
Chapter 1

The flight into Tampa from New Hampshire was interminable - crowded, stuffy... not to mention the molestation prior to boarding. Trish adjusted her position again, cursing both the small airline seats and her own not inconsiderable bulk. Although the romance novel on her lap was the latest from one of her favorite authors, it held no interest for her. Painful, gut-wrenching scenes from the past months kept playing in her mind, bringing tears to already sore, swollen eyes until she finally shook her head vigorously to clear her thoughts. She was beginning to learn how useless that was, because the visions crept right back to huddle around her, smothering her usually optimistic personality in a shroud of depression.

Luckily, the jarring bump of the landing gear on solid ground brought her attention back to the mundane necessity of joining the herd of passengers as they crowded the center aisle to exit the plane. Uncharacteristically, her head was bowed as she walked into the airport, but an excited voice caught her ear.

“Trish! Over here!” It was her younger cousin, Maggie,

jumping up and down and waving her arms in a manner that was most undignified for a woman of her advanced position. It was one of the few sights in this world right now that could make Trish smile broadly as she changed course and headed for the nattily dressed young woman in the Donna Karan suit.

The two women came together in a long, unselfconsciously affectionate hug, which only made unbidden tears spill down Trish's cheeks that much faster as her cousin held and rocked her, whispering, "I'm so sorry, honey."

Afraid that she would dissolve into a mindless puddle if she didn't assert some control over her wayward emotions, Trish was the first to move away. She fished an ever-present tissue from her pocket and handed a clean one to Maggie. "Sheesh, where are my manners?" Maggie was saying, although Trish was completely preoccupied by her own misery. "Patricia Barton, I want to introduce you to my boss, Reed Douglas. Reed, this is my infamous cousin, Trish Barton."

Trish shook the hand of a man who, had she been her usual self, would have made her eyes roll back into her head. He was drop-dead sexy. Not gorgeous in the traditional sense, but he fit her requirements down to a "t." Short-feathered black hair, graying at the temples but not completely, framed disgustingly tanned skin. Stark blue eyes missed nothing as he deftly assumed her carryon bag himself, turning the three of them towards the baggage area.

"Isn't he wonderful? Isn't he... well, sexy as hell?" her cousin gushed as they followed meekly behind the Adonis in Armani. Six-three at least, very broad shouldered, and not a spare ounce on him. Although she didn't chase men in the least, Trish was usually extremely appreciative of any male eye-candy in her vicinity, especially dark haired hunks, which were her preference - although she often found in her own

relationships that she was more attracted to personalities than looks.

“Mmm.” She gave the man no more than a cursory glance.

Maggie sighed. Trish's distinct lack of response made her even more worried than she already was.

Trish spotted her gray tapestry suitcase with the handle wrapped with a bright pink ribbon and was just in the act of trying to wrestle its overstuffed weight to the floor when a long, bulging, pinstriped arm reached past her and lifted it effortlessly away from her. “Thank you,” she mumbled awkwardly.

“You're welcome,” rumbled back to her ears as she set off ahead of him to fall into step beside Maggie.

Before she knew it, they were more than comfortably ensconced in the back of an impressively long limousine, Maggie and Trish on one butter-soft leather side and Mr. High-Powered-Executive on the opposite seat, facing them.

Maggie reached across and caught Trish's hand. “Are you okay?” she asked quietly.

The tears returned instantly, and she barely choked out, “Yeah. I'll live – it's just not easy.” Her tone did not invite further conversation as she stared out the window.

Reed took the opportunity to study her and make comparisons between the cousins. Physically, they were opposites, with exception of the fact neither of them was as fashionably skinny as was the current norm. Where Maggie had shortish, almost silver blonde hair, her older cousin's longer locks tended towards a darker blonde, with a lot of reddish highlights. Trish was a few inches taller, but was just as well blessed with a lovely, ample figured as Maggie. He'd heard a lot about

Miss Tricia Barton from his gushing right-hand woman, and he was interested to see if any of the advanced publicity held true.

When they arrived at her cousin's house, Trish reached for her three heavy bags, but got "the look" from Reed until she backed off. *Jeez, the man was potent*, came the errant thought, *even in a three piece suit!* Maggie laughed and put her arm around Trish's shoulders as they walked into the new colonial style house. "He's a great boss, but everywhere except the board-room he leans a little towards chauvinistic – in a good way," she hastened to add, chiding herself for saying too much.

Maggie and her husband, Kell, were blissfully in love and almost parental in their concern for their favorite relative, even though Trish was four years older than Maggie and tended towards almost rabid independence - especially since the messy divorce - even to her own detriment at times. It had been Kell's idea to invite her down for some R & R. Trish taught the fifth grade and generally adored it, but this past year had been hellish in more ways than one, and the cousins were frankly worried about her. Her mother's passing after a long, debilitating illness had thrown her into a deep depression, and the lively, sparkling, funny person they adored was only just beginning to resurface.

