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Sleepless in Manhattan

Written by Sarah Morgan

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Sleepless in Manhattan

by

Sarah Morgan

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Sleepless in Manhattan, Sarah Morgan

There is something in the New York air that makes sleep useless.

—Simone de Beauvoir

Chapter 1

When you're climbing the ladder, always assume someone is looking up your skirt.

—Paige

"Promotion. I think it might be my favorite word. You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this." Swept along by the tide of commuters, Paige Walker followed her two friends Eva and Frankie up the steps from the subway and emerged to blue skies and sunshine. Far above her the skyscrapers of Manhattan reached up to fluffy clouds, a forest of steel and glass winking in the bright morning sunlight, each competing to be taller than the next. The Empire State Building. The Rockefeller Center. Higher, bigger, better. *Look at me.*

Paige looked, and smiled. Today was the day. Even the weather was celebrating.

New York had to be the most exciting city in the world. She loved the vibrancy, the promise, the pace.

She'd landed a job at Star Events straight out of college and been unable to believe her luck, especially when her two best friends had got jobs there, too. Working for a big company headquartered in Manhattan was her dream. The sheer energy of the city seeped through her skin and into her veins, like a shot of adrenaline. Here, she could be whoever she wanted to be. She could live her life without being asked how she was feeling twenty-five times a day. In the breathless bustle that was New York City, people were too busy thinking about themselves to have time to think about other people. Interaction skimmed the surface and never went deep. She blended into the crowd and that suited her just fine.

Paige didn't want to stand out. She didn't want to be different, precious or special. She didn't want to be anyone's poster girl for brave.

She wanted to be anonymous. Normal, whatever that was. And here in New York, finally it had happened.

Urban chaos offered its own type of privacy. Everything moved faster.

Everything, that was, except her friend Eva, who was not a morning person.

"Promotion isn't my favorite word. *Love* is probably my favorite word." Eva yawned sleepily. "Or maybe *sex*, which is the next best thing. I think. I can't honestly remember because I haven't had it in so long. I'm worried I've forgotten all the moves. If I ever get naked with a guy again, I might have to buy a 'how to' book. Why is no one in Manhattan interested in a relationship? I don't want a hookup. I want to mate for life. Ducks can do it—why can't we?" She stopped to adjust her shoe and soft waves of blond hair bounced forward along with her breasts, as generously curved as the plumpest cupcake. The man walking toward her stopped abruptly, mouth open, and four other men slammed into him.

Attempting to avert a human pileup, Paige grabbed Eva's arm and pulled her to one side. "You're a walking hazard."

"Is it my fault my laces untie themselves?"

"Your laces aren't the problem. The problem is that you just announced to the whole of Manhattan that you haven't had sex in ages."

"The problem," Frankie said, closing in to form a blockade, "is that a dozen investment bankers are now getting in line to manage your assets. And I'm not talking about your finances. Stand up, Sleeping Beauty. I'll tie your shoe."

"I don't have any finances to manage, but at least that means I don't lie awake at night worrying about yield and interest rates. That's a bonus, although not quite the bonus those bankers are probably used to." Eva stood up and rubbed her eyes. Before ten in the morning, she had trouble focusing. "You don't have to tie my shoe. I am not six years old."

"You weren't this lethal when you were six years old. It's safer if I do it. I don't have a cleavage that should come with a health warning or a brain incapable of filtering what comes out of my mouth. And move to the side. This is New York City. It's virtually a criminal offense to block the flow of commuters." There was a hint of irritation in Frankie's voice, enough to make Eva frown as she stuck her foot out.

"You can't be prosecuted for being in someone's way. What's wrong with you this morning?"

"Nothing."

Paige exchanged glances with Eva. They both knew *nothing* meant *something*, and both knew better than to push for answers. Frankie spoke when she was ready, which was usually only after she'd bottled it up for a while. "Blocking the flow of commuters could be deemed provocation." Paige said. "And she was this lethal. You've forgotten her eighth birthday party when Freddie Major threatened to beat up Paul Matthews if she didn't agree to marry him."

"Freddie Major." The memory drew a ghost of a smile from Frankie. "I put a frog down his shirt."

