

EXECUTIVE SWEET



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(a free preview of the first five chapters)

Sage Ardman

Westerley series #1

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Executive Sweet

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To the real Kay Samson . . .
you know who you are.

1: Business Plan



Monday, May 21

“Ha ha, very funny.” The receptionist frowned and continued to listen to the phone. “That can’t be right!” She looked up briefly at Kay, flattened her mouth, and rolled her eyes. “Are you trying to get this girl in trouble on her first day of work?”

Kay leaned closer. *Great.* There was a problem with her job and she hadn’t even started work yet. Did she make a mistake on her paperwork? Was this the wrong building, wrong time, wrong day? *Get a grip.* She stood straight and closed her eyes—no need to worry. Whatever the trouble was, everything would get sorted out.

Kay looked around and let her earlier excitement return. *I’m actually here now.* The lobby of the Yorick Corporation took her breath away. Old-fashioned but beautifully built, the space harkened back to a time when people still cared about marble floors, finely detailed woodwork, ornate columns, and high ceilings with tall windows. It exuded a wonderful sensation of busyness: people rushing about, the smell of morning coffee, the sounds of muffled conversations, clattering high heels, attaché case latches, and elevator dings. It called to her with great promise.

The receptionist was still trying to make things right. “That’s impossible and you know it.” *Yeah, you tell them.* Her ardor was reassuring. At least Kay had an advocate here

at Yorick—someone who seemed to care. She would take all the help she could get.

Today was a very important day and Kay had looked forward to it for a long time. After all these years of school, today was the day when she would finally start work. Kay didn't hate school—in fact, she loved classes and always excelled at them. Rather, she was excited because all of her hard work had finally paid off. She had a great job with good pay at a solid company. And the best part was that the work was in her favorite area of business: deal making. Kay was going to be a junior executive in the negotiations group. At least, she hoped so.

The receptionist listened to the phone with her mouth scrunched tight. “You’re going to get me in trouble, too.” She looked up at Kay with a guilty smile, then turned back to the phone and lashed out. “Cut the crap, Melissa!” This was not going well. Maybe she wouldn't start work today.

A man standing nearby turned to look. He focused on the receptionist, probably using her outburst as an excuse to glance their way, then quickly turned his eyes to Kay and left them there. *Uh huh*. Kay was used to this—it happened all the time. She was both blessed and cursed with good looks, rendering men helpless when they saw her. Kay forgave him for being just another smitten man, caught in the web of her long blonde hair, green eyes, and bowtie lips. Her father always told her she had a face that could launch a thousand ships—one of them was sailing right now. She ignored him and let him stare.

Over the years, Kay had experimented with her looks and learned just how powerful they could be. Sometimes she would downplay her appearance in an attempt to be taken seriously and treated normally, but it usually failed. On rare occasions she would dress provocatively, just to see

how people would react. Besides an appealing face, she had a good figure with all of the curves that she knew men loved. In high school, Kay had played a game with her cheerleader friends that involved wandering through the local mall wearing short shorts and tube tops, counting the number of men who stumbled while staring at them. Kay usually did well, often winning extra points for causing collisions.

But today was not a day to play around with her appearance. First-impressions are important and she would be meeting many new people. Kay wore a well-tailored charcoal business suit with a straight knee-length skirt. Her off-white blouse was simple, cotton, and buttoned all the way up. Her only accessories were a short pearl necklace borrowed from her mother and a gold watch borrowed from her father. But even in this modest attire, few failed to notice her.

The receptionist finished her phone conversation calmly. "Okay, I'll tell her. Bye." She turned to Kay. "Well, I called Mr. Monroe, but he isn't doing your new employee orientation after all. Instead, get this . . ." She paused for effect, an exaggerated look of shock on her face. *Tell me already.* "Instead, your orientation is going to be handled by Doris Chandler."

That's it? All this yelling and whining over a simple change of personnel? Kay blew out her breath and relaxed. She *would* be able to start work, after all. It certainly didn't matter to her if someone else was doing her orientation. Besides, she would most likely never see that person again. "What's wrong with Doris Chandler?"

"You don't understand. Doris Chandler doesn't do new employee orientations—she's the CEO's administrator."

That didn't sound right. Even the man staring at Kay looked at the receptionist for a moment before turning back to admire Kay even more. She narrowed her eyes. "Is this some kind of a joke?"

"Nope. I know Melissa and she insists this is for real. Or, if it *is* a joke, she isn't in on it." The receptionist held her palms up and shrugged. "In any case, they want you to report to Ms. Chandler on floor thirty-seven—the top floor. Here's your badge."

Kay took the badge and tried to keep her voice light and friendly. "Nice welcoming committee you've got here." But inside her head, warning bells were starting to ring.



The elevator door opened on the top floor and Kay stepped out. She took a moment to appreciate where she was. It's not often that you get to visit the executive floor—she might as well enjoy the view.

Kay had expected it to be all chrome and glass, the usual modern office theme, but the decor was nothing of the kind. Instead, the executive floor continued the style of the first floor, but was much more stately. The walls were dark wood, even more lavishly carved than the lobby. The floors were carpeted with deep pile, and the ceilings were sky high. A few works of art adorned the walls and she spent a bit of time admiring them. One painting showed a prince holding a skull, and she almost laughed when she got the joke. Hamlet, holding Yorick's skull. She was glad to see that the Yorick Corporation had a sense of humor.

By comparison to the lobby below, the executive floor was quiet. Too quiet. None of that bustle of busyness; the floor seemed nearly empty. A small desk sat on the left and a waiting area filled the right side. An older woman, the

only person in sight, sat at the desk typing at her computer. *Why am I here? This isn't right.* The warning bells kept up their steady ding, ding, ding.

Kay walked carefully to the desk, as if she wasn't supposed to make any noise. The sign said "Doris Chandler" and the woman sitting there had a pretty face but an old-fashioned hairdo. Kay stood a few feet away and waited for Doris to finish typing.

After a few seconds, Doris looked up, saw Kay, and gasped. Her face brightened and she put a hand to her chest, as if to contain her joy. "Oh my God! Please tell me your name is Kay."

Ding, ding, ding. Kay wasn't just any visitor to the executive floor; they were eagerly awaiting her. "Why, yes, I'm Kay. Kay Samson. I was told to . . ." But before she could even finish her sentence, Doris leapt from the chair and ran around her desk with open arms to give Kay a big hug. *Clang, clang, clang.*

"Welcome, Kay. I'm so happy to meet you! I'm Doris."

This was too strange. "I . . . Wait, are you sure you have the right person, Doris? This is just my first day of work. Aren't I supposed to go to new-employee orientation?"

Doris stood there and looked Kay up and down. "No, you're definitely the right person. We redirected your orientation so that you would come here first. Dan Avery, our CEO, wants to talk to you before you start work. Come right this way." Doris walked to the big double doors near her desk.

Of course. It all made sense now. Yet another lustful man, this time one with power.

Kay had read about Dan Avery after she got the job. The playboy CEO, just thirty-three years old, was so handsome and eligible that every picture of him Kay could find was

always with a different, dazzlingly dressed model. Many articles also pointed out that he was just as good at business as he was at attracting women; Yorick had done very well since he became CEO two years earlier. In fact, the press nicknamed him “The Charmer” because of his success in both business and pleasure.

But every story she read about Dan Avery eventually got around to the same subject: his profligate ways. He was such an alluring personality that he often got his picture in the society pages, drinking and dancing all night with dozens of women. The settings and clothes were always the most glamorous. He was even known to fly half way around the country just to attend a party. *Another rich boy, playing with the world.*

So of course, horny Dan Avery wanted to snare the latest pretty woman who came to work for him. How had he found out about her? Did he have spies in recruiting, advising him of potential girlfriends? And why was Doris so happy? That was mysterious.

This is unacceptable. Dan Avery had a lot of nerve, getting his administrator to derail her first day of work. She would *not* be his next piece of arm candy.

Kay set her jaw and turned to look at the elevators, gauging how quickly she could reach them if necessary. *Whoa, chill.* There was no need to be upset; Kay knew how to handle men and had learned hundreds of ways of saying “no.” And if her looks gained her admission to the CEO’s office on her first day of work, then why not? She forced a smile and turned to Doris, who was now standing by the double doors. Doris opened a door, stuck her head in, and practically sang out, “It’s Kay!” Then she backed away and waved grandly. Like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole, Kay spiraled into the CEO’s office.



Kay stood just inside the door of Dan Avery's office, amazed. *This is incredibly grand.* More dark wood lined the immense room, and a giant picture window looked out over the city. An executive-sized leather chair sat behind a huge desk, and three chairs for visitors lined the other side. Kay noticed more plush carpeting, an ornate chandelier over a small conference table, a black leather couch, and a well-stocked bar along the right wall; this place had everything. She guessed there was even a bed in the next room for his more personal activities.

And sitting there in his big chair was Dan Avery, looking like a king. He stood up and walked over to shake her hand, a warm smile on his face, his big strong hand holding her securely but not too tightly. "Hello, Ms. Samson. Nice to meet you." He waved her toward a chair. "Please have a seat." Smooth, and actually kind of cute. He had dark wavy hair, a strong rugged jaw line, and glimmering gray-blue eyes. She suddenly understood why they called him the Charmer. Of course, his eyes kept bouncing up and down, evaluating her, undressing her, and shouting with wordless desire. *Men.*

Kay sat down and watched her CEO walk back to his side of the desk. *Hmm, not bad.* Besides a nice face, he had a solid build, neither too big nor too skinny. That winning smile had surely melted a few hearts. Yes, the Charmer was one cool player; no wonder women wanted to be with him.

There were so many possibilities, good and bad, that might come from having a fling with the CEO, but *damn!* why did this have to happen on her first day of work? Why did things always end up like this? It upset her that the CEO could take advantage of her like this. Kay folded her arms,

looked away, and started to withdraw. This was not what she wanted today.

Then Kay stopped herself. There was no need to call out her new CEO for being a lecher—give him a chance. After all, he was Dan Avery, and that might count for something. She sat up straight and looked around the office one more time. Then she turned to face him directly. “Not that I’m complaining, Mr. Avery, but why am I here?” *As if I don’t already know.*

Dan held up a finger to indicate patience. “I know this must be confusing; I’m going to answer every one of your questions. And please, call me Dan. I hope you don’t mind if I call you Kay.” Already on a first-name basis with the CEO? This was proceeding as expected.

Dan shuffled a few papers on his desk and picked up one of them, scanning it and nodding his head in approval. “You’re a pretty good student, aren’t you?” He waved the paper at her. “All I see on this transcript are A’s. Didn’t you ever get a B?” He had a teasing look on his face.

Well, this is a surprise. He actually seemed to care about her schoolwork. Could she have been wrong about him? “I got some A minuses here and there, but sorry, no B’s.” School work was one of the few areas in which Kay could do well and compete fairly—a refuge from her good looks. In fact, she had always tried to excel academically *because* of her appearance—to prove to people that she was more than just a beauty queen and to try to rise above their condescending attitudes about pretty girls. She was relieved to be talking about academics. “I was first in my MBA class, you know.”

“Yes, from Olin no less! A pretty good school. Are you some kind of genius? It says here that you were also college valedictorian.”

She had even been high school valedictorian and president of the debate team, but she didn't bother mentioning it. And anyway, Kay was no longer sure she knew the subject of this morning's debate. "I'm pretty good at school. I'm sure you'll find that I'm just as good at work."

"Yes, I certainly hope so." He picked up a few other pieces of paper. "By the way, you also have great recommendations. Your professors have some very nice things to say about you."

Kay wished it were that simple. Unfortunately, some of those professors were thinking about more than her academic record. It took extra effort to be smart and attractive, because people often stopped at attractive and ignored smart. This was Kay's lot; just one more thing that she had to deal with—sometimes by being extra sharp, other times by being extra smooth.

Why did Dan Avery care so much about her academics? The articles about him said nothing about smart women. In every picture of Dan, women were laughing, dancing, and drinking—never doing anything intellectual. It just didn't add up. Kay ventured a guess. "So is this a special welcoming session for good students?"

"No. I'm afraid it's a bit more than that. Your contracts professor, Paul Ryerson, is a good friend of mine and he told me that you were coming to work here. Paul said two things about you that made me want to meet you in person. First, he said that you were one of his best students *ever*. This is high praise coming from Paul. Second, and I hope you don't think this is inappropriate, he said that you were one of his most beautiful students ever. He's right about that."

And there it was. After such a promising start, Dan Avery had shown his true nature. It looked like another one

of those situations where her accomplishments would get overlooked because some man couldn't get beyond his libido. Kay frowned slightly and looked directly into Dan's eyes. "Yes sir, I hear that a lot. I can't tell where this is going though. Is this about my academics or my looks? You seem to be flipping between the two. I don't have to tell you about your reputation as a ladies man, but perhaps I should mention that I have no interest in being one of those ladies." *Well, maybe some interest, but not on my first day of work.*

Dan spoke calmly. "I understand, and let me assure you that this is not a pick-up." He held up his hands in a sign of surrender. "Look, I can see that this is a bit threatening so let's back up for a second before you slap a sexual-harassment lawsuit on me." He picked up a document from his desk and tossed it to her. "Tell me, what is this?"

Whoa. I didn't see that coming. After such a heated buildup, they were back to talking shop. Kay leafed through the document—a contract with another company that wanted to buy Yorick's trucks. This was obviously some sort of test, so she checked the numbers on the summary page to see if there was anything unusual.

"This looks like a standard contract. But it does seem to have an awfully high closing fee here." She pointed to the number on the summary page.

Dan's eyes widened, and he sat up in his chair. "Yes!" He shouted like a schoolboy and pumped his fist back and forth. "You're good! You saw that fee instantly." He leaned across his desk toward Kay, a look of delight on his face as his eyes continued to study her. "Wow! Sharp as a tack and beautiful too—you're perfect! I can't believe it, you're the killer colleague!" He pounded the desk. "I've been searching a long time for someone like you."

Those warning bells were clanging again, but this was more than just a horny man on the attack. Way more. “What’s going on, Mr. Avery . . . Dan?”

Dan took a deep breath. “Kay, I know you’re supposed to start work in the negotiations group, but I’m going to offer you a different job. It’s really an experiment, but I think you’ll be good at it. You still get to do negotiations, you work directly with me, and the pay is better. And yes, I know what you’re thinking, so let me add that this job does not involve having sex with me or anyone else. However, what I’m about to tell you is sexual in nature and definitely inappropriate work talk, so if that bothers you, we can stop this meeting now.”

“I’m listening . . .”

“Good. First the obvious: you are an incredibly beautiful woman, by any man’s standard. What’s more, you dress well, allowing your beauty to shine for all to see. I’m sure that you know the power this gives you over men.” Dan leaned even closer toward Kay. “So here’s the deal: *I want to harness this power.*”

“That sounds like sex to me.”

“Look, I know that some businessmen sweeten their deals by sending prostitutes to please their clients. I do *not* want to please the people I deal with—I want to *distract* them, by bringing a beautiful woman with me to the negotiation table. A woman who is just as savvy as I am and who is on my team. A woman who understands the situation so completely that she knows exactly *when* to be distracting. I think that woman is you.”

Kay sank down in her chair and stared out the window, unable to move. The CEO wanted to negotiate contracts with her—that was good. But he wanted something sexual as well. Those warning bells had been dead on. She looked

at Dan and spoke slowly. “You want me to work with you and act sexy in meetings?” *This is wrong.* Kay dropped her head and covered it with a hand, trying to hide her unease. Then she looked up at Dan. “I’m not going to seduce your clients.”

“No seduction, just teasing.”

“Teasing *is* seduction. How do you propose to separate the two?”

“Yes, it’s a fine line. Let me give you an example of what I have in mind so you’ll understand—it has to do with the contract I just gave you.” He leaned forward in his chair. “I am very close to closing a deal with Jason Mack over at Atlantic Distributors. We’ve been going back and forth for a while, and we’re nearly done. Now normally, we have negotiation specialists at these meetings who advise us about changes. But in this case, we’ve been through all that for weeks now, so we’re ready to sign. All I need is to get him to accept this one change—the closing fee. That’s where you come in.

“I want you to pretend to be a secretary who knows nothing. You sit in on the meeting and follow the negotiation, distracting him at just the right moment so that he agrees to that fee.”

This was some kind of pornographic fantasy, the sort of thing she’d heard guys kid about during sex. What was this kind of ploy doing here, at the top level of management? And playing a stupid secretary was just plain insulting. “Oh great, the dumb, sexy secretary routine. How trite.”

“Yes, but always effective. Don’t worry, I have plenty of scenarios in mind where you are much more of an expert player. Most of the time, I want you to be my negotiations specialist, advising me while distracting the other guy. But let me stress once again—none of these plans involve you

having sex with anyone. No seduction, no sex. Just a little teasing. Let's face it—this is a 'con game,' where you must win the other guy's confidence in order to manipulate the situation."

"A con game? Is this legal? Is it moral?" *Am I going to get arrested on my first day of work?*

"I'm glad you asked that, because if you didn't, I'd be concerned about you. There is nothing illegal about what we're doing here. Nobody is going to force Jason Mack to sign this contract. If he does sign, it's because his judgment is clouded. By you. As for morality, I'm going to admit that this is a gray area. However, all of the games I want you to play are against people who have their own gray areas. Take Mack, for instance. That bastard suckered me last year when I first negotiated with him. He actually threatened to stage an Internet-wide smear campaign against our company if we didn't lower our price. This deal recoups our losses and evens the score—if he agrees to the extra closing fee.

"And to further alleviate your qualms, I'm going to pay you ten percent of whatever profit you can squeeze out of these guys, which for this deal, means \$60,000 for you. Not bad for a few hours of work."

Wait, what? Kay's mouth fell open and she wondered if she had heard him right. Did he just offer her \$60,000 to tease a business adversary? Sixty. Thousand. Dollars! For that kind of money, she would gladly act like a sexy secretary. With that kind of money, she could start to pay off her college loans and even put something away to help her brother's upcoming college costs.

But she didn't get all A's in school just so she could act like a tramp in business meetings. This sucked in all kinds of ways. And one thing that really sucked was this deal. It

didn't make any sense. No normal businessman would agree to such a change. "Tell me. Why would Jason Mack allow this fee? It seems like a deal breaker to me."

"Yes, you're right. But you see, there are actually two changes in this contract. The other change gives him a discount on parts from our Mexican plant. So that's the reason for the high closing fee: it offsets the Mexican discount." Dan smirked and leaned forward. "What he doesn't know is that we're closing the Mexican plant, so the discount is worthless."

"What?" She practically shouted and fought back her rising bile. "You're not only willing to seduce your business adversaries, you're also willing to lie to them?" Was Dan Avery an unusually scummy businessman, or were they all like this?

Dan pointed his finger at Kay and raised his voice. "I fight back with equal force! You should have seen some of the lies he was going to say about us in that smear campaign. Calling us racists, claiming that we torture the workers in our foreign plants. That's just not true. We're a good company. Hey, we're even leading the industry as far as our percentage of female executives, although I admit that the specialty truck industry doesn't do too well in that area. Still, fifteen percent of our executives are women."

"Your board of directors is all male."

Dan twisted his mouth and looked down. "Yeah, you got me there."

Kay shook her head sadly. "I really wanted to make a difference here, for myself and for all women. But under your plan, I'm going to make things much worse. This whole idea of distracting men is the very reason why women get so much grief. Why Islamic cultures force us to cover up completely and why religious Jews build a wall in

the back of their sanctuaries to keep us out of sight. You guys can't think straight when there's a woman nearby. And now you want me to intentionally distract men, leading them on and tricking them out of their money. How is that going to help women?"

