

Chapter One

I propped my feet up on my desk and leaned back in my chair. I noticed a scuff on my black, designer pumps and frowned. Shouldn't \$500 shoes be able to take a little bit of wear? I swiveled my chair so that I could see out the large floor to ceiling window behind my desk. People pushed through the crowded streets, and cars honked as they navigated busy intersections. Usually watching all those people running around made me feel energized, like I was part of some greater urban economical force. But lately I had just found them all exhausting.

I had no reason to be anything close to depressed. I had a fantastic job with a six-figure salary and perks to kill for. I had a fiancé who was well known in the business world, or at least his father was, and who made three times what I did and also came complete with family money.

Technically, David was my boss. But, in truth, I was the boss of our relationship. David was short, only a few inches taller than my own 5'4" frame, and was always trying to make up for it by building up his chest and arms. He spent so much time at the gym and the salon that he was the perfect definition of metrosexual. I had to admit that he always looked good. He wore expensive clothes that were meticulously cared for by his staff of housekeepers.

David had lived his whole life in the shadow of his multi-millionaire father and had never had to do a thing for himself. This is why he never learned to make a decision. His father had been the one to get him the job at Reilley Corporation. I suspected his father had gotten him all of his jobs.

We were planning a huge wedding at his parents' estate in Connecticut. The gown I'd chosen was \$30,000 before the veil and alterations, and the flowers were even more out of control than that. I was spending more money on the wedding than my parents had ever spent on anything in their lives, including their house. Once I married David, I would be able to have anything I wanted. I had worked intimately with my lawyer to draw up the pre-nup so even if we broke up, I was still going to be crazy rich. I was about to embark on a life that most people could only dream about. I should have been on top of the world. That's why I was having such a hard time figuring out why I was bordering on miserable.

My phone rang. It was David. I picked it up and said, "Hi, David."

David cleared his throat. "Um... Hayley, we're having a meeting in here..."

Sirens went off in my head like someone had pulled a fire alarm, and I was immediately livid. "Without me?" I demanded, my heart thumping against my chest. I had told David a million times that I wanted to be included every time he discussed the company with someone. "I told you not to have any more meetings without me!"

David dropped his voice almost to a whisper, "I know, honey. I'm really sorry. It's just that Joel is here, and—"

"Joel?" I spat. Joel Rogers was my nemesis. He was hired several months before, and my life hadn't been the same since. In fact, that was exactly what had happened the last time David had a meeting without me. It had ended in Joel steamrolling over David and making sweeping company changes. "I'm coming in there!"

"No, honey, please..." I heard David whine as I slammed down the phone.

I put my feet back down on the floor and click-clacked right out of my office.

"Everything okay?" My secretary looked alarmed as I stormed past her desk.

“Fine,” I told her. “Or at least it’s going to be.” I marched down the hall toward David’s office suite. My brain was swimming, and I thought that fire was going to come out of my nose as I breathed. I was angry at David, but I was also angry at Joel. For some reason that infuriating man shot down every decision I made. I could only guess that he was annoyed that I was sleeping with the boss, but it wasn’t like David was going to sleep with him. At least I hoped not. How dare he bully David into a meeting without me? I was the only one who was supposed to bully David.

I pushed past the protests of David’s administrator and then his assistant and burst through the heavy doors. David’s office was huge. A family of four could live there comfortably. His large, walnut desk loomed at the back of the room. A long table stretched out between us. “David!” I called.

He got up from his desk and hurried toward me. I marveled at how he hopped along like a squirrel. “Hayley, honey. You need to calm down. I was just about to call you into the meeting.”

“Call me in?” I narrowed my eyes. “Why wasn’t I here to begin with?”

I turned when I heard the sound of chuckling in the corner. It was Joel. Big and brawny, he leaned against a bookcase with his arms folded. He wore a black suit that clung to his broad shoulders in a way that made me fully aware of the chiseled chest that was hidden underneath. “Lovers’ quarrel?” he asked.

