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## Chapter 1

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“Is this... is this real, Miss Treadwell?”

She seemed to be caught unaware for a moment, then answered unhesitatingly, "I was surprised to see it, too, sir, but it does seem to be legitimate."

"The sheer audacity."

"I know. I didn't intend for you to see that application, sir, for obvious reasons. I meant to remove it prior to giving you the potential candidates I had whittled down for you. Here is the schedule I've worked out for the rest of the applicants."

He sat back in his chair, staring at the beautifully rounded, slightly flowery cursive answers on the application and trying to reconcile it with the anger and humiliation it brought to the front of his mind from the safe place he'd thought he'd confined them to at the back.

Cyrus Ulysses Patton III leaned back in his chair, holding the schedule in his hand and ostensibly perusing it, but his gaze kept wandering back to the surprising application that was still sitting on his desk.

As if she'd noticed that he was doing that, Miss Treadwell

snatched the paper up, crumpling it viciously and throwing it into the wastepaper basket.

"Since the need is so acute, I've scheduled the first interview for tomorrow morning. Hopefully, we'll have a suitable candidate within a day or two, sir."

He nodded somewhat absently, turning away from Treadwell, who was already exiting the room and didn't notice. For a long while—much longer than he wanted to admit to—Cyrus, who was known to be a man of action, stared out his office window, seeing nothing of the landscape in front of him.

Two days later, it was five o'clock. His highly efficient secretary was gone, having made it quite clear that she found it surprising that he wasn't requiring her to stay and work, too, as had been his habit over the years that she'd been with him.

Instead, he'd told her that he wasn't going to be long, and that she should go. Her small frown at that didn't go unnoticed, and he knew that she was wondering by what kind of mess she was going to be confronted when she came in tomorrow morning.

But there wouldn't be any. Regardless, that was what he paid her for—and an extremely generous amount it was, too. It was more than enough to pay for the expensive gambling habit she had that she didn't think he knew about.

Still, she was an excellent secretary—always efficient, organized, and discreet. As long as whatever she did on her off time didn't interfere with what she did for him while she was working for him, he was fine with it.

While he was waiting, Cy was surprised to find himself becoming a bit nervous, which was a state in which he was relatively unused to finding himself. The need to move urged him to go to the small bar tucked neatly in the corner of his office to pour himself a healthy amount of good rye whiskey.

Once he'd done that, the time seemed to pass relatively quickly as he read and re-re-re-read her application. He still

couldn't believe it was there. She was overqualified for the job, frankly, but—as much as he hated and had tried to resist the idea—he had to see her. He knew it was a purely masochistic pursuit, but he couldn't seem to help himself, and that only spurred him to do what he was doing. He didn't like feeling out of control, and he certainly didn't like that there was a rebellious part of himself that desperately wanted to see her again.

So he was deliberately challenging himself with her—making certain that he could control himself around her and that she was well out of his bloodstream, as she should be. At least, that was what he was telling himself he was doing, anyway, to make it palatable to his intellect, which the rest of him was blatantly bypassing.

Of course, he was never going to hire her, but she didn't need to know that.

He was surprised that she'd agreed to the interview when he'd called her—while Miss Treadwell was out, of course. He supposed he shouldn't have been. He'd heard through the grapevine, not that he tried to hear such things, that she was practically destitute. She was living in that ramshackle old "cabin" her grandfather had built and that had been falling down around her family's ears when she was in high school, and he supposed, if he had been in her place, he would have applied for everything and anything he thought he could get, too.

The condition of the cabin hadn't mattered then, since her family fortunes had risen considerably and they no longer lived there by the time she entered school.

At five-twenty—when their appointment was for five-thirty—he heard the door to Miss Treadwell's office open. She always was the early bird type. Cy was able to watch her surreptitiously through the crack he'd left in the door, noting that even though it was nearly November and already downright cold, she wasn't wearing a coat. She spent the first few minutes in the outer office warming her hands on the radiator, which made him frown

involuntarily, since he could see from where he sat that she was shivering. She ran those warmed hands up and down her arms, her entire body hunched over the heat source, until he watched her force herself to take a step back and stand with her back straight.

Seeing her immediately sent him right back to before it happened, when she was his. All of those powerful feelings of desire and love and the very male need to see to her, in very different ways, came roaring back as if they'd never forcibly left him.

With that, he rose, coming to the door and opening it. "Miss Henderson, please come into my office."

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As soon as she heard his voice, which was deep and dark as it had always been but neither unkind nor loud, she started nervously and immediately knew that she had made a monumental mistake in coming here. She'd hoped that after all of this time, bygones could be bygones between them, and if he wouldn't give her the job for which he had the opening—which she would understand—perhaps he would be willing to point her toward another one with a different family.