"How about this? We target only those who you think deserve it—sexist bastards who are rude to women. We investigated Mack back when he was slandering us—he rarely plays nice. If you want the latest dirt on him, ask Doris what her friends say about working there—she'll have plenty to tell you."

Dan held out his hands, palms up. "Look, I have no intention of using you to manipulate every negotiation. It really would be immoral to play this game on decent businessmen who are trying to make an honest deal." He raised his fist in the air, his face stern. "But there are some people who just don't play nice, and you can help me even the score with them. This game will give you all sorts of power, including the power to make things better. Wait until you meet some of these men—you'll hate them even more than I do."

Hmm. The gallant Robin Hood Avery. That would make her his Maid Marian. Did Marian use seduction to help Robin? It could well be. "So you want me to pretend to be a secretary. Whose secretary, yours?"

"Yes, I'll tell him that you're a temp who's filling in for Doris. And speaking of Doris, you should talk to her—she knows all sorts of useful information about how to get things done around here. She also has a woman's insight into the people you're going to meet."

"She knows about this kinky idea of yours?" *Stupid question—of course she does. Remember that hug?*

Dan chuckled. "She works with me on it."

That was no surprise. She couldn't stop a sarcastic barb from bursting forth. "So I'll have a pimp *and* a madam."

Dan frowned. "Honestly, Kay, it's not like that. This isn't about sex—just sexuality. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do." He paused and bit his lip, then continued unsteadily. "I, uh . . ." *What now?* Probably something kinky that he forgot to mention. "I want to ask you a question. I hope this isn't too personal, but can I ask whether or not you have a boyfriend? Because if you do, this game might put a strain on your relationship."

Kay laughed out loud, and Dan looked puzzled. Perhaps she was laughing a bit too much, but she couldn't help it amid all this insanity. "Strain? Let me tell you! If I had a boyfriend right now and mentioned your idea, he'd leave me, even if I said 'no' to you. Your whole proposal would threaten him so much that he'd get jealous and run for the hills."

She let her head hang down for a second before continuing. "I'm fully aware that my looks draw men's attention, making them swarm around me like flies. But just like flies, they never stay long, either because they're threatened by my intelligence, or because they just want sex and don't care anything about me, or because they're so insecure that they fly away as soon as any other guy starts buzzing around. So, no, I don't have a boyfriend—they're rare things for me." She looked up at him timidly. "I bet you find that hard to believe."

"Actually, it makes perfect sense. You may be surprised to know that most women want me for all the wrong reasons too, like my money or my notoriety."

"Well, I'm glad you understand. But I still don't believe that this game can be played without having sex. Wherever I go, people want my body. Jason Mack will, too." *And you*

too, buddy. Not that she would mind taking Dan to bed, but after work hours.

“Jason Mack may want to have sex with you, but he won’t get to. All our deals will be done at work with other people around. All you have to do is tease—follow-through is not expected. In fact, I forbid it. Your job is to make these guys fall for you and sign the contract, then get out of the way before anything else happens.”

Kay closed her eyes briefly. “Dan, I hear what you’re saying, but I know how this works. You say there’s no sex involved, but it always comes down to that. If I tease Mack, he *will* want me—maybe not here in your office, but certainly later.”

She looked at him and hesitated. Should she call him out for his leering? *Sure—let’s see what he has to say for himself.* “Also, if I may be so bold, there may come a time when *you* will want more from me than just a business partner. This whole game is sexually charged, so don’t tell me it isn’t about sex.” *Because I’m certainly feeling it.*

“Kay, I’ll admit that you’re right. I have no idea what will happen in this game, so it’s foolish of me to make any definite statements. But I can make two important promises to you right now. *I promise* that you will never have to do anything you do not want to do. Feel free to say ‘no’ at any time. I also promise to support and defend you, both during and after these deals.

“Let me also add that you’re wrong about me. My strongest emotion right now is pure delight, just thinking about all the business deals we can do together. I’m so focused on this game that I refuse to even consider jeopardizing it by having an affair with you. Given my track record with women, it would be a terrible idea and would ruin the entire plan. Besides, as you’ve already pointed out,

I don't have any trouble finding women to seduce, so you're off my list.

"That isn't to say that I'm not attracted to you. You're a total knockout, and in any other setting, I *would* go after you from the moment you walked in my office. But today, your allure tells me that these other businessmen will want you too, and it will be even more of a pleasure to watch you play them. Believe me when I say that, right now, I look at you and all I want to do is tell you about the incredible business schemes I've thought up for us."

Dan leaned back in his chair. "Kay, I've been fantasizing about this for a long time. You're the first person I've ever met who could actually pull it off. I think we could play this game fabulously, with me setting up executives and you knocking them down." He stared directly into her eyes and his face glowed. "Will you play with me?"

Wow, he's hard to resist. She could do this, and make big money, too. And if she got to target unsavory men, then it would be a real thrill. *Don't forget working with Handsome Dan.* But wouldn't this game destroy her career prospects, once everyone got to know her as some sort of slut?

"Dan, I've got this little voice in my head that keeps shouting 'career.' I've worked hard all my life to get to this point. I've excelled academically and finally landed a good job with a solid future. I was expecting to start work in your negotiations group today." She grumbled and let her head fall. "Playing this game could ruin my career. I feel like I'm throwing away everything I've worked for."

Dan blurted out a single laugh and then looked straight at Kay. "I'm sorry; I don't mean to laugh at you. You're right. You could turn me down and go work in the negotiations group. In five years, you'll be head of the group. In ten years,

you'll be climbing the corporate ladder and maybe even be one of my dozens of vice-presidents. Do you want that? Because if you do, then you can have it, and much faster than you think. Play this game with me, and if you're good at it, I'll promote you to vice-president when it's over. It will cut a decade off of your climb up the corporate ladder."

Kay dropped her head and put her hand up to it. "Don't you see what an empty promise that is? If I'm good at this game, I won't be able to show my face anymore. I could never be one of your vice-presidents. I'll probably have to leave town when it's over."

"Fine, I'll let you run one of our satellite offices. How would you like to be the manager of the St. Louis office, hang out with your business school friends?" Dan opened a drawer and started leafing through it. "I have a brochure here showing all the offices we have around the world. You can take your pick. Let's face it . . ." Dan looked up at Kay with a coy smile. "Yorick is a company of infinite possibilities."

Kay smiled back. That line was so familiar, but not quite the way Shakespeare wrote it. "No, Dan. I believe Yorick is a company of . . ." She ran the lines in her head. *Alas, poor Yorick*. Yes, everyone knew that part. But what was the next line? Right! *He was a man of . . .*

". . . Infinite jest."

Dan snapped to attention and looked at Kay, his mouth hanging open. "That's right," he whispered. He stared at her for a few seconds, then leaned back in his chair, his mouth still open and his eyes never leaving her.

"Please Kay, play this game with me." His voice was soft, entreating, intoxicating. "We'll have so much fun, I can't even begin to tell you."

“Like I said, it could be fun, but it will destroy my career. And no, I don’t want to run your St. Louis office. I just spent the last two years there, and I’m ready to move on. Besides, I want a real job, doing what I’ve been trained to do.”

Dan gave her a tender look. “Look, you’re fresh out of school and you think that these years of training have prepared you for that job in the negotiations group. But there are many other jobs that you’re qualified to do. Today, I’m offering you one of them, a job you never planned on, a job you didn’t even know existed, but a job that you prepared for, all the same.

“And as far as your career goes, I think this is a great opportunity. Work with me and you’ll learn all sorts of things about the business world—many of which are not taught in school and would take you decades to learn on the job.” He leaned forward. “Work with me and you will meet the captains of industry and watch how deals get made.” He sat up straight and waited a beat before continuing, obviously working up to a big finale. “Work with me and you will make *so much money* that you’ll be able to retire in a few years.” He sat back and grinned. She had to admit he had some good points there.

“Oh, and as for your reputation, keep in mind that nothing is permanent. When you stop this game and get back on the corporate ladder, I’ll even arrange to change your identity so that you can return to being an ordinary business person.”

But, but, but . . . This was too much to handle. He had answers for her every concern—there had to be a catch. “I can see why they call you the Charmer. You’re good! It seems to me that you’ve got everything you need to make people do your bidding—you don’t need me.”

"I may be charming, but with you by my side, we could be irresistible!" *Hmm, by your side.* Why was this so damn appealing?

Dan looked down at his watch. "Look, I've got a phone meeting soon, so why don't you take a bit of time to think about this. We have an office for you just down the hall—Doris will show it to you. Talk to her and think it over. I'll be free again in an hour and we can talk some more." He stood up and they shook hands, his radiating warmth. Kay could not help but notice his eyes, sparkling with an incredibly loving look. She inhaled deeply, and her mind clouded over.



Doris looked up when Kay stepped out of Dan's office. *What just happened in there?* Kay leaned against the wall and stared blankly into space, her mouth hanging open. "Are you all right, dear?"

"I . . . I think so." She shook it off and managed to sit down next to Doris. "This is so strange!"

"You've got that right." *She's such a beautiful young woman.* Doris had a good feeling about Kay. "Does this mean you're going to play Dan's game?"

Kay laughed. "I think you're being too modest, Doris. From what I hear, it's your game too."

"Yes, yes. *Our* game. Are you playing with us?"

"I'm thinking about it, but I really need some more time to figure it out. Dan tells me that I have an office up here. Can I go sit there for a while?"

"Come on, I'll show you." Doris got up, and Kay followed her down the hall. They stopped at a door and Kay broke into a big grin. The door had an engraved sign on it reading "Kay Samson."

“My own office on the executive floor.” She couldn’t take her eyes away from it, and stood there immobilized. “This can’t be real.”

Doris watched her for a few seconds, then opened the door. Kay stepped in slowly and her mouth dropped. The office wasn’t nearly as big as Dan’s, but was just as beautifully appointed, with the same wood paneling, plush carpet, picture window, and big desk. She walked to the window and looked out over the city.

“I don’t believe this!” She sat down in the huge leather chair and looked out across the empty desk, her eyes unfocused. Doris sat down across the desk from Kay, and they looked at each other. “You must have been pretty confident that I’d agree, or else you wouldn’t have given me an office like this.”

Doris chuckled and folded her arms. “I’m glad you’re impressed, but this is just a spare office we have up here. It doesn’t cost much for us to have a sign engraved. If you agree to play this game, you’d better have a more compelling reason than just seeing your name on a door.” She got up and started to leave, turning back with a sympathetic smile. “Take your time. If you have any questions, come ask me.” She left the room and closed the door.



Kay sat in her new executive office and gazed out the window. She picked up her phone and called her good friend from business school. “Hey, Rebecca. Guess where I am right now?”

“At work?”

“Yes, but you’re not going to believe this, I have an office here on the executive floor, just down the hall from the

CEO. It's a giant empty office with a great view of the city. It's beautiful!"

"What? Did you get promoted already?"

"I don't know what's going on—I'm still trying to figure it out. It may not last, but it's pretty awesome for now. I figured I'd give you a call before it all goes away."

"Lucky you. All I've got is a cubicle, but they say I can move into a shared office in a few weeks." She paused. "So have you met the playboy CEO? What's his name . . . Avery, right?"

"Yes, I've met him. I just got out of my first meeting with him."

"Wow! Is he as good looking in person?"

"Actually yes, but don't worry, I am not letting him near me."

"So you say. Just watch out, Kay. Executives are dangerous people. Watch your ass, and I do mean ass."

"You have no idea how right you are. Listen, I'm going to go now. I've got to figure out this new job. Let's get together sometime and you can tell me about how it's going with you."

"Sure. Bye, Kay." They hung up and Kay turned back to the window, numb.

Time to face facts. Kay thought about herself, and she thought about men. Men who wanted her as soon as they saw her. Men who would do anything to be with her, except care about her, respect her, trust her. She was amused by that old line men liked to say about women, which fit so well when turned on its head. "Men! Can't live with them. Can't live without them."

Kay didn't hate men, at least not all men. And she enjoyed having sex. She got this carefree attitude from her parents, two classic hippies who still held onto their 60's

values. They had raised Kay and her younger brother in a world filled with arts and humanities and sciences, with sex and drugs and nudist colonies, with spirituality and holistic medicine and meditation. Open and honest—a pretty damned good childhood, if she did say so herself.

Kay and her parents agreed that she could date boys in high school, but that she would wait until college to have sex. It meant that she had to fight off a continuous stream of high school boys. But it also meant that she was free to indulge herself as much as she liked, guilt free, when she got to college.

Once in college, Kay availed herself of the long line of boys who eagerly offered themselves to her. She soon learned something that her parents had not taught her: being beautiful was not always a good thing. Men found it difficult to be themselves when she was around. They changed, acted weird. Some became swaggering tough guys, unable to focus on anything but sex. Others became timid babbling boys, unable to focus on anything at all. Some were cool and could handle her, but only for a while. Any relationship that lasted more than a month would collapse from the pressure of jealousy—she had yet to meet a man secure enough to endure the nonstop stream of attention that her looks elicited from other men. It made relationships difficult and love impossible.

Of course, Dan was no different than any other man. He not only saw her as a sex object, but he wanted to make it a part of her work! Where was the line between this and prostitution?

Then again, Kay had to admit that Dan was right about one thing: she understood very well the power she had over men and had become good at wielding it. Over the years, she had mastered many more skills than her early high

school game of tripping men in malls. Dan wanted her to be a seductive con artist. The concept wasn't new to her, only the scale. In the past, she had used her appeal for small gains. Now she could grab thousands of dollars with a single wiggle of her hips.

She went through the list. Use her looks to get stuff? *Did that.* During her sophomore year, a fraternity gave her free dinners for months, simply because she asked sweetly and showed up each night in a tight sweater. Sure, she had to date one of the guys to get this to happen, but she got to choose the cutest puppy in the litter.

Use her looks to resolve difficult situations? *Did that.* She remembered her academic advisor, who froze up after one look at her and fidgeted endlessly. The guy was so flustered that he couldn't even help her with course selection. And worse than that, he refused to sign off on her paperwork, insisting that they needed further meetings. After twenty minutes of his helpless fumbling, she knew what she had to do. Kay moved her chair around to his side of the desk, sidled up to him with childlike sweet talk, and only then was she able to coerce him into signing her forms. It really bothered her for a few days, but then she realized that she had learned a useful skill.

Was she that much of a floozy? Could it be that Dan wasn't asking anything more of her than what she already knew how to do? *Whore?* No, she wasn't a whore. She was a good girl, who just wanted a man to treat her fairly and respect her. Was that too much to ask? Apparently so, because every time she got into a relationship with someone, it ended badly. From the first time she had sex right up to the last time. Badly.

She remembered her first lover, early in freshman year of college. He was a boy from her physics class who only

wanted to do homework with her—or so he said. They never did do any homework, but they did have lots of sex, which was what Kay really wanted, too. The problem was that he didn't want to do anything else. When she protested and went to a dormitory party without him, he got angry at her for abandoning him. Soon they were fighting over everything, using sex as a way of making up. Kay knew that this wasn't right, so after a few weeks she sent him packing.

That's when Kay first learned that her looks could win favors, even when she didn't ask for them. It happened the day after the breakup, when Kay was free of that possessive jerk, free to find someone nicer. With flirty abandon, she put on a miniskirt instead of her usual jeans, and walked off to math class. The previous math class had been an exam and of course Kay had done well on it. So class began with the professor walking up and down the aisles of the classroom holding an armful of graded tests, calling out names and trying to get to know his students.

"Kay Samson?" She raised her hand. He saw her, and his eyes locked on her for an extra beat before he started to approach. Then, as he got closer, his eyes shifted to her legs. "Very good, Ms. Samson. You got a perfect score." He handed the test back and stood there looking at Kay for a bit too long before returning to the pile and clearly having to force himself to focus on the next student.

The math professor was staring at her? That *old* math professor? She had dressed up for the boys in the class, not the professor! Of course, all the boys stared too, thanks to the professor's awkwardness. Now everyone would want to do homework with her.

But what happened next really caught her by surprise. For the rest of the semester, the professor gave her special care. Not only did he call on her whenever she raised her

hand, but he wrote notes of praise on her homework. And his was the only class in which she got an A+. Kay had inadvertently manipulated him with that miniskirt, and the lesson was not missed. If she really wanted to, she could spend the rest of her college career wearing short skirts and sitting in the front row of every class, guaranteeing better grades with less work.

Of course, she would never allow that to happen. The very thought of it upset her. It would demean her and diminish her accomplishments. Wasn't it bad enough that people thought beautiful women were stupid? It would be tragic to prove them right. No, Kay didn't have to work hard at all to manipulate men; they did it to themselves as soon as they saw her. In the end, Kay learned to dress more modestly in class and avoid the special treatment that she could so easily command.

Then Kay thought about her last sexual encounter, a pretty bad scene that nearly ended in rape. It happened half way through her first year of business school, when she should have known better. The guy seemed decent enough—even sincere—so she went back to his room. But as soon as they started to make out, his two roommates appeared out of nowhere and they all grabbed her at once, holding her down and announcing their intention to share her body. Kay tried to protest, but only met with further resistance. So she changed gears and disarmed them with her feminine wiles. The first boy was sent to a nearby liquor store for a bottle of whiskey—the party would be so much finer if they had a few shots first. The second boy was sent to a nonexistent dormitory room three floors away—wouldn't these boys enjoy *two* women instead of one? The third boy was sent the farthest. This scumbag, the one who had originally lured her to his room, was sent to the infirmary

with pepper spray in his face because he allowed Kay to open her purse and fetch a fictitious stash of weed. She ran from the room scared and angry, but in retrospect, empowered.

That was over a year ago, and it had really damaged her interest in men. In fact, Kay had decided that night to stop wasting her time on boys who were obvious losers, which unfortunately seemed to be all of them. So Kay hadn't had sex with anyone since then.

Now, sitting in this empty executive office and reminiscing about her interactions with men, Kay realized that there wasn't much of a difference between what Dan was asking and what she already knew how to do so well. And although she didn't hate all men and didn't want to be indiscriminately mean, it did seem that Dan had some pretty despicable characters in his address book. Perhaps it would be amusing to teach a few of them some lessons. Something about that actually appealed to her.

Would she really play Dan's game? It would be an opportunity to wield her power like never before, trouncing obnoxious executives. And make lots of money. And get promoted to vice-president. Oh, and work with Dan Avery, who was super handsome.

Kay gasped as a shiver shook her. *What was that?* Was she really lusty for Dan? And right after she so roundly abused him for his own wanton ways? That was ironic. But Kay knew the feeling—she *was* aroused. Over Dan? Over the money? The power? Suddenly, the idea of playing this game was wickedly tempting.

Kay tried to remember why she had been opposed to the idea. The game was too brazenly perverse, something she would never do—exactly the reason why she suddenly

felt like doing it. There was no rational reason to say yes or no; both choices were shrouded in an emotional blur.

Why don't I try it once and see what I think. Yes, that's what she would do: play Jason Mack and then decide about doing any more deals. Conning one miserable business executive wasn't going to ruin her reputation. And maybe she could change her name *before* the game began, sending Kay Samson into hiding while her manipulative alter-ego ran amok.

Kay sat for a minute and stilled her mind—a short meditation on her future. All of the warning bells were curiously silent. She got up to admire the view one more time, then went to see Doris.

Doris looked up and exhaled when she saw Kay coming down the hall. “You look much better. You really had me worried before. How do you feel?”

“I'm fine. Thanks, Doris.” She sat down and considered her decision one last time, but her mind was made up. “I'm going to give this game a try.”