“Shut up, Joel,” I spat. “This is your fault.”

A dark look crossed Joel’s face. It was a look I found inexplicably unnerving. “Sit down,” he told me calmly. “We’ll talk.”

“I will not!” I protested. I tried staring him down, but he just wouldn’t be intimidated like David always was.

“Hayley, please,” David began. He was nervous. I watched as he played with his fingers. He’d loosened his tie, and there was a line of sweat trickling along his receding hairline.

“Shut up, David,” I said, turning to him. “All I want to hear from you are some answers!”

That’s when I felt it. There was pressure on my shoulders just before my feet left the ground. Then I was unceremoniously plunked into the nearest chair. I looked up in horror as Joel stared down at me.

“How dare you touch me!”

Joel continued to look at me. “You stay right there,” he ordered evenly in his slow, low voice.

I looked around wildly. “David?” But my fiancé was pretending to be engrossed in some papers on his desk. That’s the problem with dating a man you can bully. He’s not ever going to fight for you. But that was okay. I had been fighting my own battles for a long time, and I wasn’t planning on losing now.

I started to stand. Joel pushed me back down. “If you don’t let me up, I’ll call security!”

I could have sworn I saw sparks fly out of Joel’s deep brown eyes. He leaned down toward me, and I could smell his subtle, musky cologne. In a rumbling voice he asked, “You really want to find out how far I’m willing to take this, Hayley?”

I stiffened. The answer to that question was no. I took a deep breath and attempted to regain my dignity. “Tell me what’s going on here,” I demanded.

Joel pulled himself up to his considerate height. “I would expect better manners from a lady. But from you, I guess that’s the best we’re going to get.”

“Listen up,” I said, stopping myself from popping up out of the chair. “You’ve only been in this company for twelve weeks. I’ve been here six years. I don’t think you need to be telling me—”

“Hayley,” Joel interrupted. “David has something to say to you.”

Startled, I looked at David. “What?” I asked.

David looked scared. He shuffled toward me holding his papers tightly against his chest as if he were planning to use them to shield himself from an attack. “Well honey, we’re having some problems with sales.”

I sighed loudly. “That’s what this is about? For God’s sake, David, we talked about this. I told you I had some sleek new ideas. My plan is going to triple last quarter’s sales!”

“I know, honey,” David said. “But I’ve had a call from Josh Reilley.”

My ears perked up, and my heart did a flip-flop. “Mr. Reilley called? Personally?”

David nodded. “Yes, and he’s concerned about the sales.”

Josh Reilley owned our company. He was the only person above David and, therefore, the only person who could make a decision that would affect my job. I had never met him personally. He wasn’t a particularly hands-on company owner. He had hired David to run the company, and he expected to be able to stay out of day-to-day operations. As far as I knew, he lived on a farm in some backwards part of the country and spent his days riding horses and building barns.

Ignoring the ape in front of me, I started my argument. “David, baby. Let me talk to him. I’ll tell him what I’m working on, and he’ll understand. It’s all going to be fine, babe. Just let me take care of it.”

David smiled, and my heart lifted. I could talk David into anything.

“That seems like a good idea,” David said. He turned to Joel. “Maybe Hayley could talk to Josh.”

Joel slammed his hand down on the table, and I jumped at the explosive sound. “No, Hayley will not talk to Josh. Listen to yourself, David.”

“Well, I... just want everything to go smoothly,” David mumbled, sounding like he might cry. I rolled my eyes.

“Sit down,” Joel said to David. It wasn’t quite the tone he’d used with me, but it was clear he was a man who was used to being obeyed. And unfortunately for me at the moment, David was used to following orders.

David sat, and I shook my head. This wasn’t going to end well.

Joel sat down too and leaned toward me. He looked sincere enough. “Here’s the problem. We are not marketing to our consumers.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Joel cut me off.

