contracted floats.

"Your phone kept ringing and it was driving me crazy. I'm also looking for the specs on the Cleopatra sea creature. Upstart's trying to schmooze Cary Presley with some crazy hydra with motorized heads, so this float's gotta be stellar."

Any other time and Tess would agree, but she could hardly speak, much less bolster Dave on the Cleopatra bid. She sank into the squeaky chair beside the one Dave sat in and looked at the files and sketches scattering the surface of her desk.

Where to even start?

"Tess? You okay? You look weird."

"Yeah."

Dave shook his head and hunkered down, his fingers moving deftly over the face of the calculator, his eyes screwed up in concentration. "Okay, I found the file. Just...wanna...see...if...this...matches."

She probably needed to get a box to put her stuff in. She had funny pictures tacked up on the corkboard beside the huge filing cabinets that held all the past year's designs and sketches. Those designs would be systematically replaced over the course of the next few months with new designs for 2015, paying special attention to the repurposing of all the props. At Ullo they reused every part of the float, even joking about trading out toilet seats

yearly. They begged, bartered and stole from last year's floats to create the awesomeness of Mardi Gras 2014 for the various krewes around New Orleans and the outlying areas. A flurry of meetings nearly a month ago before this year's parades had finished rolling had cemented projects for the upcoming season and those of 2016.

Tess picked up the bumblebee with the crazy boppy antennae Jules Roland, the head sculptor, had given her on her birthday. Tess the busy bee.

The clip of hard soles on the concrete floor interrupted her thoughts. Then she saw the wing tips.

"Tess?"

She looked up, meeting Graham's blue eyes. Damn, they were pretty eyes. Too bad he was a creep.

"What?"

He swallowed and she watched the powerful muscles in his throat convulse. She'd kissed that sweet spot at the base of his neck. He'd smelled so good—sort of citrusy and clean—and he'd tasted salty and warm. Very solid. Very sexy.

"We need to talk."

Dave looked up, tucking his pencil behind his ear. He raised bushy eyebrows. "What's going on? Who's this guy?"

Tess glanced over at her friend and mentor. "You'll understand soon enough, Dave. But don't worry. I've got this."

She stood. "I don't have much to say to you, Mr. Naquin, but what I do have will be better said in private." Ice hung in her

words.... Exactly what she intended. Part of her boiled over with anger, hurt and disappointment. The other part felt frigid and empty.

Graham had caused that particular arctic front when he'd never called...and then hadn't been man enough to return the call she'd made two weeks ago.

Total asshole.

She stalked toward the exit, wishing she hadn't worn jeans and sneakers. High heels tapping on the floor would have been much more dramatic. Pushing the bar that would lead to the smokers' lounge high above the rough waters of the Mississippi, Tess inhaled not smoke, but the brackish, fetid air of the river. No one sat on the porch, but she didn't want to be interrupted, so she quickly took the worn steps down to the deck several feet below, now glad she'd worn her tennis shoes.

Reaching the smaller landing holding an ancient picnic table and two chained deck chairs, she spun around. "You bastard."

Graham stopped by the last step, shifting his gaze toward a tugboat pushing a colossal rusted barge. "I deserve that."

"Yeah, you do."

"I didn't call you."

His words were a day late and a dollar short. Didn't matter anymore. She'd decided twenty minutes ago when she'd seen him sitting in her father's office as the heir apparent she was way over the infatuation that had dominated her thoughts and body for weeks after he left her loft. That ship had sailed. Bye-bye.

“You think this is about you not calling?”

“It was rude.”

“It was pretty rude. But what did you think I wanted? Commitment? You were a fun screw, that’s it. So, no, this isn’t about you not calling.”

Something in his eyes wavered and she could tell he hadn’t expected such a casual dismissal. “A fun screw, huh?”

“For you, too, I imagine. If it were anything more you would have called me, right?” She lifted an eyebrow, feeling the righteousness in her anger.

“About that. See, there were some things going on....” He looked away, hiding from her, but she didn’t care. She meant what she said—what she felt—Graham meant nothing to her on that level. He was a used-to-be.

But on a professional level...