Doris clapped her hands. “That's great! Let's tell Dan.” She pushed a button on the intercom.



Dan sat at his desk with a pounding heart and an unfocused stare. *Could she be the one?* Kay was exactly what he had imagined, years ago. And now that he'd found her, nothing else seemed to matter.

When Kay left his office earlier, he had dialed into his morning phone conference. Twenty minutes in, Dan realized that he wasn't paying attention and had no idea what was being said. He told them that he needed to attend to other matters and hung up. That left him free to think

about Kay and hope with all his might that she would agree to be his partner in the game.

To play a game like this, Dan needed someone who was quick witted, flexible, and most of all, unafraid. Kay's transcript and letters of recommendation were excellent, but they said nothing about agility or self-confidence. Imagine his surprise when Kay demonstrated every skill he wanted, and more. She was also friendly, sensible, and honorable. But the arrow that pierced his heart and left him so helpless was definitely her sense of humor. Nobody ever got his "company of infinite possibilities" joke, but Kay spotted it without missing a beat.

Then there was the small matter of her looks. Kay had a stunning figure that couldn't even be hidden in a business suit. Trim and tall, busty and leggy. *And what about those hips?* Kay was a real woman, not some skinny hipless wonder. Her hourglass figure was going to keep Dan distracted the most.

Don't forget those lips. Okay, maybe her cute bowtie lips would keep him the most distracted. After he grabbed her slender waist and ran his hands all over her curvaceous hips and backside, he was definitely going to kiss those gorgeous lips, nibble on them a bit, and then devour her whole.

But he wasn't really going to do any of those things, because it was a one-way road to trouble. And then he wouldn't see her hips or her lips, and she certainly wouldn't play the game with him. He would simply have to be content to watch.

The intercom buzzed him out of his reverie, and Doris's voice rasped through. "Can Kay and I come in?"

Dan practically jumped in his chair but took his time in replying. "Yes, I'm free now." Like he hadn't been free for the past half hour.

They came in and Dan got up from his chair, delicately ushering them to the chairs across from his desk. He also sat in one of the visitor's chairs and turned to face Kay. "So, what do you think?"

"I'll do it, but just one time with Jason Mack. Then I'll decide about doing any more."

"Wonderful! I can't tell you how happy I am—we're going to have so much fun!"

"I still feel like it's a dangerous situation, though. If it starts to degenerate into prostitution, I'll be gone in a heartbeat."

"Kay, I know you don't believe this, but if it gets even close to prostitution, *I'll* be the one who stops the game."

Kay looked at him with level eyes. "I somehow do believe you, but I still needed to say it up front so there's no misunderstanding." She picked up the contract on Dan's desk and leafed through it, stopping in the middle. "I assume that this is the Mexican discount you're using to sweeten the deal." She pointed to a line on the page and curled a corner of her mouth.

Amazing. Dan shook his head enthusiastically. "Damn, you're good." *Much better than I expected.* "Go ahead and take that copy with you, although I bet you've already memorized it." He chuckled.

"We have a tentative meeting with Mack tomorrow at 2:00 p.m. right after lunch, so that he's liquored up, sleepy, and pliable." He turned to Doris. "Call Atlantic and tell them that the meeting is on. We're going to get that bastard!"

Kay pursed her lips. "I have something else to ask you, Dan. You said you'd help me change my identity when the game is over. But I think I want to do it now, before the game starts. That way, I can stop being Kay Samson, the

MBA, and instead be your business-deal vixen. I think it will help me play the part if I'm not worried about ruining my reputation as Kay Samson."

"Excellent point. What should we call you?"

"Well, I like my first name, but let's change Samson to 'Gershon.' I've always liked that name, so from now on, I'm Kay Gershon. And I'm going to disguise myself a little by dyeing my hair black."

Dan nodded approval. "I think you'll knock 'em dead with raven hair. But are you really willing to dye your hair on a one-deal trial?"

"I'll use a temporary dye at first. Then if I like the game, I'll see."

Dan turned to consult his expert on the matter. "What do you think, Doris?"

"Yes, of course. Black hair will look fine. Good-looking women like you can do nearly anything to their appearance and still look great. Don't forget to do your eyebrows, too." Doris cleared her throat and hesitated. "Also, if I may suggest, wear a miniskirt and higher heels if you have them. My friends at Atlantic tell me that Mack loves legs. But don't hide your great breasts, either—wear something low-cut."

Kay let out a nervous laugh, obviously shaken by Doris's crude discussion of body parts. *Was that inappropriate?* Maybe not, in this game, but it was best that Doris and Kay work out these details themselves.

"Wow, this frank talk about my body is going to take some getting used to. I suppose you could say that my breasts are now a corporate asset." She made a little grin and pointed to her breasts, as if anyone had forgotten where they were.

Kay dropped her hands to her lap and went on. "And speaking of the corporate balance sheet, let's talk about expenses, specifically for my clothes. I don't have the wardrobe for this line of work, so I'm going to have to do a little shopping." She stood up, gave Dan a sultry sulk, batted her eyelashes, and purred. "How about a little money for clothes, boss?" She opened her mouth and slowly licked her lips.

Dan burst out laughing. *She's so good at this.* "Yes, that's the stuff! Oh, you're going to blow these guys away." He pointed at Doris. "Give her a business charge card." Then he turned back to Kay. "Use it for whatever you need."

"Thanks. I also want to rearrange your desk before the deal tomorrow. I hope you don't mind."

"You've already got this whole thing planned out?"

"Mostly. I hope you like it. I hope it works."

"Even if it doesn't work, I'm sure I'll like it." He beamed at her warmly. "Thanks for giving this a try, Kay—I hope you like it." He turned to Doris. "Put a hold on Kay's employment until we figure out how to change her name." He wagged his finger in the air. "And have a new sign made for her door."

Doris stood up straight and saluted, a twinkle in her eye. "Yes, sir! Come on, Ms. Gershon. Let's do your new-employee orientation."

2: Desk Job



Tuesday, May 22

Kay was sitting at Doris's desk in the skimpiest outfit she had worn in years, waiting for Jason Mack to arrive. *Wow, I'm such a tramp.* Mack's first view of her would be a frilly light pink blouse, loose, low cut, and so wide at the neck that one side was slipping off her shoulder. When she stood up, he'd also get a look at her straight black miniskirt and black stiletto heels, separated by miles of bare leg. The guy wouldn't know what hit him.

And talk about shoes! These nasty little fuck-me heels would be reason enough for Jason Mack to attack her. They raised her 5'8" stature to more than six feet tall. *Watch out, girl.*

Was this outfit really necessary? Doris seemed to think that Mack would like it, but he also would have been satisfied with something a lot less extreme. When Kay had gone shopping yesterday, she was still riding the high of playing this game. Each item that she held up to herself took her breath away. But today, when she had put it all on and walked to Doris's desk, the thrill had morphed into a sense of danger. This was going to be a test of Dan's promise to protect her.

Few people came to the executive floor, but each time someone did, the elevator dinged and Kay jumped a bit. Would it be him? Her plan was to look away until Mack was right at her desk, then catch him off-guard with one of her

warmest gazes. As people got off the elevator, she would look down and watch discretely, only looking up when she was sure he hadn't arrived.

The elevator dinged, and Kay lowered her head, as she had done a handful of times already. But this time as the door opened, she shivered—her sixth sense told her that Jason Mack was here. She tried to identify his face in her peripheral vision, but she couldn't be sure, so she raised her eyes a little to get a better look. *Yes, it's him.* She'd seen the pictures; that was definitely Jason Mack standing by the elevator. *Keep your head down . . . wait for it.*

Kay sat and waited for Mack to come to the desk, but something was wrong. He was taking too long. She looked up part way and nearly broke out laughing. Mack was immobilized, staring at her from the other side of the room. They were in a standoff; Kay was not going to acknowledge him until he got closer, and Mack simply wouldn't move at all.

I can play this game. Mack probably had better things to do today and would move eventually. Kay, however, had nothing better to do than sit there and let him stare. She cleared her mind and looked down, ready and able to wait him out.

Soon Mack started to walk, slowly, haltingly. Kay kept waiting, rather enjoying the rapt attention she was getting. At glacial speeds, Mack made his way to the desk and was only a few feet away when she made her move.

Kay lifted her head and smiled dreamily, her eyes shooting directly into his. Her hair, now jet-black, danced lightly over nearly bare shoulders. Mack's eyes hopped around like a cricket, from her face to her breasts to her transparent plastic bra straps.

“Hello. You must be Mr. Mack. Welcome!” He appeared to be having trouble speaking because he could only nod his confirmation, with unfocused eyes. “Mr. Avery is expecting you. Please . . .” *Yes, please.* Now was the time to stand up and reveal those legs that Doris said he’d love. *Please.* She got up slowly, and when she stretched to her full height, Mack inhaled sharply. *Please.* “Follow me.”

From the breathless silence, she could tell that Mack was watching every second of her stroll toward Dan’s office. Then he exhaled loudly and quipped, “Hey babe! Do ya think you can get that skirt any shorter?”

Is that the best you can do? She’d hoped for something more sophisticated from an older CEO, but instead he was like a teenager. So she gave it right back to him and became a vacant teenage girl. “Gee. Hmm.” She looked down and touched her skirt, then turned to him with a serious look. “I have some other skirts that are shorter.” Mack’s eyes went wide, and he beamed like a boy.

Kay felt a little pang of guilt for being so slutty and taking Jason Mack for a ride. Then she remembered Doris’s stories about Mack and remembered why she was here. *Sorry, Mr. Mack. I’m taking you down.*

The first act in this afternoon’s performance was the grand entrance, in which she would open both of the double doors at once and let Mack watch from behind. Kay lunged against the doors and let them fly open, her arms spread wide. Inside the office, Dan looked up with a gleam in his eye. As he took in her outfit, his eyes flared briefly with a feral heat that Kay could actually feel on her skin. She was thrilled by his obvious approval, and gave him a wink.

Watch this, Mr. Charmer. She already felt a little better, a little safer, with Dan nearby. She was ready to play.

Kay held the doors wide open for a few seconds and then took her hand away from the right door, pretending it would stay open but knowing it wouldn't. The door started to swing back and Kay shrieked, jumped away, and let go of the other door too. "Oh darn! Those things never work right." She stood there frowning and watched as both doors swung closed, stamping her foot and flapping her hands in the air. "Ohhhhh!" She rolled her eyes and pretended to mope.

Then she started again, more slowly. She gingerly opened the right door and carefully pushed it against the wall. Running her hand up and down the door jamb, she pushed a button here and slid a bolt there, satisfying latching sounds ringing out at each stop of her hand.

Kay got down on one knee to flip a latch and her skirt rode up. She looked toward Mack and apologized. "I'm really sorry, sir." She quickly turned away to examine something on the door and squeezed out another loud click. "These doors are tricky." She kept apologizing, even though Mack wasn't at all upset. He just stood there, staring.

Kay stood up tall to reach the top of the door and make another clicking sound. She glanced over at Dan, who was trying so hard not to snicker that he had to cover his mouth—he was enjoying her little door routine just as much as Jason Mack but for very different reasons.

"Oh good, I think I've got it." She stepped back and admired her handiwork—the right door was open. Then she hopped over to the left door, turning to give Mack a pleased expression. "I hope you don't mind. You can go in as soon as I get this other door open. Sorry for the delay." She bit her lip and gave Mack her most apologetic look for a second before returning to the door.

The left door received the same passionate care as the right. Kay writhed up and down, stretched and bent over, clicked, and finally opened the door.

It was a surreal experience, preening in front of two CEOs of major corporations. They'd delay their meeting all afternoon if she stood there and fidgeted with the doors. *Let the poor man go into Dan's office already.* Kay did a little victory dance and turned to Mack. "Come on in." She walked into the room, swishing her hips subtly. Dan had a delighted smile that was just for her, and she felt her breathing hitch up a step. *Wow, this is fun.*

Mack wandered into the office, and Kay turned to look at him. He was dewy-eyed and had a lost little smile. It wouldn't be much longer now before he'd be tenderized and ready to serve. She quickly scanned Dan's desk to make sure that everything was ready, the pencils, her cell phone.

Dan took over. "Jason! Have a seat."

"Hi, Dan. Who's this knockout secretary? Where's Doris?"

"Doris is out today. Kay here is a temp. I want her to take notes." Dan was cool and level, all business. Kay looked around with an innocent, sexy air.

"Hey Jason, want a drink? Kay! Offer Mr. Mack a drink."

Kay spun around and locked her eyes on Mack. "What would you like to drink, sir?"

Mack looked at her and a grin grew slowly on his face. Kay beamed back at him, watt for watt. It took a while for him to speak. "Uh, what have you got, honey?"

"Oh Mr. Mack, we have a fully stocked bar here. There's everything from hard liquor to light beer."

"Oh my goodness, Miss Kay, how did you know I like light beer?"

Thank you, Doris. “Gee, you just look like a light beer kinda guy.” Then, to ensure that this wouldn’t be taken the wrong way, she giggled and lied. “I can tell you like to keep trim.”

“Well thanks, Miss Kay. I’d love a light beer. Are you drinking, too, honey doll?”

Honey doll? Spare me. “Oh no, Mr. Mack.” She held a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide open. “I’m working!” *On you.*

Mack needed a drinking partner. “What about you, Dan?”

“Sure, I’ll join you, Jason.” Then to Kay, “Screwdriver.”

Kay straightened her skirt and slinked over to the bar. Dan made idle chitchat, and Mack muttered senselessly while Kay mixed the drinks. She served Mack first, bending over a bit to let him admire her cleavage. Then she turned and leaned over the desk to hand the other drink to Dan, letting Mack have a different view.

When the drinks were served, Kay went to sit on the front corner of Dan’s desk, her legs crossed. She focused on the back of the room, past Mack, and started writing in a little notebook. *Show’s over. Drink up.*

A full thirty seconds passed before Mack acknowledged the beer in his hand. He tilted his head back and took a deep draw. Dan started up some small talk while Mack drank and stole glances at Kay. Whenever Mack’s attention seemed to flag, Dan would raise his voice and shout something to Kay that always ended with “Make a note of that.”

“Looks like we’ll have to restock the light beer. Make a note of that!”

“I heard that Atlantic won a big cash deal recently. Congratulations. Make a note of that!”

Kay turned to look at Dan each time, sharing a glance and an invisible smile. Then she would write more quickly and fidget around, to rouse Mack from his stupor. Dan was overacting the boss bit, but Mack didn't seem to notice.

After the drinks were finished, Dan got down to work. "So Jason, I think we're ready to wrap up this deal. I've made only two changes to the contract, underlined in red. I hope you don't mind." He handed a document to Mack.

It's showtime. Mack started looking through the contract, searching for the changes. He could have scanned the document much more quickly if he wasn't constantly glancing at Kay. She looked over at Dan once to see if he was watching her, too. But instead he was looking intently at Mack.

By sitting on the desk and staring just past Mack, Kay had a perfect view of the contract. She watched discretely and waited for Mack to turn to the page with the Mexican discount, underlined in red.

Mack flipped another page and the flash of red caught her eye. *Cheesecake time.* Kay mashed the tip of her pencil into her pad, and it broke off with a loud snap. "Oh my!" She slapped the useless writing instrument down on the desk and pouted. Mack looked up at her, noticeably glad for another excuse to ogle.

A pile of pencils sat on the desk, directly behind Kay. She twisted around to grab one, slowly, turning away from Mack, letting her skirt ride up and her blouse fall off her shoulder. Then, pencil in hand, she turned back quickly, smiled briefly at Mack, and continued to take notes. She wanted him to enjoy a tiny tease, a little something to put him in a good mood so that the Mexican discount would seem even better. Then, he would be a very happy man when he saw that closing fee.

Mack stared at Kay for a long time, his hand on his chin. The contract slipped off his lap but he made no move to retrieve it. Finally, he cleared his throat. "How much do you want for her, Dan?"

What? That's insane! Did he just offer to purchase her like a rug in a Turkish bazaar? And didn't he care that she was sitting right there, listening to this? Dan and Kay looked at each other, her teeth grinding, his face broadcasting a told-you-so grin.

"Excuse me, Jason?"

"I want her. How much?"

Dan spoke plainly. "Jason, she's a secretary."

"Sure, sure. Fine. We'll talk later." He leaned back and narrowed his eyes.

Kay seethed. Did Jason Mack think she was a slave girl, to be bought and sold to the highest bidder? What planet was he from? She could have punched him in the face, but instead settled for a renewed determination to take his money. *I will destroy you, buddy.* The last bits of sympathy for the helpless Jason Mack were officially gone.

Then it hit her. *He thinks I'm a prostitute.* She had done too much. The outfit, the preening. *Damn.* Being a hooker was much worse than being a dumb secretary because it meant that Mack would expect sex. This was Kay's biggest fear and she had to do something fast, even if it meant losing the deal. Time for damage control.

Kay trotted out her most innocent voice and haltingly pleaded her case. "Oh, Mr. Mack, you've got me all wrong." She looked down at herself and shook her head. "This outfit . . . I swear I'm not what you think."

Then Kay got angry. "It's those girls in the temp pool! They set me up! Tricked me! They told me that the sexier I got on my first day of work, the more likely that I'd get a

full-time job.” She tightened her mouth and pretended she was about to cry. “I feel so stupid! I really wanted to do well here at Yorick, and now I’ve completely blown it.” She sucked in a lungful of air and let her lips quiver as if she were about to start blubbering.

Kay wasn’t making it all up. After all, who was the girl in the temp pool who told her to dress this way? Doris! These clothes were more than any man could handle. She should have toned it down a bit, but she really did want to make a good first impression. Unfortunately, she couldn’t change now, so she might just have to play the part of a call girl. But first, she made one last attempt to convince Mack otherwise. “Honestly, Mr. Mack, I’m not a hooker. I’m just Mr. Avery’s secretary.”

“Sure, sure.” Mack said it like he was swatting a fly, his eyes never leaving Kay. It didn’t matter what she said, her words meant nothing to him. The reason was obvious. He *wanted* her to be a prostitute, so much that he refused to believe anything else. All her protests merely fed into his fantasies. Dan would have his hands full trying to protect her from this.

Mack stared at her with newfound swagger. Gone was the insecure man who snuck looks, unsure about what to say or do. Now he was doing business with a prostitute, and he understood how that worked. Kay grimaced and looked away so that Mack could return to the contract. This hooker was going to rip him to shreds. *Project Destroy-Jason-Mack is go.*

Mack finally picked up the contract and noticed the red ink, a puzzled look on his face. He read the Mexican discount and turned to Dan, his mouth twisted in doubt. “Dan! You’ve added a discount for your offshore products.

Are they defective?" Then, with a heaping spoonful of sarcasm, he added, "You're such a nice guy."

Hmm. I can work with that. Kay needed to keep him distracted, regardless of what he thought of her, and this was a perfect opening.

"You're right, Mr. Mack!" Kay's voice was enthusiastic and childlike. "He really is a nice guy!" She gave him her most innocent look. No normal business meeting would permit a secretary to make small talk like this, but Kay was already so far beyond normal that it somehow worked.

Mack looked at Kay's innocent face and knitted his eyebrows. "You're not a call girl?"

Oh good. There was a chance for redemption. "No! Please, Mr. Mack, don't tell people I'm a call girl. If my boyfriend hears that, he'll get really mad at me." She gave him a look of fear so he'd understand how bad it could be.

"All right, fine. But I still want you." He wouldn't let it go. *Well I still want you, Mr. Mack—to sign our contract.*

"And please, call me Jason."