Eva shuddered. "You were an evil child."

"What can I say? I'm not good with men. Of any age." Frankie thrust her can of drink into Eva's hand. "Hold that, and if you throw it in the trash our friendship is over."

"Our friendship has survived more than twenty years. I like to think it would survive me throwing your junk food in the trash."

"It wouldn't." Athletic and supple, Frankie dropped into a crouch. "Everyone is allowed a vice. Unhealthy eating is mine."

"Diet cola is not breakfast! Your eating habits are life threatening. Why won't you let me make you a delicious kale and spinach smoothie?" Eva pleaded.

"Because I like to keep my breakfast down once I've eaten it, and my eating habits are no more life threatening than your dress habits. Anyway, I wasn't in a breakfast mood today." Frankie tied the laces of Eva's bright green Converse as a river of commuters flowed past them, all intent on reaching their destination as fast as possible. She winced as someone knocked into her. "Why don't you ever do a double knot, Ev?"

"Because I dressed in my sleep."

Frankie stood up and plucked her diet cola from Eva's hand, her hair tumbling in fiery flames past her shoulders. "Ouch! Excuse *me*." She adjusted her glasses and turned her head to glare at the retreating figure of a man in a suit. "It's good manners to anesthetize someone before you remove their kidneys with your briefcase." Mumbling threats under her breath, she rubbed her ribs with her hand. "There are days when I want to go back to living in a small town."

"You're kidding. You'd move back to Puffin Island?" Paige shifted her bag onto the other shoulder. "I don't ever feel that way, not even when I'm on the subway and I'm so squashed it feels as if I'm being hugged by a boa constrictor. Not that the island isn't pretty, because it is, but—it's an island. Enough said." She'd felt marooned from civilization by the choppy waters of Penobscot Bay, smothered by a thick blanket of parental anxiety. "I like living in a place where people don't know every detail of my life."

At times it had felt like collective parenting. *Paige, why aren't you wearing a sweater? Paige, I saw the helicopter taking you to hospital again, you poor thing.* She'd felt trapped and constrained, as if someone had grasped her in a tight fist, determined to keep her from escaping.

Life had been all about keeping her well, keeping her safe, keeping her protected, until she'd wanted to scream out the question that had burned inside her for most of her childhood—

What was the point in being alive if you weren't allowed to live?

Moving to New York City was the best, most exciting thing that had ever happened to her and it was different from Puffin Island in every possible way. Some would have said worse.

Not Paige.

Frankie was frowning. "We all know I can't set foot on Puffin Island again. I'd be lynched. There are a few things I miss, but one thing I *don't* miss is everyone staring at me angrily because my mother has had yet another affair with a husband who doesn't belong to her." She shoved her hair out of her eyes and finished her drink. Anger, frustration and misery radiated from her and when she scrunched the empty can in her fist her knuckles were white. "At least in Manhattan there are a couple of men my mother hasn't had sex with. Although there is officially one fewer than yesterday."

"Again?" Finally Paige understood the reason her friend was so brittle. "She texted you?"

"Only when I didn't answer her fourteen calls." Frankie shrugged. "You were asking why I wasn't in the mood for breakfast, Ev—apparently he was twenty-eight and banged like a barn door in a gale force wind. The level of detail kind of put me off my food." Her flippant tone did nothing to disguise how upset she was, and Paige slid her arm through Frankie's.

"It won't last."

"Of course it won't last. My mother's relationships never last. But in the time she's with him she'll manage to strip him of a significant quantity of his assets. Don't feel sorry for him. I blame him as much as her. Why can't men keep it zipped? Why don't they ever say no?"

"Plenty of guys say no." Paige thought about her own parents and their long happy marriage.

"Not the ones my mother hooks. My biggest dread is that one day I'm going to meet one of them at an event. Can you imagine that? Maybe I should change my name."

"You're never going to bump into them. New York City is a crowded place."

Eva took Frankie's other arm. "One day she is going to fall in love, and all this will stop."