Mr. Douglas seemed to know without direction exactly where to put her bags, so Trish took a moment for an all-over stretch, taking a deep breath in and out through her nose just the way Dave, her Yoga instructor, wanted her to and she – a confirmed mouth-breathing asthmatic – rarely did. Maggie's house was gorgeous and spotless, as usual, but somehow not sterile-feeling at all. It felt very much like home.

When Reed reappeared, Trish excused herself to change out of her pretty – but irreparably wrinkled – travel clothes and into jeans and a flowered cotton blouse. A quick look at the mirror in the adjoining bathroom told her she looked only

a little less worn and harried than usual, and could use a touch up of her light makeup since there was a disgustingly rich, eligible bachelor downstairs. Sometimes her mother decided to pop into her head at the most inopportune times. Instead, she wrinkled her upturned nose at her reflection and huffed as she turned away. She descended the stairs slowly and could hear quiet voices coming from the eat-in kitchen. "...never really been the same since her mom died. She's been so depressed lately. We're worried about her."

A deep, firm tone suggested, "If you're that concerned, then she probably needs professional help."

Trish frowned. Sometimes excellent hearing wasn't a good thing. Looking up at the ceiling, she lamented, "Well, Mom, I've only known the guy for five minutes, I'm not even my usual self, and he already thinks I'm a candidate for the loony bin! I think you can scratch him off the list of potential husbands, which is fine by me." Reed Douglas was just a bit too potent for her, she'd already decided, which was great because it meant the pressure was off for her to impress him, or even behave particularly well.

That thought – that she was, under normal circumstances, not the best-behaved person – brought a genuine smile to her lips.

Maggie crossed over and hugged her tightly. "Well, that's it. Tennessee agrees with you already – you're smiling! You'll have to stay the rest of the summer!"

Trish snorted. "I don't think so! I'm not much fun right now – I'll probably wear out my welcome within the next five minutes."

The conversation wandered aimlessly from there, with Reed only contributing slightly. He was busy watching Miss Patricia Barton as she moved easily about her cousin's kitchen. It was obvious that these two were more than cousins – they were good friends. Both seemed to enjoy cooking, and dinner

preparation was a team effort where the two women's styles blended well. They finished each other's sentences and added to each other's recipes with the casual familiarity of long time association. Once or twice, he even thought he caught an almost smile on Trish's sad face, a quick flash of humor that couldn't quite be suppressed. It lit her face from within, and Reed found himself wondering what she'd be like when she surfaced from beneath the shroud of melancholy she'd wrapped so tightly around herself. It surprised him to realize that he wanted to be there when that happened, and maybe even try to help extricate her. Hmm.

Kell's arrival was cause for more tears and kisses and openly affectionate hugs. Kell kept Trish by his side with a casual arm around her waist, and Reed's hands clenched into fists involuntarily, so that he had to consciously relax them. It was the most unusual reaction he'd ever had to a woman, and he wasn't at all sure he liked it.

Reed could afford to have pretty much any woman he wanted. Generally, they leaned towards world-weary socialites who had the same interest in commitment that he had – none – but who enjoyed the finer things in life and was used to having them. He could take them to the ballet or the opera or an exclusive restaurant and not worry that they were going to say or do the wrong thing. And in bed... his sex drive was legendary; he wore out most of his partners, had them crying “uncle” well before he would have felt the need to stop. An overachiever in most things, Reed made damned sure that lovemaking was one of the things he excelled at. No woman ever left his bed wanting more, or in any doubt that she was a desirable, beautiful woman.

Reed required monogamy from his women while they were together and remained entirely faithful himself for the duration of the relationship. Personally, he had always been a one-woman man, the result of having been raised by a

wonderful, loving mother who was hurt too many times by her two-timing husband who seemed to think that women – even his wife – were a convenience, like Kleenex, to be used up and thrown away. He'd left them when Reed was two years old. Although he had grown up in complete and utter poverty, he had always known that he was loved, and his mother had always told him that he could become anything he wanted. Reed knew from a very young age that the one thing he wanted to do in life was to take care of his mother in the way she should have been cared for, and he'd done exactly that. His mother had died several years ago, but not before he'd given her everything her heart desired – not that she'd ever asked for anything, the stubborn pain! She'd hated the cold, so he'd bought her a house in Florida, staffed it, took her on trips with him, made sure that, even the last moments of life she'd spent in his arms, were as comfortable as his buckets of money could make them.

His dad had contacted him once – *only once*. And, if he was smart, *never* again.

Still, even with his “one at a time” attitude, he'd never cared enough about any one woman to feel jealous. Anger and annoyance, yes, especially if they tried to cling after he'd decided it was over. But that was what had just happened when he watched Kell pull Trish close. Jealousy.

Interesting.

Maybe, though, it was just the fact that he hadn't had much time lately – hell, in the past year - to indulge his rampant sex drive. That was one of the problems with being rich – there were very few situations beyond complete retirement that afforded one the ability to lie back and enjoy the ride. He always had to be on top of everything. And although that was his favorite position – in sex and everything else - he barely had time to take a deep breath, much less spend valuable time courting and romancing a woman,

even at the bare-bones level, which no woman he knew would accept.