Sure, why not? "Jason, then." She nodded her head to him, then went back to her notebook. Mack looked down with a bit of a frown and resumed reading. Too bad he wasn't happier at this point, but her final act was yet to come and she felt certain that it would lift his spirits.

After a few more pages, Mack got to the summary page and saw the huge closing fee. "Wait! Why are closing costs so high all of a sudden?"

Dan was ready with an answer. "It's a counterbalance to the Mexican discount, and also includes some extra legal costs." His voice was stern, but with a touch of sympathy for poor Jason Mack. "My lawyers insisted on it, damn them."

This was the critical point in the negotiation. Mack's eyes flashed, and he stood up to assert himself, his hand

pointed at Dan. He was ignoring Kay for the first time and didn't see her grab the cell phone on the desk. Mack extended his arm all the way and shook his hand like an angry parent, ready to launch into something, perhaps a tiresome lecture about unnecessary costs. But before he could get out a single word, Dan's desk phone rang.

Everyone froze. Dan hissed through bared teeth. "What!" He seemed ready to kill. Obviously, nobody called Dan Avery during an important business meeting. He looked up at Kay, and she tilted her head toward the phone, flashing a tiny smile. Instantly, he inhaled and gave her the barest hint of acknowledgment. *Good. He knows what to do.*

"Get that!" he barked at Kay. "And tell them we're busy!"

Rather than getting up from the desk and walking to the phone on the other side, Kay simply reached across the desk to pick up the receiver. This was another carefully planned maneuver: everything between Kay and the phone had been cleared away, and the phone was sitting just beyond easy reach. She leaned over, her hand grasping for the phone, her body stretching out. With each ring of the phone, she got closer to it and her skirt rode higher. Then, in one swift move, she grabbed the receiver, lost her balance, and fell sideways onto the desk. "Good afternoon. Mr. Avery's office."

Mack sat down.

Laid out across the desk, Kay faced Mack with an embarrassed look. Her blouse and bra were still doing their job, but even greater expanses of skin were now visible. Kay looked away and spoke quietly on the phone for a few moments. Her faraway gaze let Mack stare at her freely. Sometimes she spoke in a loud voice, sometimes in a quiet voice, but all her words were punctuated with body

language. "I'm sorry, he simply can't come to the phone right now." Stretch.

Jason Mack was breathing a bit heavily—visibly excited. *Wait, so am I.* Why would she be excited at Jason Mack's leering? He did nothing but upset her. But, of course, it wasn't about Jason Mack; there was another person in the room watching her. A handsome, devilish, powerful man who was going to pay her royally for taking Mack down. *That* was exciting.

Kay hung up the phone and sat up, preparing to get off the desk. As she did this, her legs were momentarily spread apart, giving Mack a crotch shot full of pink panties. Then Kay closed her legs and pushed herself forward to stand up, the skirt riding up farther. She took a step toward her corner of the desk, paused to straighten her skirt, and sat back on her perch.

Mack's eyes never left her. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his mouth. "Who is this woman, Dan, and why isn't she mine?" That was the desired effect: he was no longer thinking about the contract. And he had offered her the perfect opening line. *Me, me! Please Dan, let me answer that one.* She turned to Dan and discretely pointed to herself, her finger hidden from Mack's view by her body.

Dan gave her a half-nod and turned to Mack. "Do you mean why isn't she working for you? Let's ask her." *Very nice, Dan.* "Kay, why aren't you working for Mr. Mack?"

Kay stood up and turned to face Dan with darkened eyes. "Hmm. Maybe I *should* work for Jason." She had an angry edge to her voice and spread her legs in a power stance. This was the closing act that would seal the deal, the part where she gets angry at Dan and sides with Mack.

“You know, I’m only a temp here, Mr. Avery. Did you see how quickly Mr. Mack decided that I should work for him? That is so . . . so . . .” She paused with a blank face, pretending to grope for the right word. After a beat, she brightened and pointed at Mack. “Decisive! That’s right, decisive! I like men who are decisive.”

Kay turned back to Dan and lashed into him, her voice rising with each word. “You’re not very decisive, Mr. Avery. You can’t even tell me if I’ll be able to come to work tomorrow!” She sneered at Dan and then sat down in the chair next to Mack, squeezing his arm and pretending to admire his nonexistent muscles. Mack’s body tightened under her touch and his mouth fell open. She looked deeply into his eyes and purred, “*You’re* decisive, aren’t you?”

“Definitely,” Mack asserted and sat up straight in his chair, one fist pounding the other palm in a demonstration of bravado.

Perfect. Like a trained volleyball team, Dan had tossed the ball to Kay and she had set it up for him neatly. All he had to do was spike it. He leaned back and looked directly at Mack. “So, Mr. Decisive, are you going to decide on this contract, or are we going to go back to negotiations?”

The room went quiet. Kay’s mind was racing, and she noticed that her breathing was even heavier. She had planned on doing some heavy breathing as a distraction, and this would have been the perfect place for it. But her breathing wasn’t fake. *I know this feeling. I’m a little bit aroused.* She sat up straight as the realization hit her. Mack was going to sign the contract—she could tell by the way he was fidgeting and mumbling. The exterior had crumbled and all that was left was the admission of defeat.

Kay had won the game and was enjoying the moment. She had pulverized Jason Mack and reduced him to a

helpless fool, putty in her hands. Between the thrill of her victory, the attractiveness of sixty thousand dollars, and the carnality of Dan's stare, Kay was all worked up. She tried to calm herself down and get back to the game, but it wasn't easy. Fortunately, it wasn't necessary.

"Yes, right," Mack mumbled. "Okay, sure. Legal costs are always a bother. I know how it is." He turned to Kay and joked, "Lawyers! Always charging too much. Never date a lawyer, my dear." He gave her a weak smile, picked up a pen, and signed two copies of the contract.

Dan and Kay glanced at each other with wide eyes.

"Listen, kid, when you get sick of working for this guy, call me up." Mack handed her a card.

"Thank you, Mr. Mack. I mean, *Jason*." She spoke his name warmly.

Dan took the documents and signed them, handing one copy to Kay. "Take care of this." He leaned back in his chair with suppressed delight.

"Yes, sir." She took it and left the office.

Just outside the office door, Kay leaned against the wall and put her hands on her knees, waiting for her heartbeat to slow down. The door was still open so she could hear what was being said. At first, there was nothing but silence. Finally, Mack spoke up.

"What just happened?"

Dan laughed. "Isn't she something?"

"I'm going to hire her away from you, Dan."

"I don't know, Jason. I think I'll make her full-time. Sorry."



Dan finished reading the last report on his desk and noticed the time: nearly six in the evening. *What a stupid report.* These reports were so interesting just two days ago; now suddenly they seemed tedious. What report could even begin to compare with what Kay had just done? He considered setting fire to the entire pile, and chuckled at himself when he realized that he could think of very few reasons not to.

Dan kept replaying the deal and laughing to himself. In fact, he had been laughing all afternoon. He hadn't had so much fun in . . . in . . . well, in his entire life! *Even if she never does another deal with me again, I'll never forget today.*

The way she worked Jason Mack was pure genius. *And wow, what a looker.* Her middle name had to be "distraction." Dan certainly couldn't keep his eyes off of her. *So beautiful! I want those lips.* This was going to be the hardest part about playing the game: working with Kay and keeping his hands to himself.

Dan got up to stretch and wandered out into the hall. Doris was getting ready to leave, and Kay was back to her modest business suit. *Why can't I stop thinking about her?* "Come on in, you two."

Dan closed the door and spun around to look at them, flashing a grin that could be seen from outer space. "That was nothing short of awesome, Kay. You made me the happiest CEO in the world today. Doris, did she tell you how she writhed around on my desk? I think Mack nearly wet himself." *He wasn't the only one.* She was so good at this game, her precise planning, her silent communication, the flawless manipulation of Mack, that outrageous outfit and

of course, her irresistible body. Dan looked at her in awe. “Even I was mesmerized. You were amazing.”

Kay looked from Dan to Doris and frowned. “Yes, but we pushed it a bit too far. My outfit was so trumpy that he thought I was a hooker.”

“You know, I thought about that this afternoon and I’m afraid it may be unavoidable. Let’s face it, any time you distract a guy, he’s going to think that you’re available. In fact, if he doesn’t think that, then he’s not sufficiently distracted. It may well be that this game can’t be played any other way.”

“Well that’s the sort of thing that I do *not* want to happen. That’s why I spent so much time trying to ease out of the hooker role.” She shook her head.

“People hear what they want to hear, so you can tell them you’re not a hooker until you’re blue in the face. They’re still going to think otherwise. Sorry.”

“Yes, I’m beginning to see that. But even if he didn’t believe me, I still had to say something. I just can’t let that sort of thing pass by without comment.”

“No, you can’t. I’m glad you pushed back.”

Ask her the important question already. “So tell me . . . other than Mack’s obnoxious response, how did *you* like the deal today?”

Kay shot out a laugh. “I’m embarrassed to admit that I actually liked it. I don’t know why—everything about the deal was demeaning. And I don’t ever want to play a dumb secretary again. But there was an excitement to it that I didn’t expect. Defeating that pig was a major thrill. The money’s nice, too.”

She likes it! Thank you, lord. “Speaking of money.” Dan handed Kay an envelope. “Your bonus.”

“Thanks!” Kay took the envelope and put it directly into her purse.

She didn't even open it. How incredibly cool is that? Of course money was a big factor in Kay's decision to play the game, but he was glad to see that she trusted him and didn't need to instantly check the math and admire the zeroes.

Kay looked up from her purse, right into Dan's waiting eyes. They held their gazes for a long time, staring and giving each other subtle nods, their own silent high-five. It brought back those intense moments during the deal when they meshed like perfectly formed gears.

Stop! Don't lead her on. This woman was so much more than he expected. So much more, for that matter, than any other woman he'd ever known. Dan looked away.

Doris cleared her throat and smirked—she had noticed the energy passing between them. *As usual, Doris, nothing gets past you.*

Dan got back to business and wagged his finger at Kay with pretend anger. “I have one little detail to discuss with you . . . Why did you give me orange juice when I asked for a screwdriver? Don't you think I can handle a real drink?”

Kay got back to business, too, her hands on her hips. “It seems to me that both of us need to stay focused when we're doing these deals. And by your own admission, my routine distracted you. That could be a problem. In fact, from now on I'm going to give you a full description of my plans *and* clothes before each deal, so that you know what to expect.”

Did she say “from now on”? “So does this mean you're willing to continue the game?”

Kay stopped, her mouth opened slightly. “You're right! I completely forgot that this was a trial. But I guess I am willing to continue.”

“Then there’s one more reason to celebrate!” Dan raised his arms and shook his hands. “Let’s have drinks! With alcohol this time.” He went to the bar and awaited their orders.

Kay laughed. “Wow, drinks with the CEO on my second day of work. This is some job!” She scanned the bottles on the bar, then her eyes lit up. “There it is. I’d like some of that Jack Daniels, please. No ice.”

“Really? Jack? I had you figured for a white wine woman.” *She’s nothing like any woman I’ve ever met.*

“Blame my father for that. He loves whiskey and taught me to appreciate it.”

Oh, how I could appreciate you and a bottle of Jack. Dan brought the drinks and they all toasted. “To a perfect deal!”

Kay sipped and leaned against Dan’s desk. “So is this a full-time job? Do I come in to work every day, or do you call me only for special ops?”

“This is a full-time job, Kay. You need to learn about the company, the deals, and the people. Don’t forget, you’re still earning your salary—these deal payments are just bonuses.”

Doris took a sip of her drink and turned to Kay. “It’s going to be so much fun having you work here!”

Kay looked at Doris, her head cocked to one side. “Thanks, Doris. You really helped me on the deal today. But I don’t understand why you’re so enthusiastic. Shouldn’t you be put off by this whole thing?” *Doris certainly is a special breed. Even Kay can’t figure her out.*

“Oh honey, I think this game is hysterical, a joke on men everywhere. Planning these deals with Dan is the most entertaining part of my job. But don’t get me wrong, I don’t hate men. I’m a happily married woman.”

“Happily married? Does your husband know about this?”

“Sure, he loves to hear my stories from the executive suite, and he’s going to fall on the floor laughing tonight.” Kay squinted at Doris, her mouth tight, so Doris continued. “Look, this is Dan’s thing—he’s been waiting a long time for someone like you to come along. He told me his idea a few years ago and we started thinking about how great it would be. Every time he would do a deal, we would fantasize afterward about how it could have gone down if someone like you had been at the meeting. Do you know what we call you? The ‘killer colleague.’ You have no idea how exciting it is to see the killer colleague come to life and play this game so well. I wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

3: Hostile Takeover



Thursday, May 24

Kay was sitting near Doris's desk, reading and observing. She had a beautiful private office down the hall, but during these first few weeks, while she was still learning the ropes, she needed to be out here where the action was, watching traffic go in and out of Dan's office. She also needed to learn from Doris.

The downside of sitting out here was that everyone noticed her, and they all asked questions. Soon Doris started having fun with the answers, making up a different one each time someone asked.

"She's in training."

"She's from the field office."

"Shhh! Don't talk to her—she's from the health department."

Some people approached Kay first, and she had just as much fun making up answers.

"I'm from sales."

"I'm making a special delivery."

"I'm . . ." Looks around, whispers conspiratorially, "I'm not really supposed to be here."

The elevator door opened, and a trim young man came out. He wore a stylish three-piece suit, had perfectly coiffed blond hair, and his mustache was pencil-thin. Doris gave him a big hello and he ran over to hug her. Soon they were lost in excited gossip.

At one point the man noticed Kay and squinted at her for a second, then he turned away and kept talking. Kay's gaydar flared up. There was something about his outfit, his perfect little mustache, and the way he giggled as he gossiped with Doris. If he wasn't gay, he was seriously metrosexual.

A few minutes later, he looked at Kay again, still squinting with a puzzled look on his face. "Say, are you that girl everyone's talking about? The one who did a snake dance on the CEO's desk?"

"Snake dance!" She wondered how long it would take for these deals to get into the rumor mill. *That was fast.*

Doris did the introductions. "Raymond Stone, meet Kay Gershon. Raymond is our computer guy. He keeps the machines running around here. He also knows what's going on at Yorick, so if he says you did a snake dance, then *you did a snake dance.*" She smiled and turned to Raymond. "What do you know about this? Are there any videos?" She glanced at Kay and winked.

"I don't know of any videos." Raymond's eyes bounced back and forth between Doris and Kay, then settled on Kay with a little grin. "Maybe you have some videos."

"Me? What makes you think I'm the snake dancer?"

Raymond laughed loudly. "Now I *know* it's you." He got up and walked over to Kay to shake her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Kay the snake dancer."

"I hope you don't expect me to do a snake dance for you."

"Girl, you can keep your silly snake dance. I'm not interested." He flipped his wrist at Kay and pursed his lips. *Yes, gay.*

Kay smirked. "So what are they saying about me?"

“They say you’re good, that you suckered Jason Mack. Nobody can figure out who you are or where you came from.” Raymond looked around to be sure nobody was listening, then leaned closer and lowered his voice. “But I know. I’m probably the only person at this company who knows. Well, apart from Doris and Mr. Avery, that is.”

Kay couldn’t tell if Raymond was friend or foe. He sounded sympathetic, but the things he was saying scared her. She gave him a half smile. “Okay, I’ll bite. Where did I come from?”

Raymond sat down and wheeled his chair over to face Kay and Doris. “Let me tell you a story. A few days ago I saw a suspicious form go by. Apparently someone changed their name but didn’t give a reason on the form.”

Doris blushed and looked down.

Raymond sat up straight and pushed his chest forward, clearly proud of himself. “I believe the woman’s name was Kay something-or-another. She got added to our system and then instantly had her last name changed.” Raymond rolled his chair over to Doris’s computer and typed a bit. “Here it is. Kay Samson is now Kay Gershon. And look at this! We’re still making out paychecks to your former name, which is even more suspicious.” He stroked his mustache and looked at Kay. “Now I’m thinking that the snake dancer here wants to hide behind a fake name, right?”

Kay gasped. *This is huge trouble.* If any random person at the company could figure it out, then she wasn’t safe playing the game. Doris and Kay sat silently with their mouths open.

“Oh come on, throw me a bone here. Do I have to put all of the pieces together myself? At least tell me if I’m getting warm.”

Doris cleared her throat and gave Kay a shrug. “Very warm, Raymond. You have to keep this one secret.” She gave him a sideways glance. “How did you even notice that form?”

“Oh, I have my methods. I keep a number of back-door scripts in the computer systems to tell me what’s really going on. But don’t worry, Doris. I love a good mystery and I’m good with secrets.” He pointed to the computer screen. “Mind if I clean this one up a bit?”

Doris let go of the mouse and offered it to Raymond. He started to click and type. “Now we’re going to edit the name change so that it looks like a marriage.” He worked quickly, expertly, his fingers flying over the keyboard. “There. Now Samson is her maiden name and Gershon is her married name.” He pointed at the screen and showed Doris. She nodded. Raymond clicked and typed, and then he leaned back in the chair. “Done! The paychecks go to her mother, Kay Samson. Much more believable.”

“Thanks, Raymond. You’re a life saver.”

“I know.” He beamed. “So what’s the deal with you, Kay?”

She laughed. “You’ve been doing so well on your own, Raymond. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Well, the story is that you were half naked and did your snake dance on Avery’s desk. And in the middle of a business deal!” He looked at Kay and narrowed his eyes, apparently trying to gauge her reaction. She gave him none, so he went on. “I figure you for some kind of Mata Hari. You know, a corporate spy.”

“Oh! You were doing so well, but I’m not a spy. I work here, as you already know—my office is just down the hall.”

“Then what are you?”

“Would you believe that I actually fell on that desk by mistake?” She turned and looked away, trying to avoid his analytical stare.

“Oh, stop it!” Raymond leaned back and thought some more. “If you’re not a spy, then my next guess is that you’re the snake in Avery-the-Charmer’s basket. You two worked Jason Mack over as a team.”

Kay froze, and Doris started to say something but Raymond cut them off. “Look, I’m on your side here. If you want to seduce those boys, I say go for it! Sounds like a hoot to me. I promise not to tell anyone that I met the famous snake dancer, okay?”

Doris exhaled and smiled. “Thanks, Raymond. I owe you a long and interesting story someday, but for now, we just can’t talk about it.”

“That will be fun. Listen girls, I gotta go. Nice to meet you, Kay.” He got up, waved goodbye, and left.

Doris turned to Kay with a blank face. “Rumors travel fast, don’t they?”

“That’s no rumor—he got it right. Mack must have told someone about his encounter with the snake dancer. Probably some fellow executive at whatever watering hole those guys frequent.”

Given that Mack was calling her a “snake dancer,” chances were good that he didn’t blame her for the ruse. If, however, he had called her a cheat, it would have been more difficult to play this game, going forward. Although he didn’t appear to suspect her, he was obviously attracted. Soon Mack would be hunting her down for more, begging her to come work for him. “See, Doris, I knew this would happen. It won’t be long before he asks me out on a date.”

“Actually . . .” Doris grimaced and looked down. “It’s already happened. I didn’t know quite how to tell you, but . . .”

“Jason Mack called to ask me out?”

Doris frowned. “No, worse. Far worse.”

Worse than Jason Mack? Maybe this job wasn’t right for her after all. Kay motioned Doris to continue.