"Oh please! Even you can't romanticize this situation. Love has nothing to do with it," Frankie said. "Men are my mother's job. Her income. She is the CEO of the BMD corporation, otherwise known as Bleed Men Dry."

Eva sighed. "She's very troubled."

"Troubled?" Frankie stopped dead. "Ev, my mother left troubled behind five stops ago. Can we talk about something else? I should never have mentioned it. It's a guaranteed way to ruin my day and it isn't as if it hasn't happened before. Living in New York has many advantages, but being able to avoid my mother most of the time is the biggest one."

Paige thought for the millionth time how lucky she was with her parents. True, they worried and fussed a bit too much, which drove her insane, but compared to Frankie's

mother they were wonderfully normal. "Living in New York is the best thing that ever happened to any of us. How did we survive without Bloomingdale's and the Magnolia Bakery?"

"Or feeding the ducks in Central Park," Eva said wistfully. "That's my favorite thing. I used to do it with my grandmother every weekend."

Frankie's gaze softened. "You miss her horribly, don't you?"

"I'm doing okay." Eva's smile dimmed a little. "Good days and bad days. It's not as bad as it was a year ago. She was ninety-three so I can hardly complain, can I? It's just that it feels weird not having her around. She was the one constant in my life and now she's gone. And I have no one. I'm not connected to anyone."

"You're connected to us," Paige said. "We're your family. We should go out this weekend. Shopping? We could hit the makeup counter at Saks Fifth Avenue and then go dancing."

"Dancing? I *love* dancing." Eva wiggled her hips provocatively and almost caused another pileup.

Frankie urged her forward. "There aren't enough gel inserts in the world to cope with shopping and dancing in the same trip. And Saturday night is movie night. I vote for a horror fest."

Eva recoiled. "No way. I'd be awake all night."

"It wouldn't get my vote, either." Paige pulled a face. "Maybe Matt would let us have chick flick night to celebrate my promotion."

"No chance." Frankie straightened her glasses. "Your brother would jump off his own roof before he agreed to chick flick night. Thank goodness."

Eva shrugged. "How about going out tonight instead of Saturday? I'm never going to meet someone if I don't go out."

"People don't come to New York to meet someone. They come for the culture, the experience, the money—the list is long, but meeting the man you're going to marry isn't on it."

"So why did you come here?"

"Because I needed to live somewhere big and anonymous and my best friends were here. And I love certain parts of it," Frankie conceded. "I love The High Line, the Botanical Gardens and our secret little corner of Brooklyn. I love our brownstone and I will be forever grateful to your brother for letting us rent the place from him."

"Did you hear that?" Eva nudged Paige. "Frankie said something positive about a man."

"Matt is one of the few decent men on the planet. He's a friend, that's all. I happen to enjoy being single. What's wrong with that?" Frankie's tone was cool. "I am self-sufficient and proud of it. I make my own money and I answer to no one. Being single is a choice, not a disease."

"And my choice would be to not be single. That's not wrong either, so don't lecture me. I can't help feeling a little despondent that the condom in my purse has passed its expiry date." Eva tucked a wayward blond curl behind her ear and skillfully steered the conversation away from relationships. "I *love* summer. Sundresses, flip-flops, Shakespeare in the Park, sailing on the Hudson, long evenings up on our roof terrace. I still can't believe your brother built that. He's so damn smart."

Paige didn't disagree.

Older by eight years, her brother had left their island home long before she had. He'd chosen to start his landscape architecture business right here in New York City and now that business was thriving.

"The roof garden is heaven." Frankie increased her pace. "What happened to that big piece of business in Midtown? Did that come off for him?"

"Still waiting to hear, but his company is doing well."

And now it was her turn.

Her promotion was the next step in her life plan. It would also hopefully be another step to curing her family's tendency to be overprotective.

Born with a heart defect, Paige's childhood had been a raft of hospital visits, doctors and loving parents who had struggled to hide their anxiety. Growing up, she'd felt disempowered. The day she'd left hospital after what everyone hoped was her last operation, she'd vowed to change that. Fortunately, apart from the occasional routine health check, she was free from constant medical intervention and was fine now. She knew she was one of the lucky ones and she was determined to make the most of every day. The only way to do that had been to move away from Puffin Island and so that was what she'd done.

