

FOOL'S DESIRE

CLUB RISQUÉ BOOK 1



POPPY FLYNN

BLUSHING BOOKS

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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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Poppy Flynn
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EBook ISBN: 978-1-61258-815-5
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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PROLOGUE



The lights were muted but for the spotlight that picked her out on the raised dais in the lavish but cavernous arena. Either side of the stage, giant screens showed outrageous close ups from strategically placed cameras. The muted buzz of spectators lounging in deep comfortable chairs or kneeling on thick luxurious rugs teased the atmosphere with a provocative vibe. Energy hissed through the air.

Thwack! The blunt ended fronds of the soft suede flogger skittered against the taut skin of her softly rounded buttocks. The air displaced again, this time a prickling on the backs of her tanned thighs as they swiftly bloomed a dusky pink under repeated, expertly placed blows.

Daisy's unruly mop of dirty blonde corkscrew curls dampened as sweat and desire slickened her petite, curvy body and her breath hitched. The flogger rained across her sensitised skin, but not a single, audible sound passed her lips. Arms and legs unbound as her torso stretched across the plush spanking bench, she remained statue still, concentrating her mind to allow her body to absorb the blows without so much as a flinch because that was what Joel required. That was how he had trained her.

Her stomach clenched as he changed direction and landed the flogger's strands at the apex of her spread legs, causing her reddened thighs to quiver and her bare pussy to gush as the tiny pinpricks of pain morphed into ribbons of pleasure.

Despite her libertine surroundings and the licentious audience in the dimly lit Club Risqué, Daisy did not view Joel as her Dom nor see herself as his submissive. He was simply her boyfriend. She loved him beyond measure, and she would do anything for him. She did do anything for him; she did this for him and she strived to be as perfect as she possibly could because it made him happy.

As Daisy began to float in what she privately referred to as her 'happy place', she was dimly aware of the change of sensation. The deeply massaging fronds of the flogger were replaced by the sharper, pinpointed strike of the crop. Slap, slap, slap, slap...the noise rang rhythmically in Daisy's altered state of consciousness as if from a distance. Joel maintained a steady but swift pace across her increasingly sensitive behind as he played out a pattern of rosy splashes, branding her smooth skin, up and down, side to side, never overlapping.

Daisy could feel a prickle of need spreading up her spine, a sultry perspiration blooming at the back her neck, a treacherous warmth mushrooming in her abdomen as Joel aimed the crop between her legs and skilfully targeted her clitoris. Slap, slap, slap, slap, Daisy gritted her teeth and screwed up her eyes as she fought to internalise all of her raging lust and desire in a desperate battle to stay as still and as quiet as Joel always demanded while her clit hardened and peeked from behind its protective hood and each smart of pain transmuted into an insidious pleasure that threatened to overwhelm her senses as her body begged for the forbidden release.

Joel carefully gauged Daisy's reactions while she was so obviously in the state of total immersion referred to in BDSM circles as subspace. A ripple of pride slid through his mind that he could get her to this special place that required absolute trust in him to look

after her when she wasn't completely capable of consciously looking after herself. He and his friends were known at the club as the 'baby Doms' because of their age, so it boosted both his ego and his libido that Daisy presented so beautifully for the audience of enthusiastic voyeurs, avid lifestylers and cynical veterans.

Joel altered the sweep of his lashes to intensify Daisy's desire in anticipation of their scene's finale. He knew she was close to coming; her steady breaths had become erratic and her shoulders quaked as she silently panted in her effort to control her natural urges to move, to scream, to drown in the satisfaction of the orgasm she was denying herself at his tacit demand.

Such a good girl. As her first lover, he had molded her into his ideal, strapping down every inch of her body as he fucked her again and again while she was forcibly immobilised so that he trained her not to move, gagging her ruthlessly to stop her from screaming while he introduced her to the pleasure/pain of impact play and taught her silence as he spanked and flogged her. Mercilessly withholding her gratification as he used orgasm denial to educate her into suppressing her instinctive reactions until his control was absolute, until his dominance was inescapable. Until her submission was complete.

Now, after eighteen months, surrendering to him was second nature to her.

He discarded the crop and stroked a hand down her clammy flank, admiring the small, temporary welts that decorated her curvy ass, the kisses from his crop. His cock hardened painfully as he acknowledged her complete subjugation to his dominance and he unlaced his leathers, eager to take his reward.

"Come for me!" Joel growled, seizing her hips firmly as he plunged inside her wet heat in a single, unwavering thrust. He held himself still as her body went rigid and she started to milk his cock with the powerful contractions of her deferred orgasm. Closing his eyes and firming his jaw against the instinctive craving to immediately empty himself inside her tight clasp, Joel determinedly

shunned instant gratification in favour of enduring fulfilment. He centred himself and initiated a slowly building cadence guaranteed to trigger the spark of arousal in Daisy all over again. Increasing the driving tempo, Joel grasped Daisy's hair as he leaned over her back, angling her head so that he could sink his teeth lightly into one of Daisy's primary erogenous zones, where her neck met her shoulder.

"Again!" he demanded between nips as he reached around and palmed her heavy breasts, pausing briefly to torture her pebbled nipples, pinching and twisting the dusky peaks until he felt her tell-tale quiver of quickening excitement. Joel raised up again, sucking in a harsh breath and resuming an unrelenting, pounding rhythm until Daisy silently shattered around him once again and he finally allowed his own gloriously liberated release.

Daisy sagged limply; her limbs and head felt leaden, her eyes too heavy to open as she revelled in the exquisite sensations of complete erotic fulfilment and sublime satiation. She smiled softly as Joel scooped her up gently in his strong arms and wrapped a soft blanket around her before he carried her to snuggle up with him on one of the luxurious brocade sofas in a dimly lit, semi-private corner of the exclusive club where his family's wealth bought him privileged membership despite his youth.

In her intoxicated post-euphoric haze, Daisy was barely aware of the hushed voices of Joel's friends, Jake, Eric and Logan, murmuring in the background as she calmed her ragged breathing and struggled to regain her equilibrium.

Waving his friends away as he concentrated on providing after-care and recovering his own composure after the heady scene and intense responses, Joel allowed his mind to drift through the highlights of their spectacle. Vividly recalling the specific elements of Daisy's unquestioning submission as she had lain there, unbound and ungagged yet completely still and silent, bound only by his will and her desire to please him.

For Joel, it was that supreme display of surrender that was the

ultimate aphrodisiac. That was what turned him on—absolute control.