“You’ve been asked out by Walter Rosseau, one of the scummiest CEOs around. The guy runs his company like a fraternity house. There’s dozens of stories about him abusing women, making passes in the parking garage, demanding sexual favors, you name it. I tell all my friends to steer clear of his company.” Doris turned to her computer and clicked a bit before pointing at her screen. “Here it is. Rosseau wants to have a ‘business’ dinner with you and Dan so that he and some of his underlings can drool over the snake dancer. Oh, and here’s the connection: ‘Heard about the snake dancer over drinks with Jason Mack at the club.’” Doris shook her head and curled her lip. “You can only imagine where this will lead. You really don’t want to do it.”

Obnoxious ass. How many men had Kay known who acted like that? They were everywhere, even the heads of companies. And when people like that made it to the top, the company turned into a toxic breeding ground for sexism. Her hands were sweating and clenched into fists. If Walter Rosseau had been standing there, she would have leapt at him and beaten him. “He sounds like someone who needs to be taken down. Do you think the killer colleague could make a killing here?”

Doris’s eyes widened. “Really? You’d be willing to nail Rosseau? I would love you forever if you did. But you have to be careful around him.”

"I'm guessing that you already have something in mind." Kay held out her hands, palms up. "Let's hear it."

"It's a simple plan, really. We get a video of him attacking you and use it to make him resign. Dan and I would be nearby so that we could barge in to stop him from getting very far."

"Do you think Dan would be willing to do this? There's no money in it for the company."

"Or for you, but you seem willing."

"Yes, but this is personal. Dan said that this game would give me the power to make things better for women. Here's my chance. But I need backup from Dan."

"Let's ask him." She pushed a button on the intercom. "Dan? Got a minute?"

Dan snapped back. "What?" He was busy, but Doris went right ahead. "Kay is interested in doing a 'Hostile Takeover' on Walter Rosseau. Are you up for it?" *They have secret names for their deals. That's hysterical!*

Dan came out of his office and gave Kay a sympathetic look. "You're willing to get attacked by that pig?"

Kay frowned. Had she bitten off too much? "Well, maybe. Will you be there to protect me?" *With your big, strong body.* She admired his solid build, his dreamy eyes more blue right now and staring deeply into hers.

"I wouldn't let you do it alone. Of course I'll be there." So Dan meant it when he said he would support her, and that made all the difference. Kay knew how to defend herself. Now with Dan's help, she wouldn't worry about Rosseau's attack.

"Then I'll do it."

Doris got up from her desk and gave Kay a hug.



Saturday, May 26

They were ushered into a private room in the back of an Italian restaurant. The room had a big table next to a bench that ran the length of the back wall.

Dan had invited two junior executives and, of course, Kay. Walter Rosseau came with four lackeys. They were all looking forward to meeting the snake dancer.

But Kay wasn't looking very snaky tonight. She had on a full length tan raincoat and black rain boots. She wore no makeup and her hair was tied back in a pony tail, mostly hidden under a brown knit beret.

Everyone turned when she and Dan entered the room. Their eyes scanned her briefly, then they returned to their conversations and drinks. *Ha ha! I'm not even worth a second look.* At least nobody would think that Kay was encouraging Walter Rosseau to attack her.

After standing around and chatting for a minute, Dan spoke up. "Let's sit down. Walter, please have a seat on the bench."

Rosseau sat down and slid to the center of the table. After he was seated, Kay stepped closer to the table and opened her coat. Since Rosseau was the first to sit down, only he could see what Kay was wearing. Even the camera, which was recording the whole scene from the other side of the room, could only see her back.

The view inside of her coat was nothing like the outside view. Rosseau looked at her, and his face opened wide. Kay had on a short black leather miniskirt with a shiny metal zipper on the side, exposing generous amounts of her leg. Black stockings stopped well below the hem of the skirt and

were held up by garters. *The snake is back, but watch out for her bite, Mr. Rosseau.*

Kay did a performance for both Rosseau and the camera. For the camera, she shifted the coat left and right, as if adjusting it. For Rosseau, she wiggled her hips and smiled sweetly. Then she closed the coat and sat down on the bench at the very end of the table, leaving a fairly large gap between herself and Rosseau. Dan was now sitting on Rosseau's other side and egged him on. "Go on, slide over. You said you wanted to dine with the fabulous Kay Gershon—there she is."

Rosseau slimed right up to Kay and put his arm around her waist. "Hello, Kay. Lovely outfit you're wearing." He laughed lewdly and pulled her to his side. He smelled of too much aftershave, greasy hair gel, and the oppressively bad breath of an old-man's rotting gums.

I hope I can make it through this meal without vomiting. Suddenly the home-cooked smell of garlic and spices was gone, along with her appetite. "Hello Mr. Rosseau. It's nice to meet you." Kay spoke in a flat, unemotional voice that projected modesty to the camera. She let his arm stay around her waist while the rest of the people finished sitting down. Then she took his arm and gently returned it to him. "Do you mind if I take off this coat?"

"Oh please do!"

Kay pulled her arms out of the coat, but kept it wrapped around her waist and lower body. Unlike the hooker garb below her waist, she wore modest clothes above: a loose brown sweater with a cowl neck and long sleeves. Her only visible nod to fashion was that the sweater matched the beret. And even though the sweater was baggy, she also wore a tight sports bra to reduce her bust even more and avoid any possibility of seeming curvaceous. The men

across the table watched as she took off the coat, but their eager expressions fell when they saw the sweater. To them, and to the camera, Kay seemed like a pretty, demure, but somewhat unappealing woman, sitting slouched on the bench. None of the junior executives at the table had any idea that she was so provocatively dressed.

Rosseau could barely contain himself and reached down to grab her leg. *This guy doesn't waste any time.* Kay grabbed his wrist and moved his hand away. "Mr. Rosseau, please." She scolded him quietly but firmly.

"What, can't I admire a beautiful woman?" He turned to his underlings on the other side of the table. "Don't I always admire beautiful women, boys?"

Two of them jumped to concur. "Oh yes, sir." Kay felt sorry for the women who had to work with these misogynists.

Rosseau immediately grabbed her leg again, and Kay repelled him again. *Can we please get through this meal?* When he did it the third time, Kay dug her fingernails into the back of his hand.

"Hey watch it! I didn't bring my snakebite kit tonight. Behave yourself." He held his hand and examined the damage. Too bad she didn't break the skin. *Maybe later.*

The rest of the meal was uneventful, and Rosseau made small talk with Kay. She ordered an appetizer-size salad and hardly ate any of it—a combination of nerves and nausea made it impossible to eat.

When the meal was over, Dan gave his two junior executives a signal and they got up to leave. Rosseau was waiting for this and he sent the same signal to his four lap dogs. The men eagerly got up and left the restaurant. *Sorry I disappointed you boys. Consider yourselves lucky to get out while you can.*

Kay, Rosseau, and Dan waited at the table until the others were gone. Dan started to say something, then stopped and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a phone and rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry, Walter, I have to take this. It could take fifteen or twenty minutes. Can you wait?"

"I've waited all night, Dan. Get the hell out of here!" He leered at Dan and then turned back to Kay, his fingers drumming on the table. *Is it my imagination, or does his breath smell even worse?* Kay closed her eyes and tried to calm herself while Dan got up from the table.

After Dan left the room, Kay slumped down even farther, stared forward, and said nothing. But her pulse and her mind were galloping at full speed. The wrestling match was about to begin.

Rosseau's eyes scanned her up and down, then he reached out to once again grab her leg. She took his wrist and turned to look at him. "No," she protested, a bit weakly, still playing the milquetoast.

"You sex kitten! I must have you now!" He threw his arms around Kay and dived openmouthed, toward her face.

Kay gritted her teeth and let her eyes grow wide in pretend shock. This was the moment that she had thought about for the past two days. Would she panic? Would she be able to defend herself? She had never considered the possibility that she'd feel like puking on him.

The big question was whether he would push her down to the bench or try to kiss her sitting up. She needed him to push her down so that it would look more like an attack, but he seemed to be happy just sitting there and slobbering. So she helped him along, reaching with her arm—the one that the camera couldn't see—and pulling him onto her.

Rosseau and Kay fell to the bench, his bulk crushing her down. *Damn, this guy's big.* Did she really think she could

take him when he was pinning her down like this? She twisted her head away and screamed for the camera, “Stop! Help! Mr. Rosseau, what are you doing?” Next she freed an arm and swung it wildly about, hitting him ineffectively. Kay was relieved to have her arm free, so she held back and played for the camera a little longer.

Rosseau kept up his attempts to kiss Kay, his cavernous mouth chasing her head as she twisted it back and forth to avoid him. *I really deserve hazard pay for this.* The camera saw it all as the two of them struggled on the bench, their upper bodies visible at the end of table.

After a very short time, Rosseau stopped, pushed himself away from Kay, and started to take off his pants. This freed Kay’s legs and she slid out from under him, scooting down the bench a little bit while making sure to keep her inappropriately dressed lower half safely hidden behind the table, out of the camera’s view. Free from his oppressive weight, she once again felt in control of the situation, and gave him a wide-eyed look of horror, her hands clasped together in supplication.

“No! Don’t! Please!” She flipped her head quickly from side to side.

“You know you want it. You’ve been begging for it all night!”

He dropped his pants, and Kay’s revulsion doubled. If this video made it to television, they would have to edit it with a black box, but not a very big one.

“Mr. Rosseau, you’re a bad man!” Kay kicked him squarely in the crotch with so much fury that even she was surprised.

Rosseau doubled over and crashed onto the table. Then she stood up, pulled the top of her coat back on, and quickly left the room.



Kay made a sharp turn after she left the dining room and doubled back through the kitchen, leaving the building through its service entrance. There in the street was Dan's car. *I'm safe*. Dan came out of the building, smiling broadly, and waved her toward the car.

They got in and turned to each other with shining eyes, ready to burst from excitement. A simultaneous victory yell soon turned to laughter, and Dan started the car. Kay was about to throw her arms out and give him a hug, but then she remembered that she wasn't supposed to go there so she just flopped down and sank into her seat, feeling her heart pound. "Wow! I did it." She shivered. "That whole scene was gross and embarrassing. Do you really think it will be enough to take Rosseau down?"

"Kay, you were awesome! From what I could see on the video, it's going to hurt him badly."

"Good. He deserves it." It had been a peak moment—the world was hers! *I am powerful, the deliverer of justice*. Obnoxious men like Walter Rosseau better take notice.

Dan and Kay drove for a while, excited, occasionally turning to look at each other. As planned, Doris was still back at the restaurant in a makeshift control booth, watching Rosseau's last minutes of pain on the video monitor. She even wanted to record the sound of his footsteps, fading down the hall. The perfectionist in her wanted a single, clean take, starting and ending with a silent, empty room. A valuable new movie for her home library.

"Doris and I watched your grand finale on the video monitor. You were so much in control that I was never worried you would need to call me back in. You kicked him

expertly, too. We nearly fell on the floor laughing when we saw it.” Dan pounded the steering wheel and snickered. “I wanted to stay and watch him writhe, but I came out to the car as quickly as I could. I can’t wait to watch those final moments.”

Then Dan became more serious. “So tell me Kay, how do you feel? Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine, thanks for asking. In fact, I’m feeling surprisingly good, considering. I think maybe I’m still a little numb. I can’t quite believe I just did that.”

Suddenly, Dan frowned and pointed his finger at her. “What’s that you’ve got on the side of your head?”

Kay reached up, touched her ear, and then quickly pulled her hand away with a shiver. “Ewww. That guy was so much grosser than I expected.” She opened and closed her fingers a few times, judging the consistency of the slime, a combination of drool and hair gel. She sniffed it and nearly retched. “Oh God! It even smells like him. I think I’m going to be sick.”

Dan opened the center console of the car and pulled out a hand towel. “Here, clean yourself.”

Kay took the towel and wiped her hand. Then, as she was about to clean her hair, she turned to look at Dan. What was this freshly folded towel doing in his car?

“Really, Dan? You keep a towel handy when you drive?” She cocked her head and squinted at him, then shrugged and untied her hair.

“You never know when a beautiful woman will need to wipe off the kisses of some other man.”

“It’s all right, I don’t really want to know.” *I’m in the playboy CEO’s car.* She imagined an endless line of women, all needing to freshen-up a bit before a night of sex with Dan Avery.

Kay scrubbed her hair with the towel, and Dan chuckled. “Just think, you have Walter Rosseau’s DNA all over you.”

“Don’t even joke about it! I *really* need a shower.” She set her jaw and kept cleaning herself.

“We’re on our way to your place. Open the window if you need some air.”

Kay looked up and noticed where they were. “I hate to get personal, but don’t you live around here? My place is still twenty minutes away. Could I . . .” *No, don’t say it.* But the words were already tumbling out of her mouth and she couldn’t seem to stop herself. “. . . get a shower at your place?” She sucked in air between her teeth and looked away.

Dan made a quick turn, and the car zoomed off.

Did I just invite myself into his bathroom? Talk about inappropriate! She looked at Dan and let her eyes linger. Was he getting better looking all the time, or was she just horny? Although there was a part of her that was insulted at the thought of being Dan’s next pretty thing, there was something else in her that didn’t mind at all. This could turn into quite a night.

No, no, no. He said he wouldn’t do that. Kay couldn’t blame him for wanting to avoid a romance; it made sense to her too, at some level. But look how quickly he accepted her request for a shower. What was he thinking? Kay tried to diffuse the situation before it went too far. “Really, all I want is a shower.” Then she joked, “I promise not to leave any Rosseau-rings around the drain.”

“Don’t worry, Kay. I understand. A Rosseau-removal service is the least I can offer you—one shower, with plenty of hot water, coming right up.”

They drove in silence for a while. Dan started to speak, quietly, haltingly. “This may be a bad time, uh, and I’ve honestly not thought it through all the way . . .” He paused and pursed his lips, looking at her briefly. Dan obviously had something serious to tell her, so she turned to look at him. He waited a few seconds, then continued. “Oh hell, I’m going to tell you about it and you can do what you want.”

What was this about? A dark family secret? A horrifying disease? Something epic that would change everything she thought she knew about Dan Avery? “I can take it, Dan, no matter how terrible.”

Dan exploded in laughter. “Terrible? I certainly hope not. I was going to invite you to a party! We call them ‘Westerleys,’ and they happen every few months. My family throws them at a church downtown. There’s a Westerley tonight, and I’m going. I was just unsure about inviting you, coming on the heels of this Rosseau craziness. Anyway, now that I’ve told you, you’re invited.”

“A party! Why did you make it sound so awful, then?”

“I’m a little worried that inviting you to a party is a bit too forward, especially since my family and friends will be there. I’m serious about not ruining our good thing with a bad romance. We are not going to be lovers.”

I’m sorry to hear that. But Dan was right: this game was incredible, and Kay didn’t want to mess it up. What other job let you dethrone the head of an insufferably sexist corporation?

Kay thought about the party and something about it sounded familiar. “Westerley’—isn’t that the big construction firm? I’ve heard about them building some major oil pipeline.” She vaguely remembered reading about Dan’s Westerley lineage.

“That’s them. My mom’s a Westerley. The parties are at St. Joseph’s Church, downtown. Our family tithes so much money that the priest lets them party there. It’s a gathering of all the rich and famous people we know, quite the bash.”

“I hate to say this, but it sounds totally stuffy and boring.”

“Well, yes, but you see it’s actually two parties. The stuffy part happens in the main part of the church where the old folks hang out. But the real party is in the recreation hall where the younger generation gets crazy. *That’s* a party. They get a live band and let the music and liquor flow. I go just to catch up with my friends. They’re all . . .” He wiggled his fingers in the air. “They’re all very different from you.”

“They’re rich and famous. I’m poor and nobody.”

“No, it’s not that at all! I . . . How do I put this? I actually think you’re better than most of them, and I’m curious to see what they’ll think of you.” Dan shook his head and flattened his mouth. “I’m not selling this party very well, am I? It’s not that my friends are so bad—it’s more that I haven’t been much of a friend to them, lately. This job takes all of my time, you know.”

“But not so much time that you can’t help me take down your business rivals.”

“I view our little game as part of my job. It’s hard work, but someone has to do it.” Dan smiled. “Look, forget what I said about my friends. Think of this as a party with new people for you to meet. Who knows, you might meet the man of your dreams there.”

Kay tried not to blush. *Has that already happened?*

“Think of it as a way to celebrate your success with some friends and music and food and drink.”

“And meet your family. I look forward to hearing you explain me to them—a woman dressed like a hooker, with

another man's bodily fluids in her hair. And how will you describe me to your friends? Maybe if you tell them that this is the newest fashion trend, they'll all start wearing drool in their hair."

Dan cracked up. "You haven't even met my friends yet but you've hit the nail on the head as far as their fashion sense goes. But don't worry, the party actually doesn't begin for a while so you can take a nice long shower first."

If Kay thought she was too forward when she invited herself into Dan's bathroom, he definitely took it to the next level by inviting her to meet his parents! "Going to a party with you . . . to meet your friends . . . and your family." She turned to Dan. "And how will you introduce me? Am I your latest toy, fresh from the office?"

"I wasn't going to mention our work connection—you're just some woman I know. Believe it or not, nobody will ask for more. And don't forget that some of these folks might be of interest to you too. This is a gathering of many powerful and well-known people."

Kay smiled. He really knew how to push her buttons. "Fine. What do I wear to this party?"

"Well, what did you bring to change into after the Rosseau deal?"

"I've got a miniskirt, a simple top, and some pumps. Will that work?"

"Look, you can never compete with some of these women—their trendy Versace outfits draped over their bony little bodies. They practically live for these parties. But it isn't all high fashion—lots of them wear miniskirts, little black dresses, granny dresses, you name it. I think your outfit will fit right in." The car pulled to a stop. "And here we are. Take a shower and then decide what you want to do. I

don't mind taking you home if the party sounds like too much."

Partying with Dan was definitely too much. How could she refuse?

4: Westerley



Saturday, May 26

Kay stepped into Dan's home and looked around. This was the best part of the city, close to the trendiest restaurants and nightclubs. Still, she had expected much more, something that fit the rich playboy image. Perhaps a palatial enclave or a penthouse suite with a doorman dressed in full livery. *Where are the butlers, cooks, and other servants?*

Instead, Dan lived in a modest townhouse that he entered by actually unlocking the front door himself. He flipped on the lights, and the dark, empty place lit up warmly. The living room was simple, with two sofas enclosing a handsome wood coffee table. There was no clutter or mess—everything was neatly in its place. And art was everywhere: paintings, sculptures, even a mobile. The pieces ranged from classical to modern, from aboriginal to hipster.

Dan led the way upstairs and pointed to the hall bathroom, handing her a few towels from the linen closet. "Take your time. I have some calls to make." He wandered down the hall.

Kay closed the bathroom door and examined herself in the mirror. *My hair looks like hell.* She scanned the bathroom to make sure he had shampoo *and* conditioner. How many men had she met who didn't even know what conditioner was? But there in the shower stall was

everything she needed. Kay smiled. *This is where all of his women bathe.*

Kay showered more thoroughly than she had in recent memory and tried to get Rosseau's immense, slobbering mouth out of her mind. She stepped out of the shower, swaddled in soft white towels. *Much better.*

Was she really going to the party with Dan? That would be strange, but how much stranger could this day possibly get? She had to find out. Kay dried her hair and brushed it out, then put on her khaki miniskirt and a black knit top with three-quarter-length sleeves. She quickly added a little eyeliner, and even found some moisturizing cream in the bathroom. Finally, she shoved the ridiculous rain boots into her bag and put on two-inch heels.

Kay studied herself in the mirror for a few seconds. *Can I really compete with the Westerley set?* Would she make a fool of herself in front of the playboy CEO? She would know soon enough. Ready to party, Kay stepped into the hall.