“This is not open for discussion,” Joel said. “We have all realized that we need to make some changes around here for the good of the company. Your marketing approach may have worked for you when you were selling high-end cars, but here we sell farm equipment.”

“I know what we sell,” I snapped, “and marketing a luxury car is no different than marketing a tractor.”

“Come off it, Hayley,” Joel said. “There’s a huge difference, and you know it. You have a degree in marketing, and you’re not an idiot. Use your head. The kind of person who spends a hundred grand on a car is not the same kind of person who buys a tractor. You have to market to your consumer. I shouldn’t have to tell you that.”

I could feel my face burning with embarrassment. He was right. I had a graduate degree in marketing. I knew when I started this job that selling farm equipment was going to be a new experience for me. I also knew that the company’s sales had gone steadily down since I’d joined the team. I just didn’t know that anyone else had realized it. I figured I was in the clear as long as I had David looking the other way.

Joel continued. "You're good at marketing. That's not the problem."

"Thanks," I said sarcastically.

Joel shot me a look but went on with his statement. "I think the problem is that you don't know anything about the kind of people who buy farming products."

"Of course I do!" I protested.

Joel nodded. "Okay, tell me about them."

I studied the grain on the wooden table, thinking. Then I looked up and tried to appear confident. "Well... their median income is... low. And they... they... have farms. They're farmers! How hard is that to figure out?"

Joel actually laughed. "Too hard for you, obviously."

I decided to ignore Joel, and I turned my attention back to David. "So what? You're firing me?"

David's eyes opened wide. "No! Hayley, of course not."

Thank goodness. I wasn't going to lose my job. My heart fluttered with relief, and I fought to make sure it didn't show. I was willing to do whatever it took to stay employed.

Joel cleared his throat. David said, "Well, you have an alternative."

An alternative to being fired? Just what was going on here?

"I'll consider it," I said, knowing full well I would ride a damn tractor down Wall Street in a bikini if they asked me to.

"Good," said Joel. "David?"

"I think you're going to find this opportunity very exciting," David told me. He avoided my skeptical gaze. "Josh feels that as the head of marketing, you need to spend some time with our client base."

I listened closely. Did he want me to watch a documentary on farmers?

"So for the next several months, you are going to be in Nebraska with Josh," Joel spit those words out quickly, and then he actually shut his eyes as he waited for my reaction.

I felt the blood drain from my face. "Nebraska?"

David nodded. "You're going to live among your consumers."

"And if I don't?"

My heart fell down to my knees as David looked away. "It's out of my hands."

I took a deep breath, calming myself. I knew I had a choice. I could accept this decision gracefully, or I could have a full-fledged temper tantrum right there in David's office.

Joel ducked as a briefcase flew through the air. It was followed by David's glass paperweight. I also screeched a few choice curses as I made my way out.

"Josh is gonna have a great time with you!" Joel called after me just before I slammed the heavy wooden door behind me.

And that's how I found myself on a plane to Nebraska.

Oh, I had done my best to talk David out of this decision. At the very least I wanted him to let me call Josh and work my magic. But it soon became clear that David's job was on the line, too, and he was even more afraid of Josh Reilley than he was of me.

None of my best tricks worked. I tried demanding it from him, but he simply whimpered. I tried seducing him, but that fizzled before it began. Our sex life left a lot to be desired even under the best of circumstances. I even tried offering to take his mother out to dinner. It was useless. I could back him into a corner, and all he'd do was cry like a lost little puppy dog.

"You'll be fine," David said on the way to the airport. "I know you will. Josh owns a corporation worth millions at least. How different can he be from the execs you know in the city?"

“He’s from Nebraska,” I countered.

“Baby, I’m sorry this is happening,” David said. “You know I don’t have any control over it.”

David never had control over anything.

I had begun muttering to myself as I packed, and I was still muttering when I settled onto the plane and put on my sleep mask.