DAISY KIDDE HITCHED up her full, calf length skirt and stretched out her bared limbs as she lounged on the grass under the welcome shade of a huge, leafy oak tree on the campus grounds and soaked up the sunshine that poured between the foliage. Leaning back on her arms, a multitude of bangles slipped down to her wrists with a tinkling jangle. She raised her lightly freckled and habitually makeup free face towards the filtered sunbeams and let out a satisfied sigh. She always felt great in the days following a scene with Joel, as if it cleansed away all her tension and restlessness and left her feeling tranquil and refreshed.

A contented smile pulled at her full lips as she chatted idly with the girlfriend she had bonded with during their first week at University.

Charlotte Chapman tossed an acorn lightly at Daisy. Cracking an eye open as it bounced lightly off her shoulder, Daisy's smile broadened as she caught her roommate rolling her eyes. The pair of them were as different as chalk and cheese. Charlotte, coming from a strict and soberly religious background, which had helped shape her timid and cautious character and studying journalism in a determined bid to help people find the buried truths behind the surface gloss, and Daisy, the polar opposite, carefree, impulsive and full of joie de vivre, embracing her artistic temperament with dedication and gusto.

"You've been off at that kinky club with Joel again, haven't you?" Charlotte demanded, shaking her head. "I can always tell when you've had one of your perverted interludes with him!"

"Perverted interludes?" Daisy choked on the laughter that bubbled at her friend's frank prissiness. Charlotte pursed her lips and eyed Daisy over the top of her sunglasses. "Well, I can never

understand why you let him come near you with all those whips and chains and stuff!"

"There are no 'whips and chains' involved, Cha-Cha." Daisy grinned, settling onto her back and folding her hands behind her head.

"Semantics!" Charlotte asserted, launching another acorn assault. "You know what I mean!" It was an old argument between them. "It's just not right! Surely, you don't buy into all that nine and a half weeks hype?" she huffed, "All it does is provide justification for arrogant jerks like Joel and Jake to order girls about and pull off all kinds of deviant stunts and twist it into seeming *normal*..." Charlotte wiggled her fingers at the word with air quotes "...and all so they can get their rocks off at your expense...you're allowing Joel to corrupt you."

Daisy raised her eyebrows as she glanced over at her friend. "Safe, sane and consensual," she quoted the tenet of Club Risque's fundamental philosophy. "Nothing happens that I don't agree to," she reminded. "And I can stop things with a single word...not that I've ever had to," she pointed out. "Joel knows my limits; he takes care of me."

"Hmph!" Charlotte snorted. "You really believe that? You really think he's not just taking advantage of your willing nature?"

"Seriously?" Daisy frowned. "How can you think that? Do I seem unhappy? Are my grades slipping? Am I stressed?" she demanded.

"No, no and no." Charlotte sighed.

"So, what am I, then, what exactly do you mean when you say you know I've been to the club with Joel?"

"You're like you are now," Charlotte replied. "All chilled and serene."

Daisy sent her friend a baffled look as she idly twirled her long wooden beads "And this is bad...how?"

Charlotte didn't answer, just shook her head sharply in defeat, sending her long dark hair rippling down her back.

Casting a sidelong look, Daisy giggled cheekily, showing off

her single dimple. "You're just frustrated 'cos you fancy the pants off of Jake and you're not brave enough to dip your toe into the kink. Repressed and sexually unfulfilled!" she pronounced with her best therapist impersonation. "What you need is a good seeing to!"

Daisy sprang to her feet, grinning at Charlotte's bemused expression. "I've got to get to my afternoon class," she announced as she grabbed her bag. "We're having a demonstration of some cutting-edge pottery glazing techniques, and I want to get a good seat," she confided as she launched her sandwich wrapper into a nearby bin, pumping the air with her fist when the improvised ball achieved its target. "Score!" Daisy whooped merrily, bouncing on the balls of her feet and sending her shoulder length curls bobbing gaily around her head. Her trademark ribbon fluttered at her temple, today's was tied in a sunny yellow bow with trailing ends. It matched the trim on her scooped neck peasant blouse which hung negligently off one shoulder. Her delighted laughter bubbled in typical joyful abandon.

Setting off, Daisy waved cheerily over her shoulder. "See you later," she called happily, and Charlotte watched as Daisy bounded off energetically, oblivious to the admiring glances and smiles she drew from those around her at the spirited exhilaration and unguarded enthusiasm for life that radiated from her.



SOMEWHERE IN THE DISTANCE, a clock chimed the hour as Daisy made her way down into the basement of the grandiose Victorian house on the outskirts of the university campus that Joel Blackwood shared with his cousin, Jake Blackwood, and their family friend, Eric Oliver.

Daisy mentally counted off the seven chimes and checked it against her wristwatch, wondering whether it was that which was out by five or six minutes or the impressive grandfather clock that

graced the formal dining room. Probably her watch, she thought, giving it an absent tap.

This whole house, as well as its occupants, were all from old money. Joel's father was CEO of their family business, a multi-billion conglomerate with its fingers in all kinds of pies. Joel was being groomed to take over the position in the future, but Daisy had never been interested in trying to get her head around whatever it was they did.

The tight-lipped housekeeper had let her in with a vaguely disapproving look, which Daisy automatically shrugged off. Why on earth the woman always felt the need to judge her was beyond Daisy and she never let it bother her, although she admitted to being vaguely curious as to why Mrs. Myrtle always looked at her so disparagingly, as if she was some layer of filth that was being trodden onto the marble floors. People were people as far as Daisy was concerned, rich or poor, black or white, clever or not; they all ate and slept and hurt and bled and laughed and loved. Everyone was equal in Daisy's mind; some might be more beautiful, others cleverer, some worked harder, others had more compassion, but everyone had something that made them unique.

Daisy was her own person; she tried never to be judgemental and she certainly kept any such thoughts to herself. She was confident in her appearance and her character. She tried hard to be nice to people and she was always unfailingly polite, regardless. People could take her or leave her. Daisy had always rationalised that if anyone wanted to demean her, then she certainly didn't need them in her life. She didn't get into it with them; she was never rude; she simply distanced herself accordingly, and if that wasn't possible, then she was aloof but respectful.

Maybe Mrs. Myrtle knew about Daisy and Joel's kinky sex life and didn't approve. Daisy understood that some people had extremely adverse opinions of the lifestyle. Poor Jake was still mired deeply in the hostile and critical publicity caused when his

ex-girlfriend turned out to be a reporter looking for dirt on the eminent Blackwood family to further her career.

Daisy pursed her lips and frowned; what was between her and Joel didn't affect anyone else and it was certainly nobody else's business. She wondered what it was that made others imagine they had any kind of right to comment or interfere with the personal quirks of private individuals when those practices were through mutual consent and reciprocal respect.