Or not. Regardless, she was at the end of her rope, and in those first few seconds, she didn't feel as if she had anything left to lose, even if all he did was berate and scream at her. No, he wouldn't scream. Cy didn't get angry—ever.

Instead, he got even. That very stark thought started her shivering again.

The bald truth of the matter was that Norah Henderson had dramatically underestimated the surprising strength of her own weakness where he was concerned, and any bravado she'd had up to that point evaporated as if it had never been. The eyes that had met his at first, fell to the floor, and she reached for

the clutch she'd put on the chair in the waiting room in her eagerness to get to the radiator, before she gave completely into the cowardice that was overwhelming her. "I-I'm sorry. I've made a mistake." With that, she turned to take the few steps to the door.

"Stop."

Again, deep and dark—and firm, this time—but still neither angry nor loud.

Without her conscious consent, her feet stopped moving. He'd always had that kind of control over her. Other men considered her much too stubborn and independent, even leaning toward dominant at times, but she'd never been that way with Cyrus. Well, rarely, anyway. He'd always appreciated her strength of will, but then, he'd always been able to tame it pretty effortlessly—by turning her over his knee, often without any warning, and wherever it was that she said or did something to which he objected.

She'd objected to his use of corporal punishment, but he had pointed out to her—and she was even more highly annoyed to realize that he was right—that he had told her not to do whatever it was that had caused her to end up in that unenviable position, but she had ignored him.

"A spanking is something that's going to be hard for you to ignore, likely for several days afterward," he'd pronounced.

But even worse than him being right about her not obeying his verbal warnings, was the fact that the spankings worked to correct her behavior. She stubbornly tried not to let that happen, but her butt always seemed to take control of her words or actions, remembering what happened when he wasn't happy with her and forcing her to conform to his behavioral requirements, none of which were particularly odious, just embarrassing and annoying.

And it didn't help in the least that he always cuddled her in his strong arms afterward, whispering soothing nothings against

her temple as he loved on her unabashedly, which calmed her even against her will.

It seemed things were very much the same as they had always been between them, uncomfortably so.

"You actually applied for this job?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"And I am granting you a legitimate interview. That's all this is." He took a step into the small office, gesturing back toward his own.

Norah worried her lip, still not looking at him.

She was still shaking, but more finely, in a manner that denoted nervousness rather than coldness, although he didn't like seeing her shake from either cause. It tugged fiercely at his heart-strings, although he did his best to dismiss those feelings.

He was still working on trying to get her to come sit down.

Finally, Norah convinced herself that he was right—that was all this was—and forced herself to remember that this was pretty much her last resort. So she slowly began to walk in the direction he had indicated, although she still hated hearing him close the door behind himself.

Cy discreetly turned up the heat before moving behind the desk.

"Please, sit," he said as he took his own chair.

She perched on the end of hers, as if she was a schoolgirl before the principal, wondering if she was going to end up paddled, and knowing that if she did, she would be in twice as much trouble when she got home.

"I think we can dispense with the 'getting to know you' portion of the interview. You've accumulated a good amount of experience, it says here."

"I have, and each one of the people I've worked for previously would be more than willing to provide you with a glowing review." She dug into her purse for a moment, then produced two envelopes, from which he extracted two folded

sheets of paper. "The last place I worked was Little Hands Daycare, which is no more because Mrs. Allsop had a baby of her own, and her husband didn't want her working any longer."

Cy nodded. "That's understandable." He read her references, which were, indeed, glowing. "It says on your application that you only went to college for two years—you stopped in nineteen-forty-eight? Why was that?"

Her face became a dull red. "I-I think you can probably deduce why that might have happened—"

"Oh. Yes, of course. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking." Of course, there had been no money for such things as college once her father went on trial for his crimes. Much more unsettled than he thought he was going to be at hearing that, Cy said, "Well, as I remember, you loved children."

"I do. I spent most of junior high and high school babysitting for Annabelle North if you'll recall, every day after school."

He did remember. Annabelle was one of his cousins, and he knew that her children had adored Norah, as had everyone else's children for whom she sat. "Didn't you have some kind of business of your own going doing that?"

"Yes, Pam Newell and I were a kind of a team. If one of us couldn't sit on any given night, we'd suggest the parents call the other of us. It worked out really well."

"You had quite the entrepreneurial spirit, even then." He almost smiled, and she almost smiled back.