“What I have to say to you has nothing to do with that night a month ago. That’s over. This is the here and now, and you are the bastard who slinked into my company and stole my job.”

“Now, wait a minute.” He held up a hand. His was a nice hand—manicured nails, strong blunt fingers, wide palm. Very capable hands that had stroked her, loved her and made her believe in something that wasn’t real. “I didn’t slink into anything. In fact, your father never even mentioned you. I had no idea until today that he had a daughter who worked in the company.”

Knife wound. Tess clasped her chest before she could think better of betraying her emotions.

Her father hadn't even mentioned her?

"What do you want me to say? Did he mention Dave? Or how about Petra? Jules? Red Jack? Bennie B? Or Scooter O'Neil?"

"No, he went over the departments, but never said he had a daughter who headed up operations. You know I didn't sneak in here trying to steal anything from you. You can be pissed, but you have to be fair."

Jabbing a finger at him, Tess said, "I don't have to be anything. Don't tell me what to do."

Graham slid his hands into his pockets, making his shoulders beneath the poplin dress shirt look amazingly broad. Yeah, she hurt, but she hadn't failed to notice his masculine charms, which pissed her off all over again. "Fine."

For a few seconds they stood, defensive and wary.

Tess sighed. "What do you expect me to say?"

"Nothing. I don't know. It's a hard situation, but right now I don't feel I can take the job." He looked almost like a dog trying to nose the bone her way after he'd already gnawed off the fattest parts.

"Oh, please. Who passes up a job like this?" she said, trying not to hiss at him.

God, please tell me he's not that stupid. Please tell me this isn't some capricious acceptance of a job. She couldn't handle it if he treated it like it was no big deal.

Graham shrugged. "Everything's pretty much ruined. I can't be your father's pawn in a game I don't even understand."

“Pawn?”

“Well, something’s up. Otherwise you would have been in on this from the beginning, right? I don’t know why your father has done what he’s done, but I’m wading in uncharted waters without a compass.”

Tess didn’t want to admit he was partly right, didn’t want to forget the asshole status she’d assigned him. None of his admissions fixed anything in the world falling apart around her.

“I’m not going to lie. I need this job—it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me—but I never slinked in. I never took anything from you. I’m not saying I’m blameless or you shouldn’t be angry, but don’t paint me as what I’m not. I was a jerk to you, but I did nothing wrong in regard to this job.”

“A jerk I can deal with. This? Not so much,” she said, turning her head toward the far bank of Algiers Point. She didn’t want him to see the cracks in her. Didn’t want him to know how much his callous disregard almost a month ago had dinged her pride, had made her wonder why she wasn’t good enough for a guy to want as more than just a good time.

Why buy the cow... Her mother’s voice echoed inside her head.

Maybe that was Tess’s problem—she wanted to be in love, craved the touch of a man who would love her back, so much she plunged in without checking the depth.

In Graham’s case the water had been about six inches deep. Splat.

Graham moved closer, his steps sounding sympathetic, even though Tess knew that was impossible. “Don’t,” she said, flinging out a hand.

“What?”

“Don’t come near me.”

He stopped, resting his hands on his hips. “Look, it will be easier for everyone if I dissolve the contract and move on. It’s the least I can do in this situation.”

Tess snorted. “The least you can do? Whatever. Spare me your sympathy.”

“It’s not sympathy. I’m trying to do the right thing.”

“Well, don’t. I’m not working here. My father obviously doesn’t value me enough to think I can handle our family business. I won’t waste your time with how that makes me feel. He’s not giving the job to me so I could give a rat’s ass who takes it.”

Graham searched her face with shuttered eyes of arctic blue. “I can break the contract.”

“No, you can’t. My father gets what he wants, and he’s never played well when it comes to business. If you quit, he’ll sue you, wrap you up in red tape and hire someone else.”

Graham swallowed again. Hard. “Surely once I tell him our relationship—”

“Why? We don’t have a relationship. It was sex. Meaningless sex. Let’s not make it what it isn’t. Besides, why would he care? He’s a misogynist Italian who could have run the mafia but

decided he'd rather screw people legally. Don't let his Hush Puppies shoes fool you. Frank Ullo's a shark."