Dan was standing nearby, talking on the phone. She stopped instantly and stared—she almost didn't recognize him. *Who is this incredibly good-looking guy?* He wore a thin white linen shirt, intricately patterned, with the top three buttons open and showing a decent amount of chest hair. Kay hated guys who shaved their bodies, but wasn't crazy about guys with too much hair, either. Dan was just right. He was also wearing fitted jeans which, combined with the revealing shirt, showed off a solid athletic build. She stood there and admired the view.

Dan smiled at her then continued his conversation. "Let's wrap this up, Jack. Give me the summary." He stood there listening to the phone and looking at Kay, rolling his eyes to show his boredom with the call. He leaned against the wall.

This was not the same man in the three-piece suit from work, not at all. She had wondered what Dan's body would look like, but this was better than anything she had imagined. Dan looked like a model: fit, timeless, super masculine, and hot. *Wow, Dan. Where did you come from?*

She eyed him for a bit longer, drinking him in. No wonder women threw themselves at him. If she could, she'd grab those muscles and explore every one of them. *Mmm, especially that great looking chest, that firm butt, those ripped arms, that . . .* Wait! This could be trouble. *Dan said no romance, remember?* She looked down.

So was it a mistake to go partying with him? Perhaps, but then again, she was free to ignore him at the party and hunt for other guys. That would help her and Dan keep their distance from one another. Maybe he wanted that, too.

Dan hung up the phone and one corner of his mouth curled up, looking her over like he did the first day they met. She felt the hunger, but this time she basked in it and gave him a little curtsey. After a few seconds, Dan exhaled. "You look great. Are you ready for a Westerley?"

"Certainly not, but I'm coming."

"Wonderful! I can't wait to see how they react to you." He offered his hand and she took it, feeling the fire inside him, threatening to explode. *Kiss him. Don't kiss him. Damn.* Dan gallantly led her to the car.



They approached the church, all lit up in the night like midnight mass. Its doors were wide open and people were standing on the steps, talking and drinking. Everyone was dressed formally. Most of the people she saw were older and milled around in tuxedos and gowns. The only people even close to her age were obviously security guards, burly men in dark suits and darker glasses. She looked down at her outfit and twisted her mouth. *This miniskirt is just plain wrong.* But at least Dan didn't fit in either, dressed so informally, and he didn't seem uncomfortable about it.

Two women walked up dressed like Kay, young and also out of place. One had a short white skirt with a red and white halter top. The other wore a tailored black minidress.

"Wow, Dan. You've got all kinds here."

"I warned you. Let's start in the main hall—I've got some relatives to greet. You can go straight to the real party. Come on." They walked up the steps slowly, stopping to greet a Westerley or two. Dan even knew some of the security people. Few of the older people seemed to care about Kay; none of them said anything to her. They must have assumed that she was just another one of Dan Avery's women, hardly worth a look.

The other two young women were also walking up the steps and the four of them met half way up. They greeted Dan and the one in the minidress even threw her arms around him in a big hug.

"Tiffany, Sandi, hi! This is Kay."

They greeted her coolly, but continued up the steps together to better defend against the septuagenarian hoard.

The cathedral was gorgeous inside, with silver and white decorations everywhere. Mostly older people were

strolling around, drinks in one hand, reaching out with the other to take food from a passing waiter's loaded tray. Sandi and Tiffany ran off to the side aisle, and Dan pointed their way. "Go with them. I'll catch up after I say my hello's."

Kay was happy to skip the Westerley clan introductions, so she raced ahead to catch up with Dan's friends. "I've never been to a Westerley before. It sounds like fun."

Tiffany, in the black minidress, turned to Kay and looked her up and down. "Yeah, fun." She muttered it with a tinge of jealousy and a dollop of superiority.

Sandi was friendlier. "Your first Westerley? Wow! I can't remember mine." She pushed open a door and suddenly they were outside of the cathedral in the warm summer night.

Sandi led them across a courtyard. "This way . . ." Rock music was thumping quietly in the distance. She opened a door and they entered another building, not as large as the cathedral, but still fairly impressive. Now the music was louder but not too loud for conversation—a band was playing somewhere else in the building.

The recreation hall's entrance area was higher than the rest of the room, on a raised platform a few steps above the main floor. Like the church, the room was decorated, but in a more youthful motif, with lasers, mirror balls, at least two bars, and a table laden with food.

Food! That's what I'm missing. Kay remembered her failed attempt to eat, earlier this evening. She headed across the room to finish dinner, leaving Sandi and Tiffany behind on the entrance platform. They had clearly lost interest in her and were surveying the scene.

Sandi started to hop and point across the room, then they both shouted out. "Stacy! We're here now!" They waved at a woman who was leaning against the wall, bored.

Their shouts brought her to life, and the three women ran to greet each other. Kay loaded a plate and wandered back toward them, eating her dinner and watching as they reunited with hugs all around.

Sandi, Tiffany, and Stacy chatted while Kay stood on the periphery, finishing her dinner. The primary topic of conversation was their dresses, which they had bought for the party tonight and would send directly to storage tomorrow to avoid an accidental second wearing.

Sandi turned to introduce Kay. "Stacy, this is Kay. She came with Dan."

Stacy looked at Kay with appraising eyes. "Are you going out with him?"

She sounds jealous. Kay was amused at the thought that every woman wanted to be with the playboy CEO. "No. I just started working with him this week. Nice guy."

All three of them laughed. "Some might say that. Not everyone thinks the Charmer is such a nice guy." Sandi said "the Charmer" with a grunt bordering on anger.

Really? "And what makes him not-nice?"

Sandi looked heavenward and flipped her hair back and forth. "Dan's married to his work, he has no time for a woman. You know, too busy climbing the corporate ladder to care about anyone else but himself. There's a reason why he's still single." She scrunched her mouth into a frown.

Kay tried to defend him. "It takes a lot of work to be the CEO of a company. I'd imagine that most corporate executives are married to their work."

"Oh, puh-leeze. My daddy's a CEO." She said it with such a childish petulance that Kay had to step back and look at her. *How old is this woman?* Sandi looked like she was in her twenties, but could she be some bratty little teenager?

Stacy spoke up to join Sandi and put up a united front. “My daddy is a CEO, too.” *Why am I not surprised?*

In fact, even Tiffany joined in the chant, condescension dripping from her voice. “My daddy’s Chairman of the Board. That’s better.” The three women gave each other “Oh yeah?” looks but said no more. This was evidently well-worn ground.

Tiffany looked at Kay and narrowed her eyes. “You said you work with Dan. So are you at Yorick?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Well my daddy is Chairman of the Board at Yorick. Pretty cool, right?”

Just like Dan said, powerful people were everywhere. “That is very cool, Tiffany. So your father is Donald Hartfield?”

“Yep. And that makes me Tiffany Hart . . .” She drew a heart on her chest with her two index fingers, and then finished her last name. “Field.” She leaned in close to Kay. “Do you want to know the best thing about my dad’s job?”

Kay leaned in for the answer. “The best part is that Dan is always dropping by our house on business, and sometimes we get a few moments together, you know . . .” She giggled.

Kay was fascinated, watching these three friends, daughters of corporate leaders, rich beyond her imagination. They were so different from her that they seemed like an unusual form of wildlife. Kay became an ornithologist, studying the habits of a flock of rare, green-pocketed, city-dwelling rich birds. She explored gingerly. “CEOs work pretty hard. Did your daddies play with you when you were kids?”

“No, of course not.” They all agreed that fathers don’t play with children. But fathers do buy clothes and jewelry, and in that sense, these women had fine daddies.

At one point in the conversation they revealed their ages. Kay expected them to be her age, but instead they were older, closer to Dan’s age. *They seem so immature.* She wondered if the men here were just as bratty.

Kay scanned the room, hoping to find someone else to talk to. Women outnumbered men, two to one, but there were still plenty of good-looking guys. One decent-looking man caught her eye. He was dressed in a surfer outfit: board shorts and a tank top with blond sun-bleached hair down to his shoulders. It was pretty casual, but somehow it worked in this eclectic crowd. He caught her checking him out and gave her a broad smile. Kay managed to control herself and act cool as she kept looking around. Surfer Boy would be fun to get to know if nobody else turned up.

Suddenly Stacy brightened. “Look, he’s here!” There on the entrance platform, surveying the room like he owned it, was Dan. His presence lit up the room, and Kay noticed quite a few women who were happy to see him.

Tiffany straightened her skirt, then stopped, thought for a bit, and pulled her skirt back up, showing even more leg. She turned to Sandi. “How do I look?”

Sandi smirked at her. “Oh, get over him already!”

Kay was fascinated with the band of women who were upset with Dan but still couldn’t stop lusting for him. She tried to inquire discretely. “Gee, Tiffany, you seem to have a bit of a crush on Dan.”

“He’s hot, but he’s so annoying. We went out last year. After a week, I was fed up with him coming home at nine every night, too tired to party. I told him that I needed him to spend more time with me and less time at that stupid

office. Can you believe he laughed at me when I told him that?" She blew out her breath. "Nobody laughs at me. That guy doesn't know how to handle a real woman." She crossed her arms.

Kay looked at Tiffany, her completely painted face, her incredibly skinny legs—possibly even anorexic—the dozens of bracelets, necklaces, piercings, tattoos, and adornments all over her body. Kay was amused at the irony of her use of the word "real."

Dan saw Kay, across the room, and wandered in her general direction, stopping to greet everyone along the way. Finally, he got to the group of women near her, giving hugs to everyone there. He turned to Kay just as Surfer Boy appeared, hooked his arm around Kay's, and demanded that the most beautiful woman at the party dance with him. *Perfect timing.* She smiled at Dan, gave him a shrug, and followed the flowing blonde hair toward the music.

Soon they were surrounded by a dozen people jumping and gyrating to House beats, the band only a few feet away. There wasn't much space on the dance floor, but the intensity of the music was through the roof. Surfer Boy was a pretty good dancer, and Kay was entertained by some of his exaggerated moves, probably intended to impress her. Still, the music was great. She let it wash over her and move her around, the less appealing parts of the day starting to fade away.

When the music stopped, Surfer Boy took her aside. "Time for a drink! What are you having?"

A drink. Yes, I could certainly use one. "Actually, I haven't started drinking yet—just got here. So sure, let's get a drink. Beyond that, no promises." She gave him a look that was full of promises and followed him to the bar.

“So what brings such a lovely woman to our little gathering tonight? Did you wander in off the street just to sweep me off my feet?”

What a salesman. “Dan Avery invited me.” She turned to the bartender. “Jack Daniels, neat.”

Surfer Boy raised his eyebrows and called out his order. “Maker’s Mark, also neat.” He turned to Kay “You’re going out with Danny?”

“We’re just friends. But you seem to know him well.”

“Known him since we were kids. I hear the poor fool is still working—thinks he can run a company. If you ask me, Danny should retire like me and enjoy himself. But no! He sits in his office and works all day. Doesn’t even have time for women any more, from what I’ve heard.” Surfer Boy looked around the room and then turned back to Kay with a grin. “You know, Dan’s been with nearly every woman here who he’s not related to.”

That’s a strange thing for him to tell me. Was he jealous of Dan, or merely trying to sell himself? Kay squinted at Surfer Boy, and he stepped back. “Sorry. Am I telling you something you don’t want to hear?”

She patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ve heard about Dan. All the women here seem to love him.”

“Yes, but he leaves a trail of broken hearts in his wake. Every woman here thinks he’s going to fall in love with her. But nobody’s killer enough for Dan, so he never settles down. Personally, I think he gives up on them too quickly.”

Killer? What an interesting choice of words. Their drinks came and she shot her whiskey, letting its warmth burn away the crazy day. Surfer Boy beamed at her. “Come on—another dance.” *Sure, why not?*

The music was even better for the second dance, a post-punk song full of jangly guitars and raw energy. This was a

fascinating look at the real Dan Avery—growing up with the powerful elite, the bored socialites, the spoiled children. Kay found it interesting that they all put him down for wanting to run a company. To her, being a CEO was beyond impressive, but for Dan, even the best job was some sort of guilty pleasure that he had to hide from his friends, lest they tease him about it. It went a long way toward explaining why Dan was playing this game with Kay, an openly irreverent stab at corporate life.

Then Kay thought more about Surfer Boy's use of the word "killer" to describe Dan's interest in women. The killer colleague. The word was too close to be a coincidence, especially from a man who had known Dan for so long.

She let the music wash over her. *I'm the killer*. She was dancing with Surfer Boy, but in her mind she was moving up and down Dan's body, grabbing him, kissing him, pulling him deep into her. Suddenly Kay snapped back to reality: Dan was right next to her on the dance floor, spinning and shaking with another woman. She wore a black leotard with bold red stripes, and she stared at Dan with familiar desire. Kay nodded at him and then turned back to Surfer Boy. *Good for you, Dan*. They'd each found someone else, so the pressure was off. It would be much easier to end the night if they had their eyes on other partners. Still, Kay watched him out of the corner of her eye.

The song ended and Surfer Boy again walked off the dance floor; he seemed to be able to endure just one song at a time before he needed a rest. Kay followed him, and noticed that Dan was still dancing, but now he had a different partner.

When they got off the dance floor, Kay tried to be friendly. "So, where do you surf?"

He paused and gave her a puzzled look, then raised an eyebrow. “You don’t know who I am, do you?”

“Sorry, who are you?”

“I’m O.E. Orton. I built Power AG and sold it to all the big banks.”

Kay looked at him with wide eyes but kept her cool. *Oh my God, I’m partying with O.E. Orton.* Dan had warned her that this would happen. Orton was the famous young entrepreneur, the business genius. You couldn’t get your MBA these days without studying his success. “Oh of course, Mr. Orton. I’ve heard of you.”

“Yes, everyone’s heard of me.” He preened and stood up straight. “I sold my company for a half billion dollars, you know.”

Braggart. “Pleased to meet you. I’m Kay. Kay Gershon.” This was a rare opportunity to ask him a question about Power AG. She’d puzzled over it in school and discussed it with her classmates, but nobody seemed to know the answer. Surely Orton would.

No, shut up! No nerd talk at a party. But this was Orton, standing right in front of her. She couldn’t resist. “May I ask you a question about Power AG?”

“Why certainly.” He held his hands out toward her, ready to woo her with his brilliant answer.

“Is your analysis engine stochastic or does it use real historical data?”

Orton’s head snapped back and he gave Kay a perplexed look, as if seeing her for the first time. “Who gives a shit? I had the best product because I hired the best people. Ask *them* how it works, not me.”

How embarrassing. He had no idea what she was talking about. “Okay, I’m sorry—I made a mistake. Can we forget I said anything?”

Orton looked her over, one eye arched. “Damn, a beautiful nerd . . . weird . . .” He snapped out of it and looked away. “Say! I need another drink!” He turned to leave but Kay grabbed his arm and forced him to look at her, one last time.

“Very nice to meet you, Mr. Orton.” Orton smiled unconvincingly and wandered off in search of a drink, obviously seeking refuge from the nerd girl—refuge that could be satisfied by nearly any other woman here.

It didn’t make sense; he must have heard technical talk before. But he didn’t expect to hear it from an attractive woman. It belonged elsewhere, coming from other people. *Ha!* O.E. Orton—just another insecure man, threatened by a smart woman.

Kay watched him walk away and muttered to herself. “Jerk!” She was disappointed with him and shook her head. But she was disappointed with herself, too. She never made stupid mistakes like that, letting a guy get away after a couple of dances. She could have held on to Orton easily and made a fun evening of it. Instead she had stepped in a big puddle of awkward, all the way up to her ankles.

Why did she engage him in nerd talk? She knew better and still she did it. Maybe it was this damn job, combining sexuality and work. It blurred the lines and was turning her life upside down.

Kay walked around the room lost in a haze. Suddenly Rosseau’s disgusting mouth appeared in the air before her and she held a hand over her stomach. She needed something good to wash these images away. More dancing? Another drink? A walk in the warm night air? Kay found herself in front of a bar, thankfully not the one Orton was standing at, and had another shot. She heard a familiar

song coming from the band and started swaying to the music.

Then she was back on the dance floor, still in love with the music. Dan wasn't there, but a group of women were dancing together so she joined in. Kay closed her eyes and got lost in the song, a Japanese pop song that the band was handling pretty well.

The music did its job and Kay left the dance floor much more calm. From behind her, a woman's voice interrupted her reverie. "You're pretty. I've never seen you here before." One of the women who had just danced with her was also out in the hall. She wore a paisley hippie dress, long and flowing like her hair. *She certainly doesn't fit in here.* Some sort of Earth Mother, gentle and easy going, a loving gaze on her face.

"Why thanks. You're quite radiant in that dress. Are you a Westerley?" Probably just an interloper, like herself. Maybe someone she could relate to.

"Yeah, I get that all the time. Just because I dress differently than the others doesn't mean I'm not a Westerley. I'm filthy rich just like everyone else here." She gave Kay a deprecating smile.

"Well, you're obviously different from most of the people here, so please forgive me. I'm Kay Gershon. Never been to a Westerley before, so I'm still figuring it out."

"Constance Westerley, pleased to meet you."

"I already got in trouble tonight for asking too many personal questions, but I'm going to chance it again. I hope you don't mind. What do you do?"

"I'm a lawyer. Public defender for the city's poor and downtrodden."

"Very impressive. Do you ever have to go up against your own family?"

"I can't take cases that involve my own family, and yes, it does come up. You can bet I get a lot of grief at work for my last name." Constance eyed Kay. "So what do you do, while we're doing background checks on each other?"

"I'm a negotiator. I work with Dan Avery. He invited me tonight."

"Dan! Nice guy. He's done quite well for himself. I keep trying to get him to be a little more charitable with his big executive salary."

"And is he?"

"Not too bad. His heart is in the right place, but he favors different charities than I do. At least he's not a cheapskate like most of these people." She looked around and scowled.

"You're the first person I've met here who doesn't have bad things to say about Dan. It's refreshing. I'm guessing you never went out with him."

"Date Dan? We're cousins! Besides, he's not my type. I need someone a bit more intellectual who takes life more seriously. Dan's not stupid, but he's too much of a playboy for me."

"Forgive me for being blunt, but how did you get to be so serious? Everyone else here seems to be much more . . ." She grasped for the right word, but couldn't find one that wasn't insulting.

"Frivolous?" She had a twinkle in her eye. "I don't know why, but I became obsessed with the problems of the world and decided to help others. It's hard work though and I can see why public defenders burn out and go for private-sector jobs." She stopped and listened to the music. "Oh! My favorite song. The singer in this band actually does it with a Scottish accent, just like the original. Want to dance some more?"

“No thanks, I’m going to take a walk outside. But it was very nice to meet you, Constance.”

“You too, Kay. See you later!” Constance floated back to the dance floor.

How nice. Someone at this party who wasn’t shallow, clueless, or greedy. Kay stepped outside and inhaled deeply—the night air was refreshing, and Kay bathed in it. This church wasn’t such a bad place, but some of Dan’s friends were less than appealing.

Kay walked aimlessly and then saw someone in the distance—she wasn’t alone. Up ahead, in the half-light outside the other end of the recreation hall, a man was walking back and forth very slowly. *Is it Dan?* She couldn’t tell for sure so she walked closer. Whoever this man was, he was just pacing, looking down, not really trying to go anywhere. She slowed her step to match his speed and approached discretely.

It was Dan all right, walking around a labyrinth that had been painted on the ground. He didn’t seem to notice her at first and kept walking slowly, his head down, a peaceful look on his face. Then he raised his head, saw her, and beamed.

“I love this labyrinth. Always walked it as a kid.” He continued his journey.