It was expected that he would stay for dinner, as he had in the past. It was a more subdued affair than it might have been, given Tricia's current state of mind. Normally, the three of them caused a ruckus whether they were at home or in a restaurant, discussing in no uncertain terms their opinions on whatever happened to be the most controversial topic they could come up with – everything from religion to politics, and none of the three of them were shy about expressing themselves... but no one ever changed anyone else's mind about anything, either. It was unusual to have three such strong personalities blend so well, but theirs did.

Tonight the dinner table conversation was quiet but not strained, until Maggie recounted a story about Tricia's mother, which made twin tears roll down the older cousin's face. Maggie was beside herself, apologizing profusely and patting Trish's hand.

"No, no. I want to remember her, even though it hurts right now," Trish whispered, stabbing at a garlic-roasted potato with a vengeance, although she couldn't really see it.

Reed felt the compulsive need to comfort - to hold her and touch her, stroke her hair and massage those tense shoulders, but instead he asked her about her work, which seemed to relax everyone noticeably.

While they were sipping coffee over dessert, Kell asked blithely, "So how's your writing coming?"

Both women nearly spit out their swallows of coffee, fixing him with glares fit to bore a hole through his head. Reed watched a blush fall over Tricia's face like a heavy velvet curtain falling onto a stage at the end of a play. She was embarrassed, but she was almost smiling about it. "Fine."

Intrigued, Reed turned in his chair to face her, watching her closely. "What do you write?"

Maggie began coughing spasmodically. “Don’t ask her that; you don’t want to know,” she warned as she took her coffee cup into the kitchen for a pretense of something to do. Maggie didn’t know if she wanted her cousin and her boss to get into this kind of conversation – at least, not in front of her, anyway, and definitely not in front of Kell. Might give him ideas, and he had too many damned ideas of his own!

But Trish was used to this type of question, and, much to her cousin’s relief, gave the pat answer. “I write romance novels.” Now, both Maggie and Kell knew that Trish considered what she wrote to be just a couple of steps more erotic than a paperback romance novel, but the general public might disagree with that watered-down description.

“Have you been published?”

Trish got up and started to help clear the table. “On the web, yes, but I have a story that I’m thinking of pitching to a paperback publisher, eventually.”

Reed picked up his own plate and headed for the kitchen, too. He was too intrigued by everyone’s reaction to let this go. “I have some connections in the publishing industry – when you think it’s ready, let me know and I’ll see what I can do.”

His more than generous offer stopped traffic in the kitchen for a moment, while the two cousins’ eyes met in silent communication. “Thank you, Mr. Douglas.”

“Reed, please.”

“Reed,” Tricia began again, loading the dishwasher hurriedly so she wouldn’t have to look into that intent gaze. “It’s going to be a while yet.” *Yeah*, she thought, *and a cold day in hell before I’ll let you read what I write!* The embarrassing idea of a man like Reed Douglas reading any of her stories made her blush come back full bloom. If he were into the same thing that she was into – with that build and that “ask how high” temperament, he’d be a force to be reckoned with for whatever lucky woman – *lucky?* – that made him responsible for

monitoring her behavior. It was the penalties for misbehavior he'd exact out of her hide that made Trish shudder – and it wasn't with revulsion.

Although they all retired to the living room once the dishes were taken care of, Reed could see that Tricia was failing fast. He rose, saying, "Well, some of us have to go into work tomorrow."

Maggie crossed the room just to smack him sharply for that comment. "I'm on vacation. I know you – the workaholic - don't know the meaning of the word, but it means to rest and relax."

"Oh, is that what it means?" Reed asked innocently as everyone gathered around the front door to see him off. Trish had her hand over her mouth as she yawned impolitely. That sharp gaze settled on her again like a touch. "You should be in bed. You're exhausted."

The imp in Trish decided to make an appearance. "Thanks, *Dad*."

Kell and Maggie "oohed" dramatically at the dig.

Pulling himself up to his full height, Reed looked down at her. "I'm *only* forty-five. How old are you?"

Despite its inherent impoliteness, she answered the question. "Thirty-seven."

A devilish grin spread over his face. "Even *I'm* not that precocious!" That got a laugh out of her, and her smile was radiant.

Trish held out her hand. "It was nice to meet you."

Reed shook it solemnly, noting its delicate slenderness. "It was nice meeting you, too. Maybe I'll wander over here again on the pretext of work."

"Don't you dare!" came an indignant cry from Maggie.

With a bold wink at Trish, Reed sang out, "Night." He barely let go of her hand before turning to walk out the door.

“Well, you sure made an impression on him,” Maggie teased as Trish walked past her to head up the stairs.

“Yeah, right,” Trish replied, her voice full of doubt. “I’m going to bed. I’m beat.”

But as her head hit the pillow, unbidden thoughts filled her mind – not the usual sad memories of her mother’s last days, but rather snapshots of a hard, craggy face with full lips and a soft, deep voice that resonated in her ear and made shivers dance unbidden up her spine.

Tricia punched the pillows hard and forced herself to relax into sleep. Ah, well. She’d probably never see him again, anyway, so there was no sense mooning over drop-dead sexy Mr. Reed Douglas.