Graham seemed to think about this. "I still don't feel right though. Doesn't feel good to me."

So now he feels bad? He should have felt bad two weeks ago when she put her heart on the line and called him, when she told him she'd never felt this way about anyone and asked him to call her. That's when he should have been honorable and at least given her the decency of a call.

But she didn't say that. Instead she shrugged. "Too bad. You're the new boss. Might as well start thinking about who you are and how you want to be perceived by everyone here. He's not going to let you go easily. He doesn't care about 'feelings.'"

Graham shook his head and she could feel his frustration. Welcome to the club, buddy.

"How can I take your job?"

"It wasn't my job. My dad made his point—this is his company. Not mine. I suppose your first order of business will be to hire my replacement." Tess stared toward the door. Like a wave heading her way, she could feel the emotion inside her building. She didn't want to stay here any longer with a man who had rejected her as a woman. The man who had taken what she thought to be hers.... A man she still felt an ungodly attraction to even as her world unwound. Tess could pull off the ice-princess routine for only so long.... She was coming undone, and she'd be damned if she did it in front of anyone. Much less him. "See ya



around.”

She tried to slide quickly by him, but he reached out. “Wait, Tess.”

“Please don’t touch me,” she begged, her voice almost at a whisper. She really couldn’t stand the tenderness in his touch. He felt sorry for her. That was all. And something about that hurt more than if he’d been the ruthless son of a bitch she’d wanted to paint him as.

“What can I do to make this right?” he asked, his voice plaintive and so freaking sincere.

“You can’t. Only I can make this right by moving on and proving I can be more than daddy’s little girl. The best you can do is to take care of this company. There are a lot of good people here and they deserve better than a half-assed job by their new boss.”

She wrenched her arm from his grasp and climbed the steps that would lead her to a place she loved...a place where she no longer belonged.

Quitting had been her choice and it had been one she had to make. Her assumptions had gotten her nothing but wounded pride, but she knew she wasn’t part of this business merely because her name was Ullo. She was good at her job. She’d brought in new accounts and the floats she oversaw were detailed and cost-effective. She hadn’t done well because her father owned the company...she’d done well because she’d pushed herself to live up to his name.

And now she would take her experience and foresight to a new company. She would show the world—and her father—just how good she was.

“Tess?” Graham’s voice carried on the river breeze.

He stood etched hard against the muddy waters and soft emerging spring green of the brush along the riverbank.

“I’m sorry.”

Tess lifted her chin. “At least someone is.”

## CHAPTER SIX

GRAHAM TWISTED THE KEY in the door of the apartment he’d rented two weeks ago and pushed inside.

What a crappy day.

The dim room was hardly welcoming with an old leather couch that had a rip in the arm, a big-screen TV perched on a less than sturdy table and a single flowered armchair donated by his brother’s girlfriend. The place looked pathetic, but it would have to do until he could afford some new stuff. Currently, he had bills due and wanted to take Emily camping at the beginning of summer.

The contract he’d signed had given him a nice salary, a large enough expense account and a car. Soon, he’d be back to where he once was, replenishing his meager savings and funding the retirement fund he’d depleted. The severance package NASA had given him had helped buffer the loss he’d taken on the sale of his condo. Damn housing market had tanked and he’d been upside down on the gated executive condo he’d bought five years

ago. He'd been relatively smart with his money, thank God, but it still hadn't been enough to weather all the notes and student loans he'd collected over the years. Growing up poor made a man want things and Graham had been no exception—something he regretted when he'd looked at where he'd spent his money.

But this was to be his new start. Landing the Ullo job had been like gravy on the grandest of Thanksgiving dinners. Running a successful multi-million-dollar Mardi Gras company would take him back to his roots, allow him to use his skill set in a way NASA never had. While the mechanical engineer in him loved the technical aspects of cutting-edge innovation, the artist in him had mourned the loss of pushing past the boundaries creatively.

But now his success tasted like last night's dinner coming back up.

Tess.

When she'd walked into Frank's office, a myriad of emotions had galloped across him, starting with delight and ending in bitter regret.

She was right. He was a bastard.