The basement area was spacious and clear of the antiques and lavish furnishings that characterised the rest of the house. It had been fashioned into a gym, and Daisy often thought that Joel and Jake seemed more at home down here than in the rest of the place which was a little formal and stuffy for her taste, despite her admiration for the artistic creations of past generations.

Eric was a different matter entirely. She'd tried hard to be positive about him since he was Joel's friend, but Daisy was a little ashamed that she'd always thought him to be somewhat conceited and rather intimidating. And not just because he had gotten fresh with her and majorly overstepped the line one time and things had gotten a bit nasty.

Daisy still shuddered at the memory. She often watched him preening in the ostentatious surroundings as he'd showed some new conquest around, lavishing his girls with champagne and jewellery while they simpered and fawned around him but always looked far more calculating behind his back.

Daisy had consciously squelched her negative sentiments towards Eric and tried to be a good friend, tentatively reaching out to him and gently suggesting that maybe the girls he picked up were more than a little too interested in his money. Eric had looked down his nose at her in disdain and sneered that he could buy whatever he desired, even women—classy women from prestigious backgrounds who were obviously beyond her comprehension.

Daisy had absorbed the spiteful taunt wordlessly; they weren't the first or even the worst he had thrown at her, but privately, the

thought fluttered through her mind that he would never be able to buy love and that, obviously, he and the women he chose to hang out with deserved each other! She'd kept her distance from both ever since.

Heading in the direction Mrs. Myrtle had brusquely indicated, Daisy hitched up her floral peasant skirt as she descended the stairs, her ballet flats silent on the concrete steps. Joel wasn't expecting her this evening and probably hadn't heard the doorbell down here, but her extracurricular Alternative Arts class had been cancelled since the tutor had been taken ill, so she'd decided to surprise him.

Hearing voices as she approached the door at the bottom of the steps, she wondered if she'd made the right decision. Joel clearly had guests. She could hear more people than just the three housemates and their close friend, Logan Thornton, maybe half a dozen or more. Daisy shrugged. She was here now so she might as well say hello, at least.

The door stood ajar, and as she approached from the dimly lit stairwell, Daisy could see several men she recognised from Club Risqué in the bright room beyond. They were older, well, maybe not that much older than Joel, who, at twenty-three, had taken a couple of years out to work in different branches of the family business before he finished University. Still, they seemed a lot older than her own nineteen years and she hesitated briefly, a flush blooming on her cheeks as it occurred to her that all these men had seen her naked and in compromising positions. She wasn't exactly embarrassed—it was just that she'd never met any of them in a social situation before, with the exception of Eric, whom she considered more of a voyeur than a Dom and whom she generally avoided, and Jake and Logan, who judiciously never acknowledged it.

Daisy shook her head, took a deep breath, and stepped forward to push the door all the way open, only to pause once again as she heard her own name mentioned.

Frowning and tipping her head to the side, Daisy recognised Eric's nasal voice.

"Jeez, Joel, when are you going to get rid of ditsy Daisy and find yourself a real woman; one that you won't be embarrassed to take home to meet your parents?"

Daisy recoiled, pulling her hand back from the door as if it might burn her and her eyes automatically flew to Joel, even as her mother's voice skittered through her mind, telling her that eavesdroppers never heard anything good about themselves.

Joel's profile was directly in Daisy's line of sight. He glanced at Eric but didn't appear annoyed at Eric's tirade; he didn't defend her, just tipped up his beer bottle and took a swig as he lounged comfortably on one of the casual sofas that dotted the edges of the room. Daisy frowned, confused at his reaction, even as the cold fingers of icy dread began clutching at her stomach.

"Damn dizzy blonde," Eric continued. "You can't even have a decent conversation with the stupid bimbo!" He shook his head. "Have you heard her droning on about all that fucking idiotic arty farty crap?" he demanded belligerently.

Daisy pressed her hand against her chest, biting her lip against an insidious pain that felt remarkably like betrayal. She considered some of these men her friends, close friends. And yet there they sat, completely non-committal, listening with careless disinterest while somebody flayed her character and intelligence as if she were of no more importance than a vague acquaintance.

Another man laughed from his perch on one of the exercise bikes and waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "I don't think it's her scintillating conversation that he's interested in."

"She's got a nice spankable ass," came another male voice outside her sphere of vision.

Daisy stiffened as the icy feeling in her stomach morphed into nausea at the way they were casually objectifying her like she wasn't a living, breathing person with feelings that might be

battered and bruised by the cavalier comments and offhand remarks they carelessly threw into the conversation.

"Spanking's about all that fucking fat arse is good for," Eric mocked derisively. "No wonder you always fuck her from behind over a spanking bench. At least you don't have to be reminded of how short she is or look at all that 'afro' hair. She has freckles!" he declared as if it were some kind of unthinkable indiscretion. "And she wears a bow like a ten-year-old, for Christ's sake! Kidde by name, kid by nature!"

Daisy sucked in a breath at his vitriol, mutely rooted to the spot as a trembling began deep in the core of her body while some distant part of her mind whispered that Joel did always seem to make love to her from behind. But she couldn't dwell on the fleeting thought as yet another voice contributed to her verbal torment.

"What about Anita Howard? Didn't you take her out to dinner a few times recently?"

Daisy felt a stabbing pain close to her heart as she thought of the woman she'd often noticed flirting with Joel. Secure in her relationship, she'd never felt threatened by the undeniably beautiful girl; Joel had never seemed to reciprocate.

"Mm-mm," someone else declared with obvious appreciation of Anita. "Tall, svelte and gorgeous. Didn't she accompany you and your family to that charity function last week? You lucky bastard!"

Heartsick and disillusioned, Daisy shuddered as she felt something inside her break as Joel just grinned and saluted with his beer bottle. "She is a knockout!" While Jake, a man she considered one of her closest friends, frowned and shook his head at his cousin but said nothing.

Feeling suddenly lightheaded, Daisy leaned on the door for support and it swung open, drawing the gaze of each man in the room. She felt the blood drain from her face like a physical force and her hands trembled as goose bumps raced up her arms and shivered at the back of her neck as the weight of their scrutiny

swept over her, leaving her sick to the pit of her stomach. The last thing she wanted to do was face these men and their nonchalant disrespect.

"Oh God! Talk of the devil. It's 'kiddie' time, everyone." Eric narrowed his gaze at Joel. "Maybe you've got more kink than we know about? Fancy yourself as one of those 'daddy' Doms who wants to spank his 'little girl'. You should be careful, though, any younger and you might just find yourself on the wrong side of legal, although I guess she does a good job of dressing the part." Eric sneered nastily, but Daisy's dazed mind narrowed its focus on Joel and blessedly she blanked out everyone else in the room.