She had a whole new life and things were going well.

"We need to hurry. We can't be late." Eva interrupted Paige's thoughts.

"She cannot give us the 'part-time' speech when we were all working until the early hours last night."

Paige didn't need to ask who *she* was. *She* was Cynthia, Director of Events, and the only thing Paige didn't love about her job. Cynthia had joined Star Events a year after Paige, and the atmosphere in the company had immediately changed. It was as if someone had emptied toxic waste into a clear mountain stream and poisoned everyone who drank from it.

"I still can't believe she fired poor Matilda. Have either of you heard from her?"

"I've been calling and calling," Eva said. "She isn't answering. I'm worried. She needed the job badly. I don't have her address or I'd visit in person."

"Keep calling. And I'm going to try and persuade Cynthia to change her mind."

"What is her problem? She's so angry all the time. If she hates the job so much, why doesn't she leave? Every time I see her I want to apologize even though I haven't done anything wrong. I feel as if she's the Great White Shark at the top of the food chain and I'm a little seal she's going to eat in one mouthful."

Paige shook her head. "She is never going to leave. Which is another reason I want this promotion. I'll have less contact with her, more responsibility and my own accounts." She'd gain more experience and one day, hopefully not too far away, she was going to start her own business and be her own boss. She'd be the one in control.

It was her dream, but she wasn't prepared to stop at dreaming.

She had a plan.

"You'll be a brilliant boss," Eva said generously. "From the day you organized my eighth birthday party, I knew you were going places. Of course it wouldn't be hard to be a better boss than Cynthia. I heard someone say the other day that she isn't happy until she's made everyone cry at least once." Eva did an emergency stop beside another store window, seals and sharks forgotten in the face of retail nirvana. "Do you think that top would fit me?"

"Maybe, but there's no way it's fitting in your closet." Paige dragged her away. "You need to throw something out before you buy anything new."

"Is it my fault that I get emotionally attached to things?"

Frankie walked to the other side of Eva to stop her window gazing. "How can anyone be emotionally attached to clothes?"

"Easy. If something good happens to me while I'm wearing something, I wear it again when I need to feel positive. For example today I'm wearing my lucky shirt to make extra sure that Paige's promotion comes with a massive pay raise."

"How can a shirt be lucky?"

"Good things have happened to me while I've been wearing this shirt."

Frankie shook her head. "I don't want to know."

"Good, because I'm not telling you. You don't know everything about me. I have a mystical side." Eva craned her neck to try and look in windows. "Could I—"

"No." Paige gave her a tug. "You're not mystical, Ev. You're an open book."

"Better than cruel and inhuman. And we all have our own, individual addictions. Frankie's is flowers, yours is red lipstick—" Eva glanced at her. "That's a nice shade. New?"

"Yes. It's called *Summer Success*."

"Very apt. We should celebrate tonight. Or do you think Cynthia will want to take you out?"

"Cynthia doesn't socialize." Paige had spent countless hours trying to understand her boss but still had no insight. "I've never heard her talk about anyone or anything except work."

"Do you think she has a sex life?"

"None of us has a sex life. This is Manhattan. Everyone is too busy to have sex."

"Apart from my mother," Frankie muttered.

"And Jake," Eva intervened quickly. "He was at the Adams event the other night. Sexiest guy in the room. Smart too. He gets laid regularly, but I guess being scorching hot and having that killer body helps. I can see why you had a crazy teenage crush on him, Paige."

Paige felt as if someone had thrust a fist into her stomach. "That was a long time ago."

The thought of Jake having sex shouldn't bother her; it really shouldn't.

"First love is very powerful," Eva said. "The feeling never quite goes away."

"So is first disappointment. That feeling never goes away, either. My crush on Jake ended a long time ago, so you can stop looking at me like that."

But the relationship wasn't easy.

There were days when she wished Jake wasn't her brother's closest friend.

If he'd been some random guy from her teenage years she could have moved on, laughed and forgotten about it, instead of which she was destined to carry the embarrassing memory around like a ball and chain. It was always there, clanking behind her.