He reached for the remote, tuned the TV to Sports Center merely so he could hear another human voice and then he went to the kitchen to find last night's leftover takeout.

His phone jittered on the bar.

Emily.

His heart brightened.

"Hey, sweetheart," he said.

“Daddy!” she cried, a smile in her voice.

“What are you doing?”

“I had homework today,” she said excitedly.

“Wow, you’re already doing homework in second grade?”

“Dad,” she said, using a teenage voice. “Of course. Most kids don’t like homework, but I do.”

“That’s because you’re a smarty pants.”

She giggled, and he tucked that laughter into his soul. He’d screwed up a lot of things in life, but Emily had been the one perfect example of how an emotionally infantile man could grow into something better than his own father. Graham had made being a good father a vow.... Another reason he’d been adamant about returning to New Orleans. “I can’t wait to come to your house. There’s a pool there, right?”

“Yep, and a tennis court.”

“I don’t know how to play tennis,” she said, her voice a little breathless. He could hear the rattle of cabinets in the background.

“Maybe you can take lessons? That would be fun, right?”

“Maybe,” she said, chewing something. “I’m not good at sports stuff.”

“You don’t have to be good. It will be fun just to be out in the sun, moving around.” Graham had noticed Emily had started putting on some unhealthy weight. Monique had laughed it off, talking about Christmas cookies and king cake, but Graham suspected Emily was left too often to her own devices after school, snacking and sitting in front of the TV glued to the

Disney channel. Being here would give him a better handle on her health...a better handle on building a stronger relationship with his daughter. "Where's your mom?"

"She's with Josh. They're in a meeting or something. I'm in her office. I did my homework and now I'm eating a snack and watching *Saved by the Bell*."

*Saved by the Bell*?

"It's an old show. Mom said she watched it when she was little. Isn't that funny?"

"Yeah, princess, it is. Look, I'm going to pick you up on Thursday, okay?"

"Cool," she said, her attention waning, most likely caught by the campy sitcom. He thought he heard the sound of Screech's voice.

"Tell your mom to call me later, okay?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Emily? What did I just say?"

"Uh—" She paused. "I don't remember."

"Tell your mother to call me."

"Oh, right. Bye, Daddy," Emily said, still distracted, but Graham would take it. He loved every minute of hearing her breathless little girl voice. Something about her innocence buffered the guilt floating inside him...made his day not so crappy if only for a few minutes.

God, he wanted to do better by her.

And he would.

“Bye, pumpkin,” he said before pressing the end button. Tossing the phone on the counter, he sighed and wiped a hand over his face. He had to get his shit together. That’s what a good father did.

He had to be there physically for Emily, picking her up from after school care, spending weekends proving he wasn’t the same as his old man. He wouldn’t chase sparkly things or shirk his duty to his child. Emily was the reason Graham couldn’t bow out of Ullo.

It had been so long since he’d felt confident about who he was. He’d gotten a taste of it that night exactly a month ago when he’d met Tess. That night, he’d been the man he’d once been—the man who had not only dreamed but made things happen. The man who hadn’t failed with Monique, who had never been laid off, who had never paid a bill late, who had never taken medicine to pull himself out of depression. That magical night had given him a piece of himself back, cracking open the door to a new tomorrow.

But then he’d slammed it closed out of fear. Out of embarrassment of who he’d become. Yeah, it was a stupid reason to toss a chance for happiness with Tess away, but something inside him had balked about coming to her with so little to offer.

Panic had grabbed him by the throat. No matter how well he’d presented himself in his pressed suit and expensive shoes, buying drinks like he had a bankroll in his pocket, he’d known he’d been a facade of the man he’d once been.

All he could think about was his father with frayed cuffs and a shitty-ass excuse for why he couldn't afford to pay school fees. He'd looked in his bathroom mirror and seen the man who'd failed so often, who'd cared so little he'd rather take his life than get a job beneath him and show his sons how real success worked. The fear of turning into that man ate at him and convinced him to wait to call Tess until he was in a better place.

"Shit," he said to no one...because no one was there. Story of his life. "Ah, you're pathetic. You effed up with Tess. Game over."