Tears welled in her big brown eyes as Joel looked over in surprise, then let out an audible breath and rolled his eyes, intensifying the throbbing ache of her anguish. She was taken aback by the angry eyes he turned on her and Daisy heard the low keening moan and was vaguely aware that the noise had come from herself as she tried to back away.

"Can it, Eric." Daisy vaguely heard Logan's rebuke as Jake moved towards her, a look of devastated concern on his handsome face. He reached out just as she felt her knees turn to water. Daisy dipped slightly but unconsciously evaded his grasp, gritting her teeth and bracing her legs against the weakness as her defensive instincts took over and she turned and fled, a cacophony of muddled voices echoing up the stairwell behind her and taunting in her wake.

"Well, that sucked the fun out of our evening."

"That's one way to get rid of her."

"Let her go."

"There's no point talking to her until she's calmed down."

"Is Anita interested in the club?"

Daisy sucked in wheezing breaths as she tried to regain her equilibrium against the pain that threatened to rob her of everything—even as she yearned for Joel to come after her, to cradle her in his arms and whisper soothing words, to shroud her in his love

and make everything better. Who'd have guessed that something as ephemeral as mere words could cause a hurt that felt so very physical, some disconnected part of her brain observed hysterically.

"Daisy!" Jake shouted as he raced up the steps behind her. He grasped her arm just as she got to the front door, but Daisy shook him off forcefully.

"Wait!" he panted, looking desperately back at the basement stairs as she fumbled with the latch, but there was no sign of Joel. Clearly, he didn't care enough to even check if she was okay. He had seen the agony of pain etched on her face, observed the tears that trembled on her lashes, the shaking which had threatened to floor her. He'd heard the anguished cry of torment that she thought might have been wrenched from her very soul and still not been moved to ensure any part of her welfare.

"Just let me go!" Daisy's faint voice broke entirely as she finally mastered the catch and flung back the door, not bothering to close it or even look back as she rushed out into the street oblivious to the angry honk of horns as she ran, blindly, into the road, dodging traffic in a desperate bid to get away, even though she knew it was impossible to outrun these particular demons. She just had to get out of there before she fell apart and completely humiliated herself by sinking into a blubbing mess of unfettered, chaotic emotions and poured out her anguish in the middle of the street. Pulling determination around her like a mantle, Daisy concentrated solely on regulating her erratic breathing and putting one foot in front of the other as she made her way back to the relative security of her hall of residence without shattering.

Charlotte wasn't in when she got back to their shared dorm room, and for that, Daisy breathed a sigh of relief. She needed a little time alone to get herself together and order her thoughts. She sat motionless on the bed staring at nothing and clutching at the side of the mattress for support. She felt as if her entire being had splintered into hundreds of minute pieces and that the tiniest movement would see her fragment.

Daisy Kidde had led a charmed life; she had a loving family with an ample income. Despite her father's death, there were no childhood traumas in her life because he'd died before she was born and her mother had remarried when she was still a tot, to a man who had brought her up as his own. She was popular, pretty and clever. She had never been bullied or teased, she had never suffered from any crisis of confidence, and she was always optimistic and upbeat. Now she felt like she'd had the proverbial rug pulled out from under her feet, and she was at a loss at how to process it all.

Raw emotions washed over her in tumultuous waves, battering her suddenly fragile ego and saturating her with an unfamiliar vulnerability. Daisy felt like she was drowning, unable to think coherently or pinpoint her spiralling feelings. Pain, humiliation, rage, embarrassment, shock, distress, shame, grief, indignation, helplessness, misery—an uncontrollable, whirling mass of reaction. Too many to follow but one all-encompassing reality. Daisy hurt like she had never hurt before. Hurt in a way that was beyond her comprehension; emotionally, mentally. In her hyper-sensitive state, it even felt like her bones ached with her torment and Daisy didn't know how to deal with it. She had no personal criteria for comparison. She was too overcome even to cry.

She didn't know how long she sat there in a complete stupor; it felt like a lifetime. Eventually, Daisy's protective inertia abated enough for her to start the process of painfully examining her memory of the devastating scene she had encountered in Joel's basement. Each excruciating recollection felt like probing at an aching tooth—poke too hard and a shard of agony shot through you.

Did Joel and all his friends really view her as some sort of dizzy blonde bimbo with nothing meaningful to contribute? Did they all consider her childish? Involuntarily, Daisy's hand strayed to today's lilac bow in her hair. She rubbed the satin absently between her fingers before dropping her hand as she unconsciously rubbed at the arctic chill that suddenly skittered down her arms.

Why hadn't Joel made any effort to defend her? Did she really mean that little to him? Daisy loved him with all her heart. In her mind, she had seen their future—wedding, home, children—she had naively thought Joel felt the same, but as she reviewed their eighteen-month relationship, she started to wonder if all she had been to him was just a convenient piece of ass he could mould to fit his kink. Eric's malice rang in her ears, *'No wonder you always take her from behind...'* Humiliation flooded Daisy's soul and she dragged in a noisy, fractured breath as the vice around her chest tightened painfully. She didn't want to go there, but she couldn't deny the truth in his words. If they had sex in any other position, Joel always blindfolded her. The only exception had been when she had given him the gift of her virginity. Daisy bit her lip until a droplet of blood seeped onto her tongue, but she was impervious to the pain as she took that precious memory and wrapped it up, mentally tucking it away into a secret corner of her mind where it couldn't be tarnished by the ugliness of what had transpired, keeping it safe while all her other senses deadened and her eyes stared sightlessly into the spiralling vortex of her confusion and heartache. Did Joel think she was fat, like Eric obviously did? Daisy was undeniably curvy and would never be stick thin, but she'd never considered herself overweight. Could Joel not bear to look at her? Did he simply view her as just a temporary submissive?

Anita Howard, Joel had taken her out to dinner. More than once. He'd never mentioned that to Daisy. Why would he keep it a secret unless he had something to hide? He never took Daisy out to dinner. Not unless you counted the burger bar on campus. Daisy suspected that Joel hadn't taken Anita to the burger bar. He thought Anita was 'a knockout'. Joel hadn't said anything positive about Daisy. Not in conversation, not in her defence. Did he not want to be seen with Daisy socially? Did he think she wasn't good enough for him? Was he embarrassed by her? Was that why Mrs. Myrtle always looked down at her. Did the housekeeper think she wasn't good enough for Joel? He had taken Anita Howard to his fancy

charity dinner with his family. Daisy remembered that night. She had naively imagined that he might invite her to go with him; she had secretly looked forward to dressing up and meeting his parents. But Joel had persuaded her that it was a boring formality that he would have to endure and that he planned to cut out as soon as possible. He had convinced her that she wouldn't enjoy it. Yeah, pretty hard to explain another woman with your girlfriend present.