Even now, so many years later, she cringed when she thought about the things she'd said to him. Worse, the things she'd done.

She'd been naked—

The memory made her want to slide through a hole in the floor.

Did he ever think about it? Because she thought about it a lot.

Eva was still talking. "I'm willing to bet he's on a million women's bucket list."

Frankie shook her head in disbelief. "When people are compiling a bucket list they usually choose skydiving or a trip to Machu Picchu, all amazing life experiences, Ev."

"I'm pretty sure being kissed by Jake Romano would be an amazing life experience. Much better than skydiving, but then I'm scared of heights."

Paige kept walking.

She was never going to find out.

Even when she'd thrown herself at him, Jake had never come close to kissing her.

She'd dreamed of him being overcome by lust. Instead he'd gently disentangled himself from her clinging limbs, as if he'd suddenly found himself covered in laundry blown by the wind.

His patient kindness had been the most humiliating blow of all. He hadn't been fighting lust; he had been fighting *her*, fending her off.

It was the first and only time she'd ever said "I love you" to a man. She'd been so *sure* he had feelings for her and the fact that she'd got it so wrong had governed all her interactions with men since. She no longer trusted her instincts.

These days she was very, very careful with her heart. She exercised, she ate her five portions of fruit and vegetables and she focused on her work, which always proved more exciting than any of the few relationships she'd had.

Paige paused outside the offices of Star Events and breathed deeply. She didn't need to be thinking about Jake right before the most important meeting of her life. He had a tendency to turn her brain and her knees to jelly. She needed to focus. "This is it. No more laughing. Fun is not allowed inside these walls."

Cynthia was waiting for them by the reception desk.

Paige felt a flash of irritation.

Surely she could manage *one* small smile on a day like today?

Fortunately even Cynthia couldn't spoil the job for Paige. She loved it. Managing every detail and making each event a memorable occasion was fun. The most important thing for her was a happy client. As a child she'd loved organizing parties for her friends. Now it was her job, and her job was about to get a whole lot bigger.

Anticipating the new level of responsibility lifted her spirits and she walked across the foyer with a smile on her face.

Senior Event Manager.

Already she had plans. Her team was going to work hard because they wanted to, not because they were afraid of repercussions. And the first thing she was going to do was find a way to hire back poor Matilda.

"Good morning, Cynthia."

"As far as I recall, your contract says nothing about working part-time."

If anyone could kill the excitement of the moment, it was Cynthia.

"The Capital Insurance event didn't finish until past midnight last night and the trains were packed this morning. We were—"

"Taking advantage." Cynthia glanced pointedly at the clock on the wall even though she knew perfectly well what time it was. "I need to see you in my office right away. Let's get this done."

This was a meeting about her promotion and she wanted to "get this done"?

Her friends melted away, and Paige heard Eva softly humming the theme from *Jaws*.

It lifted her mood.

Working with her friends was one of the best things about this job.

As she followed Cynthia toward her office they passed Alice, one of the junior account managers.

Catching a glimpse of reddened eyes Paige stopped walking.

"Alice? Is everything—"

But Alice passed her quickly and Paige made a mental note to seek her out later and find out what was wrong.

Boyfriend problems?

Work issues?

She knew several of the staff had been horrified that Matilda had been fired after her unfortunate accident with a tray of champagne. It had created a general atmosphere of unease. Everyone was secretly wondering who would be next.

Following her boss into her office, Paige closed the door.

Soon she'd be in a position to make her own decisions about staffing. In the meantime, this was her moment. She'd worked hard for it and she was going to enjoy it.

Please let the pay raise be good.

Eva was right, they should celebrate later. A few glasses of something cold and sparkling. And then maybe dancing. They hadn't been dancing in ages.

Cynthia reached for a file. "As you know we've been looking at ways to streamline Star Events and reduce costs. I don't need to tell you that we're operating in a challenging market."

"I know, and I have some ideas I'd love to share with you." Paige reached for her bag but Cynthia shook her head and held up her hand.

"We're letting you go, Paige."