His words echoed in the apartment and as he looked at the Chinese takeout box in his hand, he felt anger wash over him. So he lived in shitty circumstances now, and he'd blown any chance he had with a woman who had made him feel the way he hadn't felt in years—whole.

But it was a new day. A new beginning. He had a job, a challenge and a daughter who needed him. No time for feeling sorry for himself.

He was Graham Naquin—over-educated, nearer to forty than thirty and possessing all his teeth.

He was in it to win it.

The world was his oyster.

He would kick ass and take names.

Because he refused to be the man who'd raised him. He might have been down, but he wasn't out.

Graham Naquin was a fighter.

\* \* \*

TESS SIPPED THE lukewarm café au lait and studied Gigi who glowered like a jail warden.

“Draw unemployment,” she said, her red eyebrows drawn together.

“No. I don’t want unemployment. I’m getting another job.” Tess stared at her computer, trying to figure how best to position the experience she had. It was damn hard writing a resume with a single company as your only employer.

“Where?” Gigi pushed her tight red curls off her face and sucked on the straw of her iced tea. Gigi hated coffee but loved Cuppa Joe’s with its bright red couches and black lacquered tables. Soft ’80s rock flowed through the speakers and modern art displayed at irregular angles decked the walls. It had a cool, comfy vibe, so they met here as regularly for Wi-Fi and coffee as they did at Two-Legged Pete’s for drinks with more kick.

“Not sure. I love design work and haven’t been able to do as much of it for the past few years because I’ve been working with clients. Maybe I’ll freelance.”

Gigi snapped her fingers. “Didn’t your father say this dude started a Mardi Gras float company way back when?”

“No, Graham told me the company he interviewed for was something he’d done before.... Wait, uh, maybe he did say he started a company, but I haven’t a clue which one. There are a lot of smaller ones.”

“Give me that,” Gigi said, tugging Tess’s laptop toward her.



“Let’s see what we can find on him.”

Tess scooted her chair closer, wondering why she hadn’t already done that. She often used social media to scan the guys she dated, but Graham had said he wasn’t on Facebook.

Gigi typed away like a flame-tipped woodpecker on crack as Tess sipped her coffee and looked around at the world still turning even though hers had crashed that afternoon. How could people still laugh, still make jokes, still flirt across the room? Didn’t her sadness permeate their happy, shiny faces?

“Bingo!” Gigi crowed, sitting back with a smile. “You’re never going to believe this one.”

Tess tipped the computer so she could see the screen. “Holy crap. Upstart?”

“Yeah, that’s crazy, huh?”

Tess reeled with the news. Upstart, run by the effervescent Monique Dryden, had grown to become Frank Ullo’s staunchest competition...and Graham Naquin had been one of the founders?

Gigi started reading. “Monique Dryden started Upstart Floatmakers in 2003 with her partners Graham Naquin and Josh Laborde when the three post-grad students, on a whim, created a sci-fi float for the Krewe of Vader, a satirical sci-fi fantasy krewe started by Jimmie Ray Dietzel. The three friends’ collaboration led to a passionate venture—” Gigi wiggled her eyebrows “—which united a film student, an engineer and an art history graduate in like purpose. Building their floats using high-tech materials, cutting-edge light displays and fuel-efficient design

has vaulted the ‘Little Engine That Could’ into the big leagues in float design.”

Gigi stopped reading out loud and skimmed the article, her lips moving as fast as her blue eyes. “Wow, he sold his interest in the company and moved to Houston to work for NASA.”

Tess looked away. She didn’t want to know any more. Something about Graham having a relationship with Monique Dryden made the coffee curdle in her stomach. She’d met Monique many times at fundraisers and the occasional Mardi Gras ball and had found the vivacious brunette to be smart and gorgeous. She’d always made Tess feel a giantess next to her dark, diminutive beauty.

“All this is pretty interesting...almost coincidental,” Gigi said. “You sure he didn’t know who you were? This smells funny.”

“He didn’t. I never gave him my last name, and obviously my father didn’t care to mention his daughter Tess frequents Two-Legged Pete’s and takes home random hot guys. Graham didn’t have any more of a clue than I did. I’m certain about that. Besides, how would it have benefited him? My dad didn’t tell me what was going on.”