For one hysterical moment, Daisy wondered exactly which one of them would have been viewed as the other woman. She had a sick feeling that it may well have been her.

Had Joel just been biding his time all along, waiting until he found some elegant, sophisticated woman with a more influential background than her own? Sowing his wild oats and getting the kink out of his system until the time came for him to settle down respectably?

The damning thoughts reeled faster and faster through Daisy's tortured mind, each notion trampling her self-esteem, each judgment chipping away at her confidence.

He hadn't come after her. He hadn't bothered to call to see if she was all right. He hadn't been interested in making sure she had arrived home safely, heedless of the state she was in. Despite everything, Daisy's battered heart still tried to deny it, but Joel's actions damned him...the answer to all her questions must be a distinct and soul shattering *yes!*

Gradually, Daisy's vacant gaze adjusted and she finally became aware of Charlotte shaking her shoulder and shouting her name in alarm while she simultaneously tried searching her tote bag for her phone.

Finally focussing, Daisy blinked at her friend.

"Oh, thank the goddesses!" Charlotte exclaimed. "I thought you were having some kind of seizure. I've been trying to get your attention for ages. What the heck is going on? Are you all right?"

The stream of questions highlighted Charlotte's panic as her

friend started to pat and squeeze her arms, as if looking for injuries.

The torrent of human concern jolted Daisy's fragile composure and her precarious façade started to crumble. Suddenly, huge, gulping sobs were torn from deep inside her as she struggled to disclose the details of her humiliation to Charlotte. Tears raced down her cheeks and neck and into her collar as the dam finally broke. Daisy garbled and hiccupped the torrent of words that suddenly spewed forth while Charlotte sat beside her on the tiny bed, arms wrapped solidly around her as she rocked them both and stroked her hair, murmuring soothing platitudes and quietly allowing Daisy to get the entire, incoherent jumble out of her system.

As Daisy eventually calmed, one certainty had developed with crystal clarity. The heartache and humiliation were simply too much for her to bear.

She couldn't stay here!

CHAPTER 1



Desirae Harper strode purposefully along the corridor to her spacious, elegantly appointed corner office at Universal Holdings, her high heeled court shoes muted on the luxury carpet. Reaching for the door, she juggled her laptop bag and her briefcase with the stack of paperwork she'd just been handed by her PA as she grasped the handle.

Descending on her strictly regimented desk, Desirae swiftly deposited the items and immediately started perusing the short-listed selection of CVs and the prior progress notes belonging to the candidates for today's final interviews for the position of finance manager.

The prospective candidates had already undergone rigorous screenings in the pre-selection process before they got to interview with Desirae herself. As CFO of one of the country's biggest corporations and with a personal reputation to uphold as one of the most responsible players in the brokerage of smaller companies, Desirae only surrounded herself with the best. Her job was primarily risk management, but her personal philosophy was never to break a company for financial gain alone. Desirae concerned herself with the welfare of the employees in the companies facing takeover, and

if the personal loss didn't stack up against the finances, then she didn't deal. As a direct result of Desirae's humanitarian approach, the corporation she worked for now enjoyed a benevolent status which eased negotiations in any company takeover.

The post Desirae was interviewing for today was key, and it was vital that the successful candidate understood how Desirae worked and what the focus of the financial implications were in relation to her personal principles as well as the bottom line figures.

Desirae also had a reputation for strict objectivity when it came to employment or promotions. Whomever got this job would get it because they were the best, regardless of age, gender, disability or creed.

At thirty-years-old, Desirae was young to hold the exalted position of Chief Financial Officer for such a huge corporation. There were many who might like to believe she had slept her way to the top, but her frosty reputation and unmitigated successes negated that myth. She was at the top because she was driven and focused and determined. She was at the top because she was single-minded and dedicated solely to her job.

She was at the top because she, too, was the best.

"Rae?" Desirae's PA, Laurel, interrupted her scrutiny of the interviewee's information before she could finish.

Fresh from her degree and with no experience, Desirae had taken a chance on Laurel when the other woman had sneaked in for an interview which she didn't actually have, after being discounted due to her lack of experience in the early screening stages. Desirae had been impressed with her fresh enthusiasm, her unshakable attitude and her undeniable ingenuity. She reminded Desirae of herself a decade or more ago and maybe, just maybe, Desirae had been guilty of wanting an idealist to succeed instead of being ground down.

That had been five years ago, and she had never regretted the decision. In fact, as Desirae had climbed the corporate ladder, she had willingly towed Laurel along with her.

"Rae, are you ready to schedule those interviews yet?"

Desirae pursed her full lips at Laurel's abbreviation of her name. She rarely answered to a pet name, although her old friend, Charlotte, insisted on calling her Desi. She supposed either was better than the childish name she grew up with.

Desirae raised an eyebrow and looked pointedly at her bubbly PA.

"Well, 'Desirae' is such a mouthful!" Laurel stated unrepentantly as she ploughed on, unperturbed.

Laurel had made herself Desirae's friend. Undaunted by Desirae's aloof disposition, Laurel had laid siege to her stand-offish nature, determined to break down the barriers of Desirae's reserved temperament. Laurel had steadfastly brought in donuts and coffee, appeared with lunch on the days Desirae had worked through, grabbed her suits from the dry cleaners during those weeks when Desirae was too bogged down in takeover meetings to do anything but fall into bed at the end of back to back fifteen-hour days. All without being asked and all despite Desirae's repeated assertions that those things were not part of Laurel's job description. It became impossible not to like Laurel Stanton.

"Schedule the first to come in at 11:30 am." Desirae ignored Laurel's banter. "That will give me time to look through the last couple of candidates' paperwork." She sat back in her chair and gave Laurel her full attention, tapping the CVs in front of her. "What's the real feeling on these final four?"

Laurel put her electronic tablet down on Desirae's desk and tapped her thumbs together. Laurel always knew all the gossip. Desirae didn't encourage her, but the younger woman's insight into the character of these candidates would give her a feel for how each of them would work within the staff dynamic.

"The older lady seems like a bit of a battle axe, but she's nothing if not efficient," Laurel pondered. "Whereas the younger one has a lot less experience because she's been out of the workplace

bringing up a family, but her qualifications and references are excellent and she seems easy to get along with."

Desirae nodded thoughtfully. "What about the men?"

"The older gentleman was exactly that—a gentleman. I liked him, but he is a *lot* older than the rest of the team so I did wonder about the age difference..." Laurel trailed off and bit her lip, knowing Desirae would frown on that conjecture. She sighed and continued. "The younger man is most certainly the forerunner. His CV and references are second to none." Laurel paused hesitantly.