"Go? Go where?" It hadn't occurred to her that promotion might mean transferring to another office. And there was only one other office. Los Angeles. The other side of the country. This, she hadn't expected. She loved New York City. She loved living and working with her friends. "I assumed I'd be staying here. Moving to Los Angeles is a big step." Although if she wanted promotion she should probably be prepared to accept that it might involve relocation. Maybe she should ask for a little time to think about it. That was acceptable, wasn't it?

Cynthia opened the file. "Why would you think we were relocating you to Los Angeles?"

"You said you were letting me go."

"We're letting you go from Star Events."

Paige stared at her stupidly. "Excuse me?"

"We're making cuts." Cynthia leafed through the file and didn't meet her eyes. "Putting it bluntly, business has fallen off a cliff. Everyone in the hospitality industry is laying off employees and reducing hours."

Letting her go.

Not promoting her or moving her to Los Angeles.

Letting her go.

There was a buzzing in her ears. "But—I've brought in nine major new clients in the past six months. Almost all the new business growth has been down to me and—"

"We lost Adams Construction as a client."

Shock flashed through her. "What?"

Chase Adams, the owner of the most successful construction company in Manhattan, had been one of their biggest clients. It was after an event for his company that Matilda had been fired.

Karma, Paige thought. First Cynthia had fired Matilda and now Chase Adams had fired them.

And she was a casualty.

"I wasn't in a position to argue." Cynthia continued. "That stupid girl Matilda ruined their event."

"That's why he fired us? Because of an accident?"

"Spilling one glass of champagne might be termed an accident, but dropping an entire tray is closer to a catastrophe. Adams insisted that I get rid of her. I tried to persuade him to rethink, but he wouldn't. The man owns half of Manhattan. He's one of the most powerful players in this city."

"Then he didn't need to crush poor Matilda." Paige could think of a few choice words to describe Chase Adams, none of them flattering. She certainly didn't blame Matilda.

"It's history. Naturally we'll give you excellent references for your next job."

Next job?

She wanted this job. The job she loved. *The job she'd earned.*

Her mouth was so dry it was hard to speak. Her heart pounded, a brutal reminder of how fragile life was. This morning she'd felt as if she owned the world and now control had been wrenched from her hands.

Other people were deciding her future. Closed doors and conversations. People expecting her to wear a brave face.

And she was an expert at that. She did it without thinking whenever life got tough, like a computer going into sleep mode.

She knew how to bury her feelings and she buried them now.

Stay professional, Paige.

"You told me that if I met my performance objectives I would be promoted. I exceeded them."

"The situation has changed and as a commercial operation we need to be fluid and react to the needs of the market."

"How many people? Is that why Alice was crying? She's been laid off? Who else?" Was it the same for Frankie and Eva?

Eva had no family to turn to and Paige knew Frankie would stop eating rather than ask her mother for a single cent.

"I'm not in a position to discuss other employees with you."

Paige sat still, battered by emotion. She felt a dizzying loss of control.

She'd trusted her employers. They'd made big promises. She'd delivered time and time again, worked hideous hours and put her future in their hands. And this was what they did with that trust? They'd given her no warning. No hint.

"This company has grown because of me. I can show you numbers that prove it."

"We've worked as a team." Cynthia was cool. "You are good at your job. You have a tendency to be a little too friendly toward the people who work for you, and you should say no to the client more often—that episode when you had that man's suit express dry-cleaned in the middle of a party was beyond ridiculous—but apart from that I have no complaints. This isn't about your work."

"I dry-cleaned his suit because he'd spilled his drink and he was trying to impress his boss. He gave us a huge piece of business after that. And I'm friendly because I like working in a happy team and a positive environment."

Something Cynthia knew nothing about.

Looking at her boss was like looking at a locked door. Nothing she said was ever going to open it. She was wasting her time.

Instead of a promotion and a pay raise, she was out of a job.

She'd have to turn to her family for help. Once again she'd be causing her parents and her brother anxiety. And their instinct would be to protect her.

Paige felt her heart pound and instinctively lifted her palm to her chest. Through the fabric of her shirt she felt the solid shape of the little silver heart she sometimes wore hidden under her clothes.