Gigi stared out the window at the world moving by in the late afternoon light. “Know what you should do?”

“I’m scared to ask,” Tess joked, trying to forget she was devastated, trying to find what little humor she had left after cleaning out her desk and passing her key to Billie.

“You should talk to Monique Dryden about a job. Bet she

would love to sink her teeth into you.” Gigi gave a sharky lawyer grin.

Tess made a face. “That would be...I don’t know...too weird. Plus, it’s doubtful she has an opening.”

“Don’t know until you ask, do you? And how awesome would that be? You’d totally teach your dad and Mr. Fancy Pants Naquin a lesson.”

“But it’s—” Tess rooted around for the right word “—treason. I’ll stick with trying freelance design or something. I can’t work at a rival company.”

“Why not? It’s a job. Your father screwed you, and Graham Naquin literally screwed you. Don’t play the victim. Turn the tables on them.”

Gigi didn’t understand family the way Tess did. Her best friend’s parents had split in a bitter, contested divorce rendering their only daughter a bone to be fought over. Finally after winning joint custody, Gigi’s father moved to California and pretty much forgot about the daughter “he loved beyond himself.” The whole messy affair had left Gigi cynical.

“I’m not you, Gigi. Ullo is part of my family and I can’t hurt my family.”

Gigi just stared at her for a good ten seconds. Censure, and maybe disappointment that Tess wasn’t jumping to get revenge on her father and Graham, clearly visible on her face.

Seriously, how could Tess work for the company that had given Frank Ullo the most competition over the past two years?

Sounded too in-your-face for Tess's taste.

Then again, Gigi wasn't totally off base. Working for Upstart would be a great way to prove to her father he'd made a colossal mistake, and Tess could prove to herself she could make it in this business without her father's name. Would it really be so evil?

The hurt, bitter part of her said no. And the tied-to-her-family, devoted part of her screamed yes.

But loyalty to family went both ways, didn't it?

Her father hadn't felt compelled to keep it all in the family...so why should she?

Self-doubt gathered inside Tess. What if everything she thought she'd been was a lie? What if she wasn't as good at designing floats or hustling krewes as she assumed she was? What if everyone else had pulled Tess's weight, winking at each other over the boss's daughter's incompetence? What if she sucked?

Tess glanced at the computer. Hell, she couldn't even write a resume. What was the difference between freelancing float designs and anchoring a desk at another company? Not much.

"Maybe it wouldn't hurt to drop by Upstart with a resume...if I can get the stupid thing finished," Tess said, gulping the last of her coffee, wishing she didn't even have to think about resumes, family loyalty or the fact she forgot to grab her favorite water bottle out of the company fridge. She couldn't think past the hurt...and Gigi wasn't helping by planting the seeds of rebellion within her.

Gigi smiled, obviously pleased Tess considered her diabolical plan for revenge. Blood in the water excited her, made her hungry rather than faint. “Bold, ballsy and very Tess-like.”

“What?”

Gigi shrugged. “We’re friends for a reason. You might smile and laugh more than I do, but we both have an innate need for justice, for righting wrong and bringing balance to the world. And we do what it takes.”

Is that what taking a job with another Mardi Gras float builder would be? Righting a wrong? Didn’t feel that way, but Tess did want to prove everything she’d done as an executive in her father’s company wasn’t because she was an Ullo but rather because she was good at it. She trampled the self-doubt and thought about how satisfactory it would be to work for the company Graham had abandoned. There was something deliciously wicked about turning that screw...a sort of a flagrant “suck it, big boy.”

“You’re right. I’m ballsy and I right wrongs. I should have a cape.”

Gigi laughed. “Get a green one. Matches your eyes.”

Tess rolled those green eyes. “Besides, a job is a job, and right now I need one. So I better get this resume finished so I can pound the pavement tomorrow. Hmm...never had to do that before. I’m liking the challenge of having to really earn my way. Is that crazy?”