Before long, I felt a warm hand sliding up against my leg. I shifted. I didn’t know what was happening, but it felt like heaven. The touch was strong and solid, and it gave me little shivers in dark, private places.

Then suddenly I was back at the office. At least it seemed like the office. It was hard to tell because I was bent over David’s desk, my head in my arms and my bottom hanging over one end. My feet just barely touched the ground.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

The voice was deep and calm. It was also very familiar. “You know what you need, little girl.”

Then I felt my skirt being pushed up to my waist and my panties pulled down around my knees. I stretched around to see who was behind me. It was Joel, and he was mad.

His hand came down hard on my naked bottom, and I jumped. The sharp sting softened into a damp sensation between my legs.

“Do it again,” I murmured.

“Ma’am? Ma’am?”

Where was that voice coming from? I shifted. Where was Joel? “Ma’am, we’ve landed,” said the voice.

I pulled off my sleep mask and blinked at her. Then I realized that I was the only passenger left on the plane, and a flight attendant was tapping me on the shoulder. She smiled as I looked up at her. Embarrassed, I gathered my things.

“Enjoy your stay,” the flight attendant called to me as I made my way down the aisle.

Enjoy my stay? I doubted that.

I took a deep breath as I stepped off the plane. The airport was about the size of a postage stamp. How did people live this way?

After I’d retrieved my bag from the carousel and used the bathroom, I went searching for the car that was supposed to have been sent for me. I found myself hoping it wasn’t a tractor.

It wasn’t long before I saw my name in black block letters. It was on a sign being held by a man in jeans and a wash-worn short-sleeved polo shirt. His graying hair was cut short, and his blue eyes smiled. His eyes showed a few wrinkles in the corners, but he was a very attractive man. I approached him and extended my hand.

“I’m Hayley Reynolds. Are you my driver?”

The man chuckled, and his eyes seemed to laugh. “You could say that.” He picked up my bag and pointed me toward the exit. “I’m Josh Reilley.”

I stopped walking and turned to stare at him. Had I heard wrong? “You are?”

“Last time I checked,” he said. His grin was huge and friendly. “Are you surprised?”

“I thought you’d be more... old,” I admitted. “And I don’t know... wearing a suit maybe.”

He was tall with tan skin that was perfectly lovely with his salt and pepper hair. His smile was terrific. It was familiar and welcoming, and it made me feel right at home. I trotted behind him all the way to the car and slipped into the passenger side when he opened the door for me.

“Welcome to Nebraska,” he said as he started the engine.

“Thanks,” I answered, suddenly shy in this man’s presence. I wasn’t used to being around someone who exuded such confidence.

“The house is a couple of hours from here. I hope you don’t mind the drive.”

“A couple of hours?” I repeated. “Is there much to see?”

“Well that depends on your perspective, I suppose. A city girl like you might find the scenery boring, but to me it’s a thing of beauty.”

I nodded my head, but I had no idea what he was talking about.

I’d heard people talk about the middle of nowhere before, but I thought it was just an expression. It’s not. The middle of nowhere is exactly where Josh Reilley took me that warm afternoon. We passed field after field as well as large barns with horses and cows roaming inside fences. I frequently spotted patches of wildflowers, sometimes dominating the landscape. I decided that I could understand how this could be beautiful.

Josh’s house was large and set back away from a winding dirt road. There was a huge fenced-in area on one side surrounded by a field. The other side was a green yard with woods behind. As we pulled up to the house a screen door rattled, and a woman stepped out into the sunshine.

“Josh!” she called, waving her arm.

She was probably in her late thirties, and she was pretty. Her long hair fell loose down her back, and a stained apron was tied around the waist of her patterned housedress. She bounced down the steps and leaned into the truck window to give Josh a kiss just as the pick-up rolled to a stop.

Josh climbed out. “This is my wife, Kim. Kimmie, this is Hayley Reynolds.”