For a moment she was back in the hospital bed, seventeen years old, surrounded by get well cards and balloons, waiting for her operation and scared out of her mind. Her brain had been conjuring awful scenarios when the door had opened and a doctor had strolled into the room wearing a white coat and carrying a clipboard.

She'd braced herself for more tests, more pain, more bad news, and then recognized Jake.

"They wouldn't let me in because it's not visiting hours, so I'm flexing the rules. Call me Dr. Romano." He'd winked at her and closed the door. "Time for your medicine, Miss Walker. No squealing or I'll remove your brain and donate it to medical science."

He'd always made her laugh. His presence did other things to her, too. Things that made her wish she were wearing something slinky and sexy instead of an oversize T-shirt with a cartoon on the front. "Are you doing the operation?"

"I faint at the sight of blood and I don't know a brain from a butt, so no, I'm not. Here. I bought you something." He'd dug his hand into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small box. "Better open it quickly, before I'm arrested."

For a crazy moment she'd thought he was giving her an engagement ring and her heart, her misbehaving heart, had missed a beat.

"What is it?" Hands shaking, she'd opened the box and there, nestled on a bed of midnight-blue silk, was a beautiful silver heart on a delicate chain. "Oh, Jake—"

Engraved on the back were three words.

A strong heart.

"I thought yours could do with a little help. Wear it, honey, and think of it as reinforcements anytime your own is in trouble."

Maybe it wasn't a ring, but he'd called her *honey* and he'd given her a necklace.

That had to mean something, surely?

She'd stopped worrying about the operation and thought of nothing but Jake.

By the time they came to collect her to take her for her operation, she'd had a whole future mapped out with him. She'd named their children.

They'd had to drag the necklace from her clenched fist in the operating room, and the moment she was able she put it on again.

A strong heart.

She always wore it when she needed courage and she was wearing it today.

She stood up, her movements automatic. She had to start looking for jobs. She couldn't waste a moment and she wouldn't waste time fighting the inevitable.

"You should clear your desk today," Cynthia said. "We'll give you a severance package of course."

Severance.

If *promotion* was her favorite word, *sever* was her least favorite. It sounded brutal. She felt as if she was having major surgery all over again, only this time they'd taken a scalpel to her hopes and dreams. So much for climbing the ladder. So much for her plans to eventually start her own business.

Walking out of Cynthia's office, she closed the door between them.

Reality seeped in. If she'd known what was going to happen, she wouldn't have bought that coffee on the way in to work. She wouldn't have treated herself to another lipstick when she already had plenty. She stood, frozen, regretting every cent she'd spent over the past few years. In the darkest part of her life she'd promised herself that she'd live every moment, but she hadn't anticipated this.

She walked down an empty corridor into the nearest restroom, the only sound the echo of her heels.

Less than an hour ago she'd been excited about the future. Optimistic.

Now she was unemployed.

Unemployed.

Alone in the soulless room, finally she let the mask slip.

In his glass-fronted office in Downtown Manhattan, Jake Romano sat with his feet on his desk only half listening to the man at the other end of the phone.

Across from him a young, blonde reporter fidgeted and tried to check the time without him noticing. Jake rarely gave interviews but somehow this woman had managed to maneuver her way past his assistant. Because he had a certain admiration for tenacity and creativity, he hadn't thrown her out.

It was an impulse he was regretting. He was willing to bet she was, too. So far they'd been interrupted three times and each time she grew a little more frustrated.

Given that her questions so far had bordered on the intrusive, he decided to make her wait a little longer and focused on the call. "You don't need a content strategist for a lightweight application redesign. What you need is a smart copywriter."

The reporter bent her head and checked over her notes. Jake wondered how many more interruptions she'd tolerate before she blew.

He swung his legs off the desk and decided to end the call. "I know you're a busy man so I'm going to stop you there. I understand you want a beautiful design, but a beautiful design isn't worth shit if your content is bad. And theory is great but what matters is solving real problems for real people. Talking of problems, I'm going to think about yours and get back to you. If I decide we're the right people for the job, then I'll talk to the team and we'll have a face-to-face. Leave it with me." He broke the connection. "Sorry about that," he said, turning his attention to the reporter.