“No. It’s normal. There are very few people who have a job waiting on them when they graduate from college.” Gigi shoved

her glass aside and rummaged through her purse. "Hurry and finish. I want to get to The Columns for happy hour. I need a date for a company party and I want to hit up the after business crowd before they go home to their Labradors."

"Or wives."

Gigi pulled a lipstick from her purse and made a face.

The last thing Tess wanted to do was go to a bar, even as nice as The Columns was. She wanted to go home, eat some comfort food, watch Seinfeld re-runs and sulk about the shit sandwich life had handed her. No, not life. Her father and, to a degree, Graham. Okay, in fairness, Graham had only hurt her feelings when he hadn't called like he said he would...and being awarded her job didn't help matters. But, hey, she was Gigi's wingman just like Gigi was for her. Maybe after an hour she could leave. "Fine, but I have to go by FedEx first. No more free copies for me."

Gigi gave a humorless laugh. "Like the rest of us."

"Whatever," Tess said, wondering why her friend saw her as different merely because she'd worked for her family. Did that make her privileged? Lazy? Entitled? She had never thought so because she'd worked hard, but maybe the world thought her life had been too easy. And maybe it had been. Maybe being truly on her own would be good for her.

But her heart told her differently.

She'd loved who she was three days ago. Well, except for Graham's knock to her ego. But even that she'd gotten over. Mostly. Her life had been gravy...and now it was soured wine.

“Put on lip gloss and brush your hair. Don’t forget you’re available, too. Wouldn’t hurt to find a little something-something to take your mind off tall, dark and deceitful.”

“My mind was never on him,” Tess lied.

Gigi gave her that look, the one that plowed through the bullshit. “You actually used the line ‘I found the one’ after that night with Graham Naquin. He was on your mind.”

“I had forgotten about him until today.” She lied again because it was easier that way.

“Whatever you say, hunny bunny. He’s a job stealer anyway.”

“Technically he didn’t steal my job. According to Papa Dearest it was never mine to begin with.”

“So you say. Still, it’s time to find someone who will make you feel better.”

A man instead of ice cream? It would be better for her thighs, although she didn’t want a man at present. Better to stay home and get her shit together...but there was that whole loyalty thing.

Tess shooed Gigi away. “Go fix your makeup or something. I can’t think while you’re nipping at me. I need to put the finishing touches on this resume before I can go out with you.”

Gigi huffed, but did as suggested, flouncing away, sliding a smile at a cute guy in a Brooks Brothers suit and pink tie. Tess refocused on her resume, wishing it looked a little fuller. But she was who she was.

And who was that?

She’d thought she knew. She’d been beloved daughter,

tolerated sister, good friend and devoted VP of operations in the family company...but now?

Tess felt like she'd been dropped into a maze. Every turn presented a barrier. No job. No man. Anger at her father...and Graham. Self-doubt. She'd never had such barriers that required her to backtrack or climb over hurdles to reach her goal.

But Tess knew something about herself—she may have lived a charmed life, but she wasn't going to lie down and flop about, bemoaning her state. She'd find a new job even if it meant going to the competition. Nothing wrong with a modern woman taking control of her life, leaving conventions behind.

And maybe she'd even get a new man...or not.

All she did know was that Graham needed to be a memory, and Frank Ullo needed to learn his daughter wasn't a doormat.

Plugging the flash drive into the computer, Tess downloaded her resume and renewed her determination to prove to the world she could kick ass and take names.

Tess Ullo was a fighter.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

GRAHAM PULLED UP to the curb in front of the house in which he'd once lived. Looked the same. Felt different.

The Orleans brick with the intentional plaster smears and the beige stucco had once seemed so modern, so very much "them." But now it looked pretty much like what it was—a new townhouse in a decent area of Metairie, crowded in like the others. Pansies lined the sidewalk. Graham only knew they were



pansies because he'd planted the same flowers in that spot years ago. He wondered if Josh planted them now.

The door opened and Emily flew outside, dark pigtails flying, smile as wide as sunshine.

“Daddy!” she screamed, her sneakers slapping against the sidewalk.

Graham scooped her up, squeezing tight. Two chubby arms curled around him. “Hey, pumpkin. Jeez, you’ve grown a foot since I last saw you.”

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