"But?" Desirae prompted, sensing that Laurel wanted to say more but already felt she'd overstepped the mark with her previous comment.

Laurel clenched her jaw and bulldozed ahead, as was her way. "But he's a jerk!" she huffed, scowling at Desirae's raised eyebrows. "Well, you *did* ask!"

Desirae shuffled the candidate paperwork, rummaging for the sheets on the man who had elicited such a negative reaction from her PA. "What's his name?" she asked distractedly as she searched.

"Eric Oliver," Laurel answered with obvious distaste.

Desirae stilled, silently absorbing the shock of hearing that name after so many years, despite the ice that felt like it was leaching insidiously through her veins. Her PA was spot on; Eric Oliver was most definitely a jerk.

Desirae's inter-office telephone broke the unnerving silence that had descended, and giving Desirae an odd look at her unusual lack of attention, Laurel rushed to answer it herself.

"She's just started scheduling interviews for the finance manager's post." Laurel excused her lapse and Desirae was vaguely aware of her PA's conversation as she fought to extract herself from the unexpected tide of disconcerting memories.

Suddenly, Laurel jerked upright and started waving a hand in front of Desirae's face to gain her attention. "I understand, sir!" she clipped out. "I'll let her know right away and alter the schedule as necessary."

The urgency in Laurel's voice pierced the haze trying to blanket Desirae's mind and she forcibly shoved the debilitating thoughts of her latter teenage years back inside the emotional strong box she kept them sealed in and gave herself a firm, mental slap.

Laurel was all business as she replaced the receiver. "That was John Williams." She referred to Universal Holdings' CEO. "He's calling an immediate emergency director's meeting. No exceptions!"

Desirae visibly started, all other thoughts flying from her head at the shocking news. "Did he say what for?" she pressed as she rushed to gather what she needed.

"No, just that all key personnel were required to drop everything and report to the boardroom straightaway, no excuses. He sounded...panicked!" Laurel whispered hesitantly.

Everyone knew that John Williams was the most unruffled man in their building.



THE VERY AIR was tense when Desirae arrived in the boardroom. No one knew what was going on yet, but not one of them had failed to pick up on the strained atmosphere that had been created by the unprecedented request and their boss's uncharacteristic agitation.

The directors settled quickly, compelled by the sense of urgency that pervaded the room.

John Williams rapped on the table, bringing to order the few muted exchanges being heatedly whispered around her. "I'll get straight to the point," he declared gravely, looking around the room, acknowledging the hushed expectancy. "We are being subject to a takeover!"

Silence greeted the shocking words he spoke for one beat, then two, and then the table erupted in a cacophony of gasps and exclamations and expletives.

The CEO spent the next little while trying to restore order and calm the stunned executives while Desirae's mind whirled. Takeovers were her business and she knew better than anyone the implications of such a move against Universal Holdings, but even *her* mind groped at the enormity of the situation.

Time and again, she came back to the same question; who would mount such an offensive? Her mind recoiled from the certainty that there was only one organisation big enough to instigate such an assault against them—the Blackwood Corporation.

As Desirae made her way back to her office later that day, she felt kind of numb. She wearily pulled on a mask of professional detachment as she stepped into the elevator amidst curious employees who were agog at the rumours flying around the building. None were brave enough to ask. It would never be said of Desirae Harper that she was approachable, and at the moment, her 'don't talk to me' vibe was screaming.

Her worst fears had been established and with the confirmation that it was indeed the Blackwood Corporation who had instigated takeover proceedings, Desirae felt emotionally disjointed.

As CFO and with her superior experience of takeovers, she was the indisputable choice to spearhead the opposition. It was her job, her livelihood, her life's work. Not just hers, but the entire organisation and every person in it was depending on her ability to head this takeover off. At any other time, or rather with any other protagonist, Desirae would be a veritable 'Boadicea', leading the battle against the invading forces. But the thought of dealing with Blackwood left her with the overwhelming urge to run screaming, find herself a cozy padded cell and cower in a fetal position with her arms around her head and her eyes screwed shut. On top of all that, she still had to interview for a finance manager; and that meant dealing with Eric Oliver.

Desirae gazed out at the spectacular cityscape from her top floor office and purposefully detached her mind from the turmoil of the day, catching her reflection in the full-length picture

windows. Eleven years ago, she had re-invented herself and few, if any, would recognise the impassive woman she had become from the capricious girl she had once been. Neither in looks, nor in character. She had traded her colourful gypsy style for formal, muted, suits. Careful makeup covered her freckles and concealed the air of innocence that had plagued her in those first few years. Now it had become her mask. Her corkscrew curls were longer and harshly tamed in a severe twist and high heels gave her height and minimised her curves. It all embodied a suit of armour that she was never seen without. A disguise which had hidden the broken Daisy Kidde. A personification which had finally, irrevocably, become Desirae Harper.

The day she had changed universities, given up her art, and enrolled herself in a business class was the day she had reverted to her given name instead of its pet form. It was the day she had overjoyed her stepfather, a man who had been in her life for longer than she could remember, and taken his name as her own. It was the day that Daisy Kidde was buried. Joel Blackwood had unwittingly moulded her alter ego. He had taught her control, patience, detachment and restraint. The lessons he had imparted at the club had encouraged her to be emotionless, reactionless, ideal qualities in the big business corporate takeover market. It may not have been his intention, but Joel Blackwood had established her pokerfaced personality.

His tuition in the bedroom, she had utilised in the boardroom.

Now, it seemed, her past was coming back to haunt her and on more than one front.

Desirae tapped an elegant, French manicured finger against her pursed bottom lip as she contemplated in which direction to move first. There wasn't much more she could do about Blackwood right now. The board of directors had vetoed an outright takeover, so they just had to wait and see what the fallout from that decision was.

That left the finance manager's position to fill, and with Black-

wood bearing down on them, Desirae couldn't afford to be understaffed, so there was her priority. That and Eric Oliver.

"Laurel, get those interviews scheduled for as soon as humanly possible," she instructed her PA. "And give me thirty minutes without any interruptions to make a call."

Desirae flicked off the intercom and dug out her personal mobile phone. She was flying this request under the radar.

Charlotte Chapman answered on the first ring. "Desi?" she queried in obvious surprise, "What calamity has befallen to have you making personal calls in the middle of the working day? Did the stock market and the internet both crash at the same time and leave you at a loose end?"

"Hello to you, too!" Desirae chuckled at her friend's sarcasm. Charlotte was always chiding her on working too hard and not keeping in touch often enough. "And I do have a couple of dilemmas. I'm after your own special brand of information."