“Charmed.” Kim shook my hand. Her Midwestern accent was cute. “I’m sure glad to have another woman around here!”

I followed them into the large house. It was decorated in a country style popular a decade or two ago. Blue plaid curtains with oversized floral hems hung from the kitchen window, and cross-stitched Bible verses decorated the walls.

Josh took my bag to a room upstairs, and I stood in the kitchen with Kim.

“Pull up a chair,” she said. “Cody’ll be home from baseball practice soon, and then we’ll have supper.”

“Cody?” I repeated.

She pulled two sodas out of the fridge. “Our son.”

“Great!” I said, brightly. I hated kids.

I took a sip of my soda, noting that it wasn’t diet, and I heard the door open and then slam shut.

“Don’t slam that door, Cody!” Kim called.

“Sorry, Mom.” Cody turned out to be an adorable kid with dark hair and his father’s big smile. He gave his mom a kiss and got his own soda out of the fridge.

Kim smiled broadly at her son. I could tell that she was proud of him. “This is our son, Cody,” she said to me. “He’s ten. This is Miss Hayley.”

Miss Hayley? I felt like a preschool teacher.

Cody shook my hand and grinned at me. “Nice to meet you.”

I liked this kid. “You too,” I told him.

Cody drank his soda in two gulps and then pulled a bag of chips from the pantry. “Mom, can I go to Bud’s house? They made a new bike ramp.”

“You’ve got extra chores,” Kim told him, sounding firm but sympathetic. “If you get them done, then you can go.”

Cody sighed. “I’ll never get them done in time.”

“You should have minded your Daddy,” Kim said. “Next time you’ll remember.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cody answered, clearly disappointed.

Kim gave her son a smile. “Get started now. It might go faster than you think.”

Cody shot out the back door.

Kim laughed. “Boys,” she said, grinning. She tossed Cody’s soda can into a recycling bin and put the chips away.

I met her smile. I had no idea what she was talking about, and frankly I hoped that I never would. I wasn’t too excited to learn about girls either. Cody seemed like a nice kid, but I felt that anyone under eighteen or possibly twenty-one should be kept in some kind of compound.

“He’s polite,” I remarked. In fact, I had never met such a polite child. Most kids I knew would have made life miserable for everyone if they were told they couldn’t go to a friend’s house. I certainly would have at his age. Honestly, my parents were always trying to get me to go somewhere else.

Kim agreed. “We’re trying to raise him right.”

Josh ambled down the stairs and into the kitchen. “Cody home? Did you tell him to get to those chores?”

“I did,” said Kim, kissing her husband. “He’s working on them right now.”

Josh nodded and turned to me. “I hope you’ll be comfortable here, Hayley. Come on and I’ll show you to your room.”

“I brought a marketing presentation to show you,” I told him. I tried to make myself sound energetic but professional. “Do you want to see it now?”

I had a plan to get myself out of this place as soon as possible, and I wanted to get started. I was hoping to immediately begin pushing my new ideas on Josh. Once he was hooked, I was going to convince him that I needed to get back to the city right away to put the new campaign in motion. I also thought I might make a suggestion or two about how to dispose of Joel.

Josh shook his head slowly. He seemed to do everything slowly. “Time for that later,” he said. “Come on upstairs.”

There was nothing I could do but follow him to what was to be my bedroom. It was a small space with a full sized bed and a dresser. Lace curtains decorated the two windows, and a braided rug had been placed neatly on the wood floors. The bed was covered in a country style quilt featuring a pattern of interlocking circles. A door opened into a small bathroom with a white, lacey shower curtain.

Josh put my suitcase down. “Supper’s at six,” he said. “If there’s anything you need, just let me know. We’re not formal here.”

He left me then, and I opened my suitcase and pulled out a pair of shorts and a cotton shirt. Obviously there was no need for my business suit in this house. They were not formal here? No kidding. They were barely even casual from what I could see.