Then Cy said, bringing his dark eyes to her pale blue ones, "Just like your father."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wished he could recall them. She seemed to crumple in on herself, no longer sitting straight-backed and proud, but shrinking visibly. He'd already been struck by her delicacy. She'd always been small and thin, but she'd also always acted like Mighty Mouse. In fact, he'd often teased her by calling her that when she'd insisted

on doing something—or learning something—that he could easily have done for her himself.

When he'd first seen her moments ago, he'd been struck by just how ethereal she looked now, as if a good gust of wind would blow her away, and it left him feeling very uncomfortable. Even her hair was devoid of the usual luster it had had. Parts of him—to which he would never give rein—wanted to vent loudly at her, but that was a surprisingly small percentage of himself. The rest of him desperately wanted to pull her into his arms, where she'd always fit just perfectly, to hold her and reassure her that everything was going to be all right and that she had nothing whatsoever to worry about.

Lost in his conflicting thoughts, Cy didn't notice that she had risen at his words and was already at the door. "Thank you for your time, Mr.—"

For the second time that late afternoon, he said, "Stop."

Once she obeyed him, he continued, "Come back and sit down, Norah."

She might have been more delicate than he'd ever seen her, but when she turned back to him, she had an eyebrow raised in a gesture that he knew meant he had ruffled her feathers.

"Miss Henderson," he corrected himself, adding, "please," in a tone that let her know he found her insistence on such formalities to be amusing.

With obvious reluctance, she did as he asked.

"I want to reiterate that this is a legitimate interview for a legitimate position."

"That I really can't believe you've granted me, considering what happened in our past. You can't really be unaware of how surprised I am to find myself here."

He shared her surprise but didn't mention it. "Yes, well, what's past is past. You were not responsible for your father's crimes."

"That's not what you thought at the time," she stated baldly.



Cy wanted to look into her eyes as he said it, but they were firmly affixed to the desktop in front of her. "No, it wasn't, but that was my own mistake, for which I apologize."

It was the first time she'd met his eyes. He could see the utter amazement there, and it was downright insulting.

"Oh, come now. Did you really know me to be that rigid and unyielding?"

"Yes."

He frowned fiercely at that, and she began that fine shivering again as she spoke to a spot just to the left of his head.

"You yelled at me. You'd never yelled at me in all the time we'd known each other. You ripped your ring off my finger before I had a chance to offer it to you, which I had intended on doing, by the way. You yelled at my mother—you reduced her to tears." *And me, too*, she thought but didn't say that. She'd managed to wait until he'd left, dutifully pouring some laudanum into her hysterical mother and putting her to bed before just barely making it to her own and having a breakdown where no one would know about it.

Norah could see that muscle jumping in his jaw, although she didn't doubt the sincerity of what he said. "For which I apologize to you, too. I'd be glad to apologize to your mother, too."

"She died, weeks after Daddy went to prison. She just couldn't handle the loss of everything she held dear." That was much less her father than her money, house, things, friends, and standing in the community, but he didn't need to know that.

Cy sighed. "Please accept my sincere condolences. But keep in mind that I had just discovered that your father had been embezzling funds from the firm in which we were partners—I'd thought—for years. I didn't know if the business would survive, or if I was looking at the death of a company I'd worked my fingers to the bone for, for years, not to mention realizing that I couldn't trust the man I had looked up to as a father figure."

As much as he tried to control his emotions, there was no denying the anger in his tone.

Her voice was ghost soft. "I'm very sorry for what my father did to you." She clutched her purse to her body as if it were a lifesaver and she was on a sinking ship. "I knew I shouldn't have come here—"

When she made as if to get up, she heard a softly warning, "Norah," in a much too familiar, intimate tone than he should have been using with her.

As she slowly sat back in her chair, he made an uncharacteristic snap decision—several of them, actually.

"My daughter is four years old, very smart and precocious, and this is a live-in position." That would kill several problems with one job offer. He wouldn't have to worry about her living in a barely functional house that was likely at any moment to fall down around her ears, or going coatless in forty degree weather, and she would be living with him, where he was again surprised to realize he would be very happy to have her.

And he would be willing to bet that his daughter, Tara, would love her just as much as all of the rest of the town's children.

"Oh. I didn't know that."

He hadn't expected her to hesitate at that idea. The cabin was a rat's nest the last time he'd seen it, and that was years ago. Why wouldn't she want to leave it?

"I have a house, though."

Calling that place a house was stretching it, but he didn't want to quibble over syntax at that point. Quite suddenly, he was experiencing an undeniable desire—need—to know that she was all right. "Okay. Then I'll have it winterized for you—whatever that might entail. But I want the person who takes care of Tara to live with us. I think it's a more stable atmosphere for her to grow up in."