Charlotte had become an investigative reporter after finishing her degree in journalism, and she specialised in digging for the kind of details that were often overlooked or buried. Currently, she put those skills to use writing a regular travel blog which highlighted bogus deals and warned the discerning traveller of both the unseen pitfalls and the hidden treasures of their holiday destinations.

"Ooh! A couple, huh? Intriguing!" Charlotte cooed. "Come on then, spill it," she hustled without preamble.

"Well, Universal has been subject to a takeover bid—"

"Whoa!" Charlottes exclamation interrupted, but Desirae ploughed on,

"By the Blackwood Corporation."

This time, her news was met with a stilted silence and Desirae pushed ahead before Charlotte could comment. "Plus, I have one 'Eric Oliver' set to interview for my finance manager position." Desirae rushed to finish, not yet ready to rehash a history that Charlotte knew all too well. "That's what I want information on."

"So...worse than the stock market and the internet both crashing at once!" Charlotte finally regained her voice, and Desirae appreciated her attempt to add levity to a conversation that might otherwise be fraught.

Seeming to understand her old roommate's reluctance to delve into the past, Charlotte asked quietly, "What exactly is it that you want, Desi?"

"I want to know everything there is to know about Eric Oliver," Desirae told her. "Why is he knocking on my door looking for a job? Why isn't he working for his father's company? And why has he turned up like a rotten apple right now?"

"The timing is a little suspect," Charlotte agreed. "What are you thinking? Corporate spy?"

"The timing stinks! He's way overqualified for the job," Desirae huffed abruptly. "But it's almost *too* obvious...and not the kind of stunt I'd expect Blackwood to pull. They have a reputation for being pretty straight shooters," she finished begrudgingly.

"Well, you've come to the right place," Charlotte stated decisively. "I'll get on it right away and get back to you as soon as I have something. How long have you got before the interviews?"

"I'll schedule him last..." Desirae hedged guiltily. "But with this takeover imminent, I need someone reliable in that post yesterday."

"No problem," Charlotte scoffed. "You know how I thrive on a strict deadline!"

Feeling better for having taken some action, Desirae said her goodbyes and settled down to get ready for the interviews.

Desirae knew she had found her new finance manager before she'd even finished Luanna Morgan's interview. She'd felt a connection with her from the moment she'd walked through the door, and Desirae instinctively knew that the other woman would fit well in the department dynamics. Just a few years older than Desirae herself, Luanna had worked hard to drag herself up from the stigma of being a teenage single mother, putting the enforced years living at her parents' home and caring for her infant son to good

use. First, gaining her distance learning degree in accounting and, later, working from her own home doing bookkeeping and more in-depth accounts for a diversity of clients. Now her son was a teenager, and Luanna was pursuing a full-time career.

Desirae admired the woman's determination and work ethic. She was down to earth and honest, but unapologetic about her inauspicious beginnings. She might not have the other candidates' experience at working within an organisation such as theirs, but sometimes, Desirae knew full well, the school of hard knocks and life experience was the very best qualification and one that couldn't be bought. Luanna Morgan had sacrificed for her son, and while other employers saw that sacrifice as an obstacle to her performance in their workplace, Desirae knew that there was no stronger compulsion than a responsible mother's desire to provide for her child.

One last chore and Desirae would be able to go home, sip at a glass of chilled wine and lounge in a relaxing bubble bath. And a chore it would be. Whatever it had taken to get her to where she was today, Desirae usually loved her job, but just the thought of her upcoming interview with Eric Oliver left a bad taste in her mouth.

She had already instructed Laurel to get the necessary documentation worked up in order to offer Luanna Morgan the position, but for the sake of propriety, Desirae still had to conclude this final interview, regardless of any personal feelings.

With fifteen minutes before his interview was due to start, Desirae busied herself printing off the email she'd just received from Charlotte. She knew that Eric Oliver was already in the building. Laurel had been somewhat less than enthusiastic but rather vocal that the 'slime ball', as she had labelled him, was taking up space in her reception area and why couldn't it be that huge hunk of eye candy that was sat there so, at least, she had a decent view. Desirae had no idea who Laurel's 'huge hunk of eye candy' was, but she had no compunction at letting Eric Oliver wait, regardless of how much it irritated her PA. She wanted all the material she could

lay her hands on before she started this interview. She'd already received an interoffice memo from John Williams recommending Eric for the post. There was no way Desirae was ever going to work with the man and the final decision was hers alone, but she couldn't afford for that decision to be perceived as being based on emotion.

Scrutinizing the evidence Charlotte had collected, Desirae couldn't help the overwhelming sense of relief that coursed through her veins at the realisation that she wouldn't have to work too hard to justify her decision.

The information also made her feel resilient enough to be able to handle his interview.

Even so, Desirae couldn't help holding her breath as Laurel finally showed her old antagonist into her office. The years hadn't been very kind to Eric Oliver; his hair was thinning and he'd developed a slight paunch from too many years of over indulgence and too little self-discipline.

Out of nowhere, speculation shot through her mind at how the last decade might have treated Joel, leaving her shaky in its intensity.

Straightening her spine against the unwanted conjecture, Desirae pulled an aura of calm composure around her like a protective cloak and steadily released her breath.

Stepping forward, she extended her hand. Eric's was limp and sweaty, but he clutched at hers for slightly longer than necessary and Desirae had to stifle a shudder.

"Mr. Oliver." Desirae distanced herself with formality, "Please, be seated." She pulled her fingers from his grasp and gestured towards a chair, repressing the urge to wipe her hand down the narrow skirt of her navy suit.

Seating herself opposite him, Desirae couldn't help but notice the way his eyes fixated on her legs as the knee length skirt crept up her thighs, and she tugged at a hemline that had never bothered her in the past. Damn the man for making her feel like this.

Shaking herself, Desirae got straight down to business. "Your CV is quite impressive, Mr. Oliver."

"Yes, indeedy," the man replied arrogantly, still not taking his eyes off her legs.

Desirae pursed her lips in irritation. "In fact, if anything, you seem somewhat overqualified for this post."

"I'm just happy to help old J.W. out." She found the way Eric casually dropped her CEO's initials to be inappropriately over familiar as his eyes finally crept up but didn't make it past her chest, and Desirae felt her temper rising.

"But would you be satisfied in a position that leaves your credentials so underutilised, never mind that the pay grade for this position is quite a way below what you're used to?"

In fact, according to Charlotte's memo, Eric was a complete slacker who routinely forced his subordinates to bear responsibilities way beyond their proficiency and then abandoned them to shoulder the blame when things inevitably went wrong.

"I'm sure Johnny boy and I can come to some agreement over the pay." Eric slouched backwards with his arms over the back of the office sofa and crossed his legs at the ankles nonchalantly, as if he'd just popped in to shoot the breeze. "And I'll probably be a godsend to Universal, especially when a woman of your age holds the CFO position...whose biological clock must be ticking," he finished smugly, finally raising his eyes to her face.