Dan Avery walking a labyrinth? So peaceful, so simple, so uncorporate! “Do you meditate?” *Another stupid question.* It couldn’t be.

“Meditation is a wonderful practice. I know it sounds like a bunch of old hippy stuff, but I meditate every day. It keeps me sane. You should try it sometime.”

Kay let her mouth fall open and she stared at Dan. “I meditate whenever I can. My parents are pretty spiritual and they taught me as a kid.”

They looked at each other with shared disbelief and growing grins. “Damn, Kay. You’re blowing away all my preconceptions of you tonight.” *As are you, Dan.* He tore himself away from her gaze and resumed walking.

Kay entered the labyrinth and started on the path. “So tell me, who taught a rich Westerly scion to be spiritual?”

Dan muffled a laugh. “I took a class in Eastern religions in college. I was an impudent bastard back then, but the professor was surprisingly immune to my attitude. It made me curious, so I went to see him. He gave me some books and I started going to a meditation circle at his home. It gave me new respect for this labyrinth, and now I walk it every time I go to a Westerley.”

“I’ll bet nobody else at this party ever walks this labyrinth, except maybe Constance.”

He smiled. “Ah, Constance. I do love her.” He kept walking. “So you think most of my friends are stupid and shallow?” He turned a corner.

“You said it, not me.”

“Yes, but you’re thinking it.” He turned another corner. “There’s more to my friends than their need to party, Kay. They’re good people and they support me. I’ve known some of them since I was a kid.”

Kay stopped walking and turned to look at Dan. “Support you? Most of the women I talked to tonight just want you in bed.” *Which I understand.* “Even Orton thinks you’re a fool to be working.”

Dan exhaled and slumped his shoulders. “I warned you about that. I’ve grown apart from some of them since I started running Yorick. Still, my friends support me as well as they can. Don’t forget, they’ve been surrounded by wealth their entire lives, so they have never had to do

anything or know anything to survive. Many of them just party, but they do that very well.”

“So what happened to make you want to work for a living?”

“I needed to give my life some definition, something besides partying. Everyone needs something to live for, even my rich friends. Big business runs in the family, so I figured I’d try the corporate life. Turns out I’m pretty good at it and I like it too.”

You’re also pretty good at looking hot. Dan was making her think way too many crazy thoughts, things she would never have imagined on her first day of work. Kay focused on her feet and tried to ignore Dan’s presence as she walked the labyrinth.

“But before you judge my friends, let’s not forget what you and I are doing—gaming executives and taking piles of money from them. Part of me is disappointed at how good you are at it. It shows that you’re not much different than I am—or my friends. I guess I expected you to fail.” Kay paused on the path and looked at Dan, her expression blank. He stopped walking and frowned, clearly unhappy with how that came out. “No, that’s unfair. It’s not about you. Truthfully, I didn’t think anybody could really play this game.” He resumed his walk.

“You know, Dan, the best part of this game is the incredible power trip. I get to take down some of the worst people on the planet—it’s awesome. And it’s a real challenge, too. I would never have believed it when you first asked me to do this, but maybe I *am* cut out for this. Maybe I really am the killer colleague.” She paused to see if Dan would react, but he didn’t so she went on. “Orton said something interesting. He told me that you’re always

searching for a woman who is 'killer.' He actually used that word."

That got Dan's attention and he stopped on the path, looking at her.

"Tell me more about the killer colleague, Dan. What else is she, besides a smart and pretty business partner?"

Dan stood there silently, his mouth tight. Then he continued to walk. After a while he spoke quietly. "Okay, I'll admit it. When I fantasize about the killer colleague, she is always my lover." *Of course.* "But that shouldn't be a surprise—they're my fantasies. Things are different in real life. If we became lovers it might fulfill my fantasy for a while, but it would probably end up . . . well it would end up like all of my other relationships—messy, awkward, painful, and then over. I really like you as a friend and a colleague, Kay, and I don't want to ruin it."

"I've been more than happy with our working relationship, Dan. I rarely get to interact professionally with a man, even a married man, who doesn't have the ulterior motive of seducing me. In fact, I usually withdraw from male colleagues and avoid eye contact or any truly open conversations for fear that they'll take something the wrong way and suddenly come on to me. Because once it does happen, when a man crosses that line and comes on to me, it's impossible to return to normal. The whole working relationship is ruined.

"Our situation is even stranger, because I'm way over the line as far as seductive activity goes. Yet you still treat me like an equal. How do you do it?"

"I've known from the start that I was attracted to you. Think about it: if I wasn't, I never would have hired you to play this game. I just remind myself that if I cross the line, you'll be gone. And let me say that you make it increasingly

difficult for me to keep from crossing that line. Besides being sexy and smart, you're a pleasure to work with, and now I find out that you even meditate! But the more I find myself attracted to you, the more I know how valuable you are as my colleague. I can't even begin to tell you what a thrill this week has been. And although I'd be sad to lose you as a friend or lover, I'd hate myself even more if I lost the only real-life killer colleague I know.

"That's why I was reluctant to invite you to this party—I was afraid that something here would make us cross that line. But now I'm glad you came, because you've seen firsthand what happens to the women I date. Maybe now you understand why I'm able to keep my hands off you. I *refuse* to turn you into one of these miserable women who wait for me to show up at parties. It's not worth it for either of us."

Kay grinned. "This party has shown me something else about you. There is no shortage of women for you to seduce! Better get back inside there, Mr. playboy CEO, and find someone to satisfy you."

"Don't worry about me. I'm satisfied." He paused for a second, then looked at Kay with a gleam in his eye.



Dan had a devilish thought and he walked directly across the labyrinth, right up to Kay. "That's it! Perfect!" *My so-called friends would never understand.* "I know what I'd like to do right now, but feel free to say no if you don't want to do this." He reached out and took Kay's hands in his, turning on whatever charm he could bring to bear, but knowing deep down that he could never charm this one—Kay was bulletproof.

“What can I do for you, Dan?” Her hands felt warm, and her eyes sparkled. *Just who is charming whom here?*

“I’d like to tease my friends, the same way we do at work. I want one hot dance with you that everyone notices, and then we leave the party together, acting like we can’t wait to get in bed.” *Of course, that won’t be an act for me.* He had thought of little else this week.

Kay pursed her lips. “Acting?”

“Sorry, just acting.” Dan shook his head. “We’re still business partners, so I’m taking you home afterwards with no kisses at the doorstep and no coming up for a drink. It’ll be fun to dance, but it’s not a prelude to anything else.”

“I can never figure you out, Dan Avery. You want me to dirty dance with you, just to scandalize your friends? Why?”

“My friends don’t understand me, they treat me like some sort of curiosity.” He started to mimic his girlfriends with a falsetto voice. “It’s only three in the morning, Dan, the night is young. Cancel your stupid meeting and let’s go to another club.” He held out his hands in a gesture of surrender. “I can’t win with them. They have no respect for what I do, and they just want me to party.”

“And marry them.”

Dan chuckled. “Yeah, that too. They have no idea who I really am. It makes me want to confuse them and leave them wondering. At least it will give them something to talk about. So let’s make the women jealous and the men curious.” He looked Kay up and down. “Actually, we’ll make the men jealous, too.”

Kay gave him a hooded stare, her hands on her hips. “Okay, you’re on. But you might be sorry you asked for this, because this time, I’m not going to be the one who gets undressed.” Dan was already sorry, but not very. He nodded in agreement.

Kay grabbed his hand and dragged him back inside to the dance floor. They started dancing and she went so wild that the other dancers had to back away to give her room. Dan kept up with her and added a few crazy moves of his own. Everyone was watching.

Kay came close to him and whispered, "Look out, here I come." She grabbed his shirt and quickly unbuttoned it. Then she pulled it open enough to reveal a fair amount of his chest and stepped back. A few people stopped dancing and stared at Dan, pointing and obviously discussing this new development.

Kay looked around with a lascivious grin, and dove into him again, running her hands up and down his body. Dan lowered his head to hers and breathed deeply. The citrus scent of her shampoo mixed with a light sweat glimmering on her neck and gave off an enticing musk. He longed to lick that neck, work his way up to her fabulous mouth and then down to everywhere else.

Kay pushed back again and quickly pulled his shirt wide open, free from his pants. She stood back and assessed the situation, looking him up and down. He was helpless against her advances, and a quick glance around told him that so was everyone else.

So convincing, even I feel her passion. Dan wanted her more than ever. He looked deep into her eyes, blew out a long steady breath, and let the room fade away.

Transfixed by his eyes, Kay's smile slowly disappeared. She had a wild, lustful look that certainly didn't seem like an act. From somewhere in the depths of his body, a slow growl rattled up his throat, demanding more.

Kay must have heard him, because she echoed his growl and her eyes burned. She threw herself against his bare chest and wrapped her arms around him, holding on tight.

He wrapped his arms around her too, and once again, the room ceased to exist. Then her hold relaxed and he knew it was time to let go and keep dancing.

They separated and Dan tossed his shirt to Kay. She held it to her face for a few seconds and inhaled slowly. Then she wrapped the shirt around herself and let her body swim in a slow sensual dance. Dan couldn't look at her any more without crying out, so he closed his eyes for the rest of the song, his head spinning from her scent, his hands tingling with need.

The song ended and a new one began. He could have danced for hours, but Kay grabbed his hand with a mighty yell, pulling him off the dance floor, and out of the room. If the music hadn't been so loud, it would have been possible to hear Dan laughing, harder than he had in years.

5: Fitness Center



Thursday, May 31

Dan, Kay, and Doris sat down for an exquisitely catered working lunch in Dan's office at the conference table under the chandelier. The table had been transformed and looked like it belonged in a formal dining room, with a linen tablecloth and napkins, fine china, sterling silver cutlery, and crystal wine glasses. Kay picked up a wine glass and stared at it. *She seems impressed. Wait until she tastes the food.*

Dan had an arrangement with a local chef, Ashok, who had his own restaurant in town. Today, Ashok served a spicy Indian/Mexican combination and as soon as the pungent aroma of the food filled the room, everyone's stomach juices flowed. For the next fifteen minutes, they spoke of nothing but the food, which captivated them with each bite, only freeing them when their plates were clean.

Dan leaned back in his chair and let the last bite of food dissolve in his mouth. A few more sips of wine remained in his glass, but that could wait. Doris was finishing up, talking and joking with Kay. *Doris seems much happier since Kay started. Or is that me?* Dan laughed to himself—both he and Doris were happier with Kay around.

Kay lingered over her meal. As she had done a few times during lunch, she stopped eating and raised her head to look around the room, staring in apparent disbelief. Dan

clasped his hands together to keep them from accidentally grabbing her and pulling her to his side.

Kay laid down her fork and fixed Dan with a playful grin. "Doris and I have a surprise for you, Dan."

Your naked body, wrapped around mine? He could dream, couldn't he?

Kay pulled a folio over to her lap and took out a document. "Check this out. We just got this offer yesterday and Doris showed it to me. She thought I'd enjoy seeing a contract full of math." Kay flipped to the end and showed him the equations, running half way down the page. "The contracts people say it's one of the more mathematical deals from Roadmover Corporation."

Ugh, Roadmover. What's that bastard Lawson up to now? Dan shook his head, looking at the page of math. "Look at that crap! Let me tell you something, Kay. If you think my use of a killer colleague is unusual, consider this: George Lawson has killer contract writers. He hires lawyers whose undergraduate degrees were in math. Then these guys write the nerdiest contracts, full of endless, confusing, deceptive equations."

"Well that's exactly what this is: totally deceptive." She rolled her eyes upward and shook her head. "I had to write a computer program to figure it all out. Look at this analysis." She handed him a piece of paper, her mouth twisted.

He scanned the paper and his eyebrows shot up. No doubt about it, the deal was terrible—another sneak attack from Lawson.

But wait a minute. She wrote a program? How many business students did that? And how many could write programs that produced clear, easy-to-read reports like this? Even his best programmers usually handed him complex messes that couldn't be deciphered without in-

depth training. *Who is this woman and what is she doing to me?*

He put the paper down and finished the wine. "Roadmover is obviously trying to pull a fast one."

Her grin widened. "Definitely. I say we play them back, and I've got an idea."

Dan leaned back in his chair and gazed at Kay. "I like it already." If anyone could play George Lawson, Kay could. He motioned for her to go on.

"We give them a counterproposal that's just as complicated as theirs, but with different equations."

"You're trying to out-math these guys?"

"Let's just say I'm going to throw a few extra figures at them, including my own." She spread her arms out and rocked from side to side, to show off the figure she had in mind. "I worked on it this morning and built an even more complicated formula. It keeps the price reasonable during the first few months and also at one-year intervals—places where they might spot-check. But the price is higher everywhere else. If I can distract them while they're checking it out, we may be able to get it past them. Here's what my formula works out to be." She handed him another piece of paper.

Dan scanned it and started to laugh. *Kay, you devil.* He continued to study the paper and when he got to the bottom, he chuckled. "I like your profit estimate for this deal. If you can sell this contract to them, you'll make ninety-five thousand dollars for yourself. Nice!" He nodded at her with a look of pride.

Dan set the paper aside. "And how do you propose to distract the people from Roadmover?"

"Doris figured that one out." Kay turned to look at Doris and so did Dan.

Doris smiled. “The ‘Fitness Center’ game.”

Dan slapped the table and let his mouth widen. “Wonderful! I love the Fitness Center game—I can’t tell you how many times I’ve wanted to use it.” He was a little boy again, anxiously awaiting his best Christmas ever. He cherished each opportunity to play the game, it made his other activities at work pale by comparison. “This is great. Get contracts to draft your counterproposal.”

“There’s nothing to draft: I just changed the price formula, not the legal parts. This contract is ready to go.”

I’m going to fire everybody else and let Kay do all the work from now on. “So is it time to get George Lawson over here for a negotiation?”

“Yes, but make it late in the day. I want him and his people to be tired so they don’t feel like working through too many equations.” Kay beamed and leaned back in her chair, looking at Dan and Doris. “And because I’m having way too much fun with this deal, I’ve added a few touches that aren’t in your version of the Fitness Center game. Watch closely and see if you can spot them.” *She not only knows our playbook, she’s adding to it.*

“And one more thing, Dan. I’m your contract specialist in this game and hopefully I won’t degenerate into a hooker. You can call me Ms. Gershon.”

I think I love you, Ms. Gershon.



Monday, June 4

Dan had been sitting in his office for the past half hour, waiting for the Roadmover people to show up. He was particularly excited about today's deal and couldn't stop thinking about what Kay was going to do.

Doris finally let George Lawson and his contract specialist into the office, and Dan wondered if they were auditioning for a performance of Don Quixote. George Lawson, the CEO of Roadmover, was thin and surprisingly tall, with a bushy head of white hair. All he needed was a helmet and a skinny horse. His contract specialist, who he introduced as Jack Spelling, was short and rotund, a perfect Sancho Panza.

Dan stood up and shook their hands, exuding charm. *This is going to be fun.* "Gentlemen, welcome. I thought my contract specialist would be here by now, but she seems to be running late."

Lawson and Spelling gave each other a quick look. "Your contract specialist is a woman? We have some pretty complicated math in this deal."

Incredible. Dan knew that a tardy contract specialist would make them feel superior, but it was even more pathetic that they discounted her for being female. Then again, it was what he expected. He couldn't help but smile as he considered how thoroughly Kay was going to trounce these guys.

"Ms. Gershon is very professional and usually on time. While we're waiting, would you like a drink?" He nodded toward Doris to take their drink orders.

After delivering the drinks, Doris started to leave the office. Before she could get far, Dan pounded his desk and

barked at her. "Doris! Find Ms. Gershon and tell her that she's supposed to be here. Now!"

Doris spoke crisply. "Oh yes, sir, Mr. Avery. I'll phone her this instant." Doris didn't get to play in these games much, and seemed to be enjoying her little role immensely. She bustled out of the office.

Dan watched the drinks go down and waited for the right moment before tapping the call button on his intercom. Then he leaned back and got ready to enjoy the show with his front-row seat. *Lucky me.*

The door flew open and Kay swept into the office, beautiful and lithe in skin-tight spandex workout clothes. Her fuchsia shorts were incredibly short and her black sports bra was so low-cut that he longed to watch her do physical activity in it. She dropped a pink gym bag on the floor and stood there, glimmering in sweat. *Hottest outfit yet.* Even Dan was distracted.

Dan and George Lawson stood up. Spelling sat there staring, then looked around and quickly got to his feet. *Poor boy, he belongs to Kay now.*

Kay was panting. "I'm so sorry. I was working out and completely forgot about this meeting." She put two fingers to her neck and looked down at her watch.

The Roadmover men stood in silence and watched Kay take her heart rate, an occasional drip of sweat falling from her head. The room was so quiet that you could hear her breathe. Dan watched them carefully, looking for signs of irritation about this delay. But they seemed perfectly happy to stand there and leer. He suppressed a snicker.

Lawson grumbled and Dan knew it was time to move on. He snapped out his words, loudly. "Ms. Gershon, time is money. I need you to be prompt from now on!"

She replied contritely. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Avery. It won't happen again." Even though everyone was overacting and being downright playful with their lines, the Roadmover guys were too numb to notice.

Dan calmed down and went on. "Let me introduce you to George Lawson from Roadmover and his contract specialist, Jack Spelling. Gentlemen, this is my contract specialist, Kay Gershon."

Kay reached out to shake hands, then stopped and looked down at her hand, which was wet. She pulled back. "Excuse me, I'm all sweaty." She turned away and bent over neatly at the waist, rummaging through the opened gym bag and flashing a perfectly formed backside in exactly the right direction. Spelling couldn't stop staring at her.

After a few seconds, she pulled out a towel and stood up to vigorously dry her hands and arms, looking carefully to make sure she didn't miss a spot. Finally, she tossed the towel onto a chair and turned back to them with a meek smile, her dry hand extended. Spelling closed his mouth and managed to shake her hand.

They all sat down in Dan's visitor chairs, Spelling in the middle, between Kay and George Lawson. Kay exhaled loudly and flopped down into her chair, her arms and legs spread out in exhaustion, breathing more slowly but no less quietly. She stared straight up at the ceiling with a glazed look, and let Spelling consume her with his eyes. Dan stared too, but he admired much more than Kay's fine, barely covered body. *This woman is pure magic.*

Lawson took charge. "You're the contract specialist? Did you review our contract? It's a bit complicated, you know." His voice was steeped in condescension.

Kay lifted her head and turned to look at Lawson. “A bit complicated?” She snorted. “It took me three days to get through it—I’m still not sure I understand it all.”

What a joke. She figured out that document in less than an hour. Dan enjoyed watching Kay set them up, feeding them a little bit of stupid so she could whack them in the face with a whole lot of smart.

Lawson and Spelling gave each other conspiratorial looks. “Perhaps you need someone else to review this contract, Dan.”

“Nonsense, George. I trust Ms. Gershon. She’s an expert.” Dan said it with a childish devotion that, he hoped, would convince Lawson and Spelling that he was just as taken with her as they were.

Lawson must have heard the message clearly because he replied with patronizing sarcasm. “Yes, I can tell she’s an expert. Fine, Ms. Gershon, what do you think of our little contract? Should Dan sign it?”

Kay stood up and looked straight at Lawson, all business. “No, Mr. Lawson, I don’t believe that Mr. Avery should sign your contract. It has a complex price-decrease in it that will force us to sell at a loss before a year is out.” She sat back down.

Wake up time, boys. Spelling’s face fell and he started to blink quickly, the first cracks of doubt in his worldview. He eyed Kay nervously for a second.