Cy knew that the offer wasn't going to sit well with her, and he saw the expected stubborn set of her jaw right on cue. "I don't

want you to pay for that for me. It's not your problem." The cabin didn't have running water, just an outside well, so she wasn't even sure there would be any winterizing to be done, since there weren't any pipes in the house. But perhaps the well itself needed to be tended to when it wasn't going to be used daily.

"It is if it keeps you from taking the job. But it's not worth fighting over, either. I'll make it a loan if you insist, and take installment payments out of your paycheck each month. Would that work for you, Miss Henderson?"

No, it wouldn't work at all for her to live in his house and see to his daughter. As much as she knew it was a very bad idea to do it, she was horrified to realize that she found it irresistible at the same time—not because it was a job and a warm, secure place to live, but purely because it was him. She supposed she should have been gun shy of him, and in truth, she definitely was. But at the same time, her ever present attraction to him had never dimmed, despite how much she'd wanted it to at first.

If he was okay with her being around, then—God help her—she was going to force herself to be okay around him.

Besides, she needed the job, and the fact that she could live in—regardless of her rote reaction—was a wonderful thing, too, even though it was with him. How much time could a rich, successful businessman spend with his kid, anyway? Not a lot, in her experience.

Not to mention that the cabin had one small fireplace, and she wasn't much of a lumberjack. Frankly, last winter, she had practically half frozen to death every night because she really couldn't haul enough wood to keep the fire going all night. And Lord knew, there was no such thing as insulation in that place.

Before she could think any longer about it and perhaps decide not to accept the job, he opened his desk drawer and took out a simple contract.

"If you'll just sign this, we'll have a deal."

It seemed straightforward enough, she guessed, although she

could hear her father's voice saying, in the back of her head, "Never sign anything without having a lawyer look at it first."

But she was sick of being cold, poor, and starving, so she signed it before he changed his mind.

Cy signed on his line, handed her the carbon copy, then stood up. "I'd like you to start tonight, Norah."

She frowned at him more automatically than with any actual annoyance, he noted, intending to ignore her preference for a more formal arrangement between them.

"Tonight?"

"Yes." He skirted around the desk then out to the other office, where he took his coat off the rack, saying, "Come here, please."

Norah ventured to where he was standing holding his coat, as if to help her into it.

"What's this?"

"Did you bring a coat?"

Her cheeks were stained red. "No."

"I know this will be ridiculously big on you, but it'll keep you warm."

"I don't need your coat, Mr. Patton," she huffed, trying to step around him to get to the door.

But he just moved in front of it, still holding the coat.

"I don't remember asking you whether or not you wanted to wear a coat, Norah."

She recognized that tone, and it had rarely boded well for her in the past.

But this was not then.

Still, as much as she wanted to stand her ground, her experiences with that look had her meekly turning her back to him, and he gently helped her into it.

"This coat is so long on me, I'm likely to trip over it and die, not to mention the fact that it wraps around me four or more times. So I'll be smothered while I'm lying on the ground, clutching my broken leg."

"Yeah, but you'll be warm while you're doing those things."

She growled audibly, and he found himself instantaneously erect at the sound.

"I'd be happy to carry you to my car," he offered gallantly.

"Thank you, but I'll manage."

She did, just barely. He stood close to her, and although he wasn't touching her, she knew that his big hand was inches from her the entire time, so that he could catch her if she started to fall.

His car was a very sporty two-seater. She didn't know the make or model, but it just screamed "expensive". Apparently, he'd recovered quite nicely from the financial blow her father had dealt him. Norah wisely kept that snarky remark to herself.

As he was driving them she didn't really know where, he observed, "You know, you didn't even ask me how much the job pays."

The car was pouring out heat like a furnace, and Norah actually had to fight her way out of the coat or she was going to roast—not that it didn't feel good to be thoroughly warm, for once.

She took herself to task for that. It could have said a dollar a year, for all she knew! What an idiot she was!

"Okay, I'll bite. How much does the job pay, boss?"

He frowned momentarily at her using that moniker with him, although he supposed it was accurate, if cold, then said, "Forty-five hundred a year."

She was astounded. That was nearly four times the largest amount she'd ever made in any year of her life! Her friend was a schoolteacher, and she only made three thousand a year.

It occurred to her that he might have inflated the salary because it was her, but then the exact opposite occurred to her immediately afterward—that he might have offered her much less than he would have given someone else simply because of who she was. It was on the tip of her tongue to confront him

about it, but she realized, with a depressed sigh, that she didn't really care.

Apparently, she had a price, and it was a live-in job where she made almost five thousand dollars a year to do something she thoroughly enjoyed doing.

Unfortunately, it was for a man who hated her guts, but what the hell!