Desirae bristled, her eyes shooting daggers and her façade stony. "I can assure you that *that* scenario is highly unlikely," she said icily as she rose from her seat to conclude this farce of an interview. Throughout the entire meeting, Eric had evaded questions about his involvement in his father's company, avoided enquiries about the true level of his responsibilities and blatantly found a scapegoat for a couple of serious instances that she brought up where the buck clearly should have stopped with him. The man obviously had no respect for women who held positions of authority, like herself, and had spent so much time mentally undressing

her that Desirae didn't think she had ever felt so blatantly objectified, even during those times she'd spent bound and naked at Club Risqué! Thankfully, he hadn't appeared to have recognised her. For that, at least, she was eternally grateful.

Eric just smirked, stuffing his hands in his pockets as he sauntered to the door behind her. Desirae turned and held the door open for him to leave, only to find him ogling her backside and rubbing at his semi hard cock through the fabric.

Fighting the urge to gag, she called for Laurel to see him out with a breath of relief.

"I look forward to working with you." Eric saluted her cleavage cockily with two fingers before turning and focussing his attention on Laurel's rear.

"Over my dead body!" Desirae couldn't help muttering under her breath as she stormed back into her office and closed the door with as much of a resounding thud as the soft seal hinges could achieve.

She was still fuming, twenty minutes later, as she collected her belongings, ready to leave. With her long, wool coat on and her handbag over her shoulder, she was about to shred the documents she had obtained from Charlotte when John Williams, himself, came in unannounced, followed by a tall, well-built man in his early to mid-thirties.

"Desirae, I'd like you to meet Connor Griffin." The vast, bear of a man stepped forward, and as he engulfed her palm in a firm handshake, she took in his sharply cut, sandy hair and expensive suit and wondered if this was Laurel's 'huge hunk of eye candy'.

John didn't offer any further insight on the good-looking visitor before peering myopically down the corridor. "Is Eric Oliver still in the building?" he asked. "If he's still about, why don't you ask him when he can start? We need that position filling asap."

Desirae stilled and looked steadily at her CEO. He wasn't exactly her boss. Their positions within the firm were close to equal, but it had always been quietly accepted that his was the last

word, and when it came to board room disputes, his was the casting vote.

"I'm not planning on offering him the job," she said carefully, schooling her features into a neutral mask. "In fact, I've already instructed Laurel to draw up contracts for one of the other candidates. I believe Luanna Morgan has already accepted the position."

"Are you sure you haven't had a lapse in judgement there, Desirae?" the older man blustered, and Desirae instinctively clenched her jaw and straightened her spine at that abhorrent suggestion which had ice snaking through her veins even while fire sparked in her eyes.

"Eric is without question the perfect candidate for the job. I golf with his father, so I can personally vouch for his credentials. I insist that you reconsider!"

Desirae's stomach plummeted and heat prickled at the back of her neck as her simmering fury came close to erupting at having her judgement questioned, in front of an outsider, no less. It had been a long, shitty day. She had already put in several twelve-hour days this week; she was already trying to avoid second guessing herself and stressing too hard about the Blackwood takeover and all its emotional implications, and she wasn't accustomed to having her decisions all but overruled. Gritting her teeth so hard she was surprised she didn't crack a molar, Desirae took a controlled breath while her manner became positively glacial. She hadn't risen to the height of her career by being a wallflower, and as much as she respected John Williams and his wealth of experience, she would never be cowed into making catastrophic amendments on somebody else's whim. Not even the CEO's.

"If you feel strongly enough that you need to overrule my judgement, John, then feel free to go ahead and offer Mr. Oliver my position while you're at it, because I'm afraid that I take exception to working with a man who couldn't even keep his eyes above my neckline for the duration of a forty-minute interview."

Desirae's arctic expression gave no quarter and her usually well-

modulated voice was clipped and stilted. "Before you make that decision, however, I suggest you read Mr. Oliver's background check. Be sure to pay special attention to the fact that your 'perfect candidate' installed his mistress as his PA in his father's business and permitted her free access to very important information that allowed her to embezzle such a vast amount that the company hit the verge of bankruptcy and only saved face from imminent bankruptcy by appealing to another 'family friend', namely Joseph Blackwood, for a buyout." John's eyes were wide and his face had drained of colour and Desirae couldn't help the tiny, uncharacteristic stab of satisfaction that accompanied his dawning horror.

"Add to that a marriage with no pre-nup, which cost him dearly, followed by a second failed marriage which, while covered by a pre-nup, had produced several children so that the courts ruled a substantial maintenance allowance, since the breakdown was due to the afore mentioned mistress, and you will find that Mr. Oliver has managed to squander almost his entire personal wealth by making catastrophic financial decisions in his personal life, as well as his father's business."

Desirae slapped the sheaf of papers she had printed from Charlotte's email into John's hand, then turned to pick up her briefcase. "It's a pity your 'golfing buddy' didn't see fit to warn you that his son's not even capable of balancing his checking account, far less a corporation!" Desirae couldn't keep the derision out of her voice as she made to leave.

"Oh, and one other thing," she swung back as an afterthought. "I happen to know that Joel and Jake Blackwood shared a house with Eric Oliver while they were at University together. While I would have expected them to send someone with rather more competence, I really wouldn't rule out that Eric Oliver might very well be on their payroll. As you have just attested, the jolly old boys network has deep roots and the timing is rather more than questionable," she contended frostily. "Breaking us down from the inside would make their takeover very much easier...and who

knows, maybe someone with less morals than a crooked politician in a crack house is exactly the kind man you need for that type of deception," she spat contemptuously.

In fact, that scenario had only just occurred to her, but the more she thought about it, the more plausible it seemed. She shook her head, unwilling to spend any more time on the matter. She felt vilified by John's lack of faith, and on the heels of her confrontation with Eric and the painful memories of Joel that he and the takeover announcement had stirred, it had brought old insecurities to the surface. Right now, she was so done with it all that she couldn't muster the enthusiasm for any further dispute. She'd walk away if she had to, rather than put her dignity on the line ever again.

"I'll see you on Monday, unless you let me know otherwise," she challenged, ignoring the fish impression the CEO was imitating with his silently open and closing mouth.

With a last glance and a polite nod to Connor Griffin, who appeared to be struggling to keep a straight face, she turned on her heel and left. Desirae wondered briefly if he was laughing at her outburst, but she really couldn't be bothered to worry about it. There was a very large glass of wine with her name on it screaming to her, and right now, all she was interested in was claiming it.