Lawson gave Spelling a light punch in the arm, then turned to Dan. “My apologies. Do you have a counter proposal?”

“Yes, I believe Ms. Gershon has prepared one for you.”

Spelling turned to look at Kay, his face still confused, his eyes still busy.

Poor fool. Dan sat back to enjoy the next act.

Kay opened her gym bag and took her time sifting through it. Then she pulled out a document and started to hand it to Spelling.

“Oops, wait a minute!” Kay examined the document, still holding it in front of Spelling’s face. There was something lodged between two of the pages.

She reached carefully into the document and pulled out a lacy black thong.

Oh, cruel woman! Dan dug his nails into his palm and grit his teeth to keep from laughing.

Spelling gasped and froze in his seat, apparently flooded in a hormonal bath. Like every man in the room, he was imagining Kay in that thong—the tiny piece of material would barely cover her.

Kay was obviously enjoying toying with Spelling, because she held the thong in front of him, turned it slowly, and inspected it as if she had never seen it before.

Spelling took a deep breath.

Finally, Kay muttered, “Oh yeah, that one.” She pulled the gym bag closer and tossed the thong into it.

Spelling looked down at the gym bag and his jaw dropped even more. He kept staring at it for a long time, and didn’t even look up at Kay much.

This bag must be something. Dan couldn’t see it from his side of the desk, so he got up to take his empty glass back to the bar. On the way over, he casually turned to look at the bag and nearly fell down when he saw it.

Kay had stuffed her gym bag with an outrageous collection of feminine un-dainties. There were straps, stockings, bras, colorful skimpy underwear, and plenty of lace. A fishnet stocking was draped out of the bag and onto the carpet. None of this was in the Fitness Center game, as he and Doris had planned it.

Dan got back to his seat as Kay handed the contract to Spelling, her face light and innocent. She sat back and turned to address both Spelling and his boss. "This contract is identical to yours, except I rewrote the price formula in the appendix. Everything else in the contract is the same."

Spelling started to flip through the pages of the new contract, frequently stopping to sniff the air. He lifted the pages closer to his nose and drew in a long breath.

Dan noticed the scent too, faint but distinct. A breath of perfume hung in the air, and Dan pitied Spelling, tormented by the irresistible Kay. She had set him up perfectly, handing him a document whose very pages would keep him off balance. He glazed over and turned the pages mechanically, no longer reading.

Spelling got to the end of the contract and blew out his breath. "Okay, the contract is unchanged, as she said." Then he turned to the new appendix, and his eyes bugged out. "Wait! What the hell is this?" Spelling showed the appendix to Kay. "Did you write this?"

She nodded proudly. "Yes I did. I thought you'd appreciate it since you wrote that other version. It's just some fun math." She giggled and smiled at Spelling. "Don't worry, it's not really very different than your version."

Sure, play innocent. He'd believe her, too.

Spelling narrowed his eyes and tilted his head, clearly suspicious that Kay could have written the appendix. He showed the new formula to Lawson. "Look at this, sir."

Lawson barely glanced at the contract and started to laugh. "It looks like the same kind of mathematical bullshit that you boys crank out. Can't understand a word of it. That's why I brought you along. Check it!"

Spelling took the contract back and started to read the new formula, inhaling deeply and letting his head swoon.

He scanned the equations, but his eyes were so glazed over that he didn't seem to be focusing, let alone reading. Dan watched him steal a full-body glance at Kay, then take another long look at the gym bag, before finally forcing himself to read the contract. He made some notes on a separate pad of paper.

Spelling looked up again, stared at Kay's shorts and actually bared his teeth a little.

Do not laugh. Dan clamped his mouth tight in an effort to look serious. Spelling made a subdued shudder and turned back to the contract, managing to actually concentrate on it for a few seconds. He turned to look at the gym bag, blinking nervously as he eyed it. *Oh, this poor man.* He fidgeted and pulled out his phone, tapping numbers and writing them down on the pad. Kay's face got his next stolen stare, but he quickly looked away. Back to the contract, he managed to scribble some more and seemed able to ignore Kay for a full five seconds. But it didn't last, and his eyes wandered to Kay's breasts for a while before returning to the contract, erasing one number and writing some more. Finally, he put down his pencil and let his gaze run down her legs.

"Spelling!"

He snapped to attention. "Yes, Mr. Lawson."

"What do you think?"

"It's . . . it's really hard to say for sure. I ran the first month through. It's slow going, but the first month comes out positive for us. This may be a good contract, like she says."

"Well, check another month. And be quick about it."

Spelling went back to work. Kay sat up and leaned close to him, watching him write down numbers and run through the formula. His eyes darted all over the place, and he

tapped unsteadily into his phone's calculator. At one point, when he was writing a number down on his pad, Kay reached over and took his hand, holding it firmly and stopping him from writing. He looked up at her with a huge smile on his face, pathetically expecting a come-hither gesture. Unfortunately for Spelling, Kay wasn't looking back at him—she was staring down at the page.

When Spelling noticed this, his smile faded and he also looked down. Kay moved his hand, pointing the pencil at an earlier number. "You forgot to discount that one." Then she took her hand away.

Oh, nice. Dan gripped the armrests of his chair to keep from falling on the floor laughing. Now Spelling knew for sure that she had written those equations.

Spelling's face fell. "You . . . You really did write this formula!" He dithered like a fish flopping on the deck of a boat. "I can't believe it." He quickly fixed the number on his pad.

"I'm a contract specialist. Of course I wrote it." Kay gave his leg a friendly pat, then she collapsed into the chair again, her arms and legs spread out. "Sorry, go on by yourself." She closed her eyes and let him ogle.

Spelling squirmed in his chair, doing his best to adjust his pants without touching them. The poor man was obviously trying to get an erection under control. After scribbling and working calculations for a long time, he announced the answer. "Okay, the next month is reasonable, too."

"Fine. Now give me three years out."

Spelling groaned and went back to work.

So did Kay. She grabbed the towel from her chair, threw it over her head, and started to dry her hair, vigorously massaging her head through the towel, her body shaking.

As she worked the towel, Spelling sat, transfixed. After a few seconds, he tore himself away and ran the numbers for month thirty-six, glancing over at Kay's body even more than before, now that her face was covered.

Kay finished drying her hair and rolled-up the towel. Then she leaned over and put it in her gym bag, rummaging around and rearranging the contents again. She pulled out a handful of lingerie and suddenly, from the midst of it all, a tube of K-Y jelly squirmed out of her hands and onto the floor. Dan watched three sets of eyes as they followed the tube to its resting place in front of Spelling.

"Sorry." Kay pointed at the tube with her chin. "Can you kick it back to me?" With slow, unsteady motions, he guided the tube back until the three sets of eyes were now staring at the floor in front of Kay. "Thanks!" She tossed it into the bag and flopped back in her chair.

The poor tortured man finally dug himself out from under Kay's mountain of innuendo, and finished his computation. "Year three is fine, too."

The room was quiet. *How long can this go on?* Dan knew that Lawson didn't want individual month results—he wanted an analysis of the contract: was it good or bad? Lawson grumbled. "What do you think of this new appendix, Spelling?"

They had reached the critical moment. Would Kay's ruse hold up or would they be suspicious? If they decided to take the contract back with them and analyze it further, they would know it was bad. But if they chose to move forward and give her a pass, they might just sign the contract without any further consideration. Kay kept rearranging her gym bag, refusing to even make eye contact with Spelling while he made his decision.

Spelling gave Kay a puppy dog look and Dan could tell what he was thinking: a beautiful, innocent woman like this could never play a deceptive trick on them. She had said so herself: her equations were just an homage to his. There was nothing to worry about. After a prolonged silence, Spelling looked up. "The appendix is a mess, Mr. Lawson, but I don't see anything financially wrong with it."



Rummaging through the gym bag with her head turned away from Spelling, Kay reveled at the news. He couldn't find anything wrong with her formula, even after she had helped him work through it and corrected his mistake. *Poor man.* Kay had won another deal.

The ripple started in her belly and spread out to every corner of her body. She welcomed the familiar thrill of conquest, and let loose a silent howl over her fallen prey. Another dishonest businessman lay bleeding at her feet and the taste of victory was sweet. If that wasn't enough, she had just scored a huge bonus, and her barely covered body, shimmering in fake sweat, longed for Dan's touch.

Hello, my friend. I think I'll call you, "deal arousal." Kay's heart was pounding and her whole body tingled as she sat up straight, gripping the arms of the chair. After a few calming breaths, she leaned back in her chair and stared up at the ceiling, one last opportunity to keep their minds off-topic.

Lawson acquiesced. "All right, Dan. I guess we deserved this for sending you such a complex contract. I'm ready to sign."

Keep staring away. They were so very close to signing the contract, and Kay wasn't going to move a muscle until it was really over. It was a sublime moment, pretending to lay

there calmly while a rousing victory party was going on inside her head.

Kay stole a look at Lawson and saw him staring at her, pen frozen in his hand. She closed her eyes and waited for the sounds of papers and pens. At first all she heard was silence, and that was fine with her. It didn't matter how long they took to sign the contract, she had nothing else to do today, except perhaps to masturbate and try to take the edge off her raging deal arousal.

Eventually, Kay heard the familiar sounds of contracts being signed, and she knew that the deal was done. Time to sit up now and rejoin them.

She looked at Dan and they smiled briefly at one another. Even in that little glance she saw flames in his eyes, sparks shooting wildly, high-voltage and dangerous. She let out her breath slowly, trying to keep it even and calm. But deep inside, the animal growled and paced impatiently.

“Will that be all, Mr. Avery?” *Or should I stay behind and give you a workout?*

“Yes, thank you Ms. Gershon. You may go.”

Kay shook hands with Lawson and Spelling. She told them both—and she really meant it when she said it—that it had been a pleasure doing business with them.



That night, Dan took Kay to dinner at his favorite restaurant. When drinks arrived, he made a toast. “To you, Kay! The killer colleague who single-handedly made a pile of money for the company today.” They drank. “And a nice little bonus for yourself.” He gave her a nod, a smile, and an envelope.

Kay blushed. *Wow! I just made nearly a year's salary.*

"I can't get over how amazing you are. I never expected you to pick this up so quickly and easily. It's like you were born to play these men."

"I really enjoyed today's deal, Dan—it demanded more than just showing off my body. I loved the challenge of outdoing them at math. And I also enjoyed being part of the negotiation."

"Being part? You ruled it!" Dan stared at Kay for a bit too long, his charming look of admiration filling her with warmth. She cocked her head, giving him a sideways look, and he went on quietly. "You know, I wanted you to be as smart as me, but I got more—you're actually smarter than me."

Kay's face fell. *Oh no. Male pride again, ruining the fun.* Dan had such promise—there were so many things she liked about him. Why couldn't he handle it if she knew more math than him? *Damn, damn, damn.* She frowned and looked down, trying to keep a tear from building up in her eye. "I hope that's not a problem."

"Problem? Hell no. It's a bonus!"

A bonus? I've never heard that before. Could it be that he was actually proud of what she had done and didn't need to be the smarter one? She looked up at him with an open mouth as a tear rolled down her face—a tear of happiness.

Dan stopped when the tear fell and looked at her closely. "Are you all right?"

Kay inhaled sharply and looked up at Dan. *Why is he so supportive?* "Let me tell you, Dan, most men don't like it when I'm smarter than them. I meet lots of guys at parties, just like your buddy Orton, who lose interest in me as soon as they find out I'm not a model or a secretary. I have to tell lies about myself just to get insecure guys to stick around. It sucks. So I guess that's another reason why we don't let

ourselves become lovers—it would threaten you. We really do have to stay business partners.”

Dan scowled. “That’s nonsense. I could easily handle a lover who is smarter than me. It’s not like I’m stupid—I’m the CEO here. I’ve got quite a lot going for me and I appreciate women who have a lot going for them. Trust me, I am not threatened by your intelligence. I’m impressed, delighted even.”

Kay looked at him with her mouth half open. “I haven’t had many lovers who appreciated my intelligence. There were a few, but they were losers in other ways. Most men need to be superior to me so they can feel good about themselves.”

Dan huffed. “That’s because they’re grateful. You know the old saying about the two types of lovers in the world: the *good* and the *grateful*. A good lover is someone who impresses you and earns your respect. A grateful lover is overly impressed *by* you and is secretly worried that they’re not worthy. I don’t want a grateful lover—I want a good one, someone I can respect.”

I didn’t see that coming. She found him easier to ignore when she thought he was a sexist playboy, threatened by her intelligence. But instead, he just kept growing in appeal. Kay looked up at his dark hair and handsome face, his intense eyes staring straight at her. It confused her and pulled her heart from side to side.

Dan wasn’t finished. “This is one of the main reasons why I haven’t settled down. I have no respect for most of the women I meet who throw themselves at me. They want my money or my body or my fame, but they don’t offer me much in return. You, on the other hand, have more going on than any other woman I’ve ever met. You are competent, intelligent, powerful, and all-around awesome. It doesn’t

threaten me at all—I could be very happy with a lover like you.” He reached up and wiped the tear from her eye. It sizzled and evaporated from the heat of his hand. “The reason I keep you at bay is that I worry about what will happen to us when we *stop* being lovers. And that always happens to me.” He tightened his mouth. “Always.” He bit his lip and looked away.

Kay sat there, unable to move. Dan was destroying all of her stereotypes about men—could he be real? *There has got to be a catch here.* A twinge of the afternoon’s “deal arousal” flared up and told her to throw him down on the floor of the restaurant and seduce him this minute. Dan would certainly enjoy it, she knew that, but he would be angry afterward. And she definitely couldn’t deny that things were fine the way they were.

Kay laughed. “If you think you’re bad at relationships, you should see my miserable track record.”

Dan gave her a sympathetic look and changed the subject. “Enough about us. I don’t want to make you sad. Let’s make another toast to today’s deal.”

“I’m not sad, I’m actually overcome with happiness. It’s nice to know that there are men like you in the world, I had no idea.” Kay took a deep breath, straightened up, and raised her glass. “So yes, let’s toast. Here’s to you, Dan. The most confident man I’ve ever met. Thank you.” They clinked glasses and Kay shot the whiskey, letting the warmth light up her entire body.

Kay thought about the day’s deal and she gave Dan a sideways look. “Did you notice the added touches that I worked into the game today?”

“Loved the thong stuck in the contract. I nearly burst out laughing when you dangled it in front of that poor boy.”

“Did you notice that I perfumed the contract papers? Spelling certainly did.”

Dan nodded with a suppressed smile. “Right. I caught a whiff at one point.”

“Smell can be a big factor, which is why I didn't actually work out before coming in to your office. Doris and I went to the bathroom with a spray bottle filled with water—it wouldn't be good if I smelled like a locker room.”

“I assumed as much. I also noticed the lingerie store in your gym bag.”

Kay's eyes twinkled. “The gym bag was crucial. It's the big piece that you and Doris overlooked when you plotted this game. When you bring an attaché case into a meeting, it's supposed to contain standard business stuff. But when you bring a gym bag with you, it's supposed to contain personal effects like underwear and perfume. It gave me the freedom to hint at all sorts of feminine contents, and I stuffed it with panties, stockings, bras—even a few kinky items from an erotic lingerie store. Then I left the bag wide open so that Spelling could see it all.”

Dan laughed heartily and slapped the table, shaking his head from side to side. “It's genius!” He paused a moment before looking up at Kay. “Listen, I've been thinking about this and my mind is made up. From now on, I want you to be my advisor at work. Not just for this game, but for the whole job of running the company. I'm going to have all my papers routed to you when I'm done with them so you can see everything that I deal with. I'll also grant you access to the executive workspace on the computer systems so you'll have as much information as I do. I really value your insight, and I want you to help me run Yorick.”

Kay's eyes widened and started to tear up again. “Oh Dan, I'm honored! I'd love to help you run this company.”

Best. Job. Ever. Just weeks out of school and she was already advisor to the CEO.

“And another thing. I want you to come with me to *all* negotiations, not just the ones you’re trying to game. It’s time you got to work with some honest businessmen, too.”

Kay smirked. “You mean I can come to a meeting and stay dressed?”

“Yes, I would like that very much.” He grinned. “Congratulations, and welcome to my executive team.”

“This is great! Thanks, Dan.”

“And, to celebrate your promotion, I have a gift for you.”

Is it a kiss? She wouldn’t mind such a gift right about now.

Dan leaned back and grabbed a small box that was sitting nearby. “I know this looks like a jewelry box, but it’s not. It’s better.”

Kay took the box and opened it. Inside were three sets of business cards, complete with the Yorick logo. All of them read “Kay Gershon,” but each had a different job title. In the first set, her title was “Contract Advisor.” In the second set, she was “Lead Negotiator.” The final set was done in raised gold letters and she took one of the cards out to admire it more closely: “Kay Gershon, Vice-President.”

“You’re right. This is better than jewelry.”

“You can use whichever card you want, depending on the circumstances. And by the way, the card that says Vice-President is real. I’m promoting you tomorrow.”

Kay shrieked and threw her arms around Dan in a big hug. “How can I ever thank you for all this?”

“Just keep on doing what you’ve been doing. I don’t need anything more.”

But maybe he did. Maybe they both needed something more. *I know I do.*

Kay looked at the three cards for a bit and twisted her mouth. “You didn’t get me one that says ‘Snake Dancer.’ That still seems to be my best negotiating skill, I’m sorry to say. It makes me wonder whether they would have signed the contract today if it weren’t for that.”

“Probably not, but that’s why you’re here. When you do your snake dance, the playing field is no longer level.” Dan beamed. “And you dance so incredibly well that even I lose my balance. It’s the best show I’ve ever seen!”

“What if someone takes advantage of you, someday, Dan?” *Like me.* “How will you feel then?”

“Well, I have to tell you, these guys don’t feel so bad after you’ve worked them over. Look at Spelling. He had a great day.”

“Yes, but he’ll pay for it tomorrow when they realize what they signed. I feel a little bad for him—he doesn’t deserve the trouble I brought down on him.”

“You’re right, Lawson deserves it, not Spelling. Still, you did to them what they’ve been doing to us for years.”

“I know that, Dan, but as much as this game is empowering, I still have a sense that it’s wrong, both in the way I pander and in the way they react. It’s confusing me.”

“You can stop anytime you want, Kay. I don’t want to force you to do this. But on a positive note, did you hear that Walter Rosseau resigned as CEO?”

Kay’s face brightened. “Wow, that’s great news.” She stared at Dan. “See, there’s another man who has fallen because of my tricks, although in his case, I must admit I have no sympathy. But one thing is certain about Rosseau: he definitely felt bad afterward. You only saw it on video but I was there. Let me tell you, he was *not* having a great day.” She blurted out a laugh and shook her head slowly.

“Well, if I do get taken by a beautiful woman, I hope it's you.” Dan had a look on his face that Kay had seen before. A look that was often followed by a kiss or a proclamation of love. Was he going to say something romantic or wrap his arms around her? She wanted it with all her heart. *Throw your stupid rules out the window and take me, damn it.*

Kay exhaled—it wouldn't be right. It would only make a mess of the situation. They had to keep their distance now for even more reasons. She was vice-president and advisor to the CEO, so a breakup would ruin much more than just the game. And she was certainly enjoying many aspects of the game, much more than she ever thought she would. Besides her power over men, there were thrills, bonuses, promotions, and an incredibly great partner who actually treated her honestly. *I can keep this handsome man at arm's length, can't I?* She could, but if he made a move right now, she would submit willingly.

Of course, Dan didn't make a move. He just sat there silently, offering that charming smile. And Kay returned the smile, only partly satisfied with the warm glow of his admiration.

End of Free Preview



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