Her smile was as false as his apology. "No problem. You're a difficult man to get hold of. I know that. I've been trying to set up this interview for over a year."

"And now you've succeeded. So are we done here?"

"I have a couple more questions." She paused, as if regrouping. "We've talked about your business, your philanthropic goals and your company ideology. I'd like to tell our readers a little about Jake, the man. You were born in the roughest part of Brooklyn and you were adopted when you were six years old."

Jake kept his expression blank.

The reporter looked at him expectantly. "I didn't hear your answer—?"

"I didn't hear a question."

She flushed. "Do you see your mother?"

"All the time. She runs the best Italian restaurant in New York. You should check it out."

"You're talking about your adoptive mother—" she checked the name "—Maria Romano. I was talking about your real mother."

"Maria is my real mother." Those who knew him would have recognized the tone and taken cover but the reporter sat oblivious, like a gazelle unaware she was being stalked by an animal right at the top of the food chain. "So you're not in touch with your birth mother? I wonder how she feels now that you're running a multimillion-dollar global business."

"Feel free to ask her." Jake stood up. "We're out of time."

"You don't like talking about your past?"

"The past is history," Jake said in a cool tone, "and I was always better at Math. Now if you'll excuse me I have clients waiting for my attention. Paying clients."

"Of course." The woman slid her recording device into her bag. "You're an example of the American dream, Jake. An inspiration to millions of Americans who had it tough growing up. Despite your past, you've created a highly successful company."

Not despite, Jake thought. Because of.

He'd created a highly successful company because of his past.

He closed the door on the reporter and paced across to the window that wrapped itself around two sides of his corner office. Sun glinted through the floor-to-ceiling glass and he surveyed the high-rises of Downtown Manhattan spread beneath his feet as if he were Midas studying his pile of gold.

His eyes felt gritty from lack of sleep, but he kept them open, drinking in the view, gaining satisfaction from the knowledge that he'd earned every dazzling piece of that view.

Not bad for a boy from the wrong part of Brooklyn who'd been told he'd never make anything of himself.

Had he chosen to, he could have given the reporter a story that would have made the front page and probably won her a Pulitzer.

He'd grown up looking at the shiny promise of Manhattan from the other side of the water. He'd blocked out the incessant barking of dogs, the sounds of shouting in the street, the honking of car horns and had stared enviously at a different life. Looking across the fast-flowing tidal stretch that was the East River, he'd seen buildings reaching up to the sky and wanted to live across the water, where skyscrapers stood tall, where glass reflected light and ambition.

It had seemed as faraway and remote as Alaska. But he'd had plenty of time to stare. He'd never known his father and even as a young child he'd spent most of his time alone while his teenage mother worked three jobs.

I love you, Jake. It's you and me against the world.

Jake stared blankly at the crisscross of streets far beneath him.

It had been a long time since anyone had mentioned her. And a long time since that night when he'd sat alone on the steps to their apartment, waiting for her to come home.

What would have happened to him if Maria hadn't taken him in?

Jake knew he had more than a loving home to thank her for.

He shifted his gaze from the view to the computer on his desk.

It was Maria who had given him his first computer, an ancient machine that had belonged to one of her cousins. Jake had been fourteen years old when he'd hacked into his first website, fifteen when he'd realized he had abilities other people didn't. When he'd turned sixteen he picked a company with the largest glass office, turned up at the door and told them how vulnerable they were to cyber attack. They'd laughed, until he'd shown them how easily he could break through their security defenses. Then they'd stopped laughing and listened.

He'd become a legend in cyber security, the teenager with charisma, confidence and a brain so sharp he'd held conversations with men twice his age who knew half as much.

He'd shown them how little they knew, exposed the weaknesses, then taught them how to fix it. At school he skipped every English class, but never Math. Numbers, he understood.

He'd come from nowhere, but he'd been determined that soon he was going somewhere and he was going there so fast he left everyone behind.

It was exploiting those gifts that had put him through college and, much later, bought his mother—because that was how he thought of Maria even before she'd officially adopted him—a restaurant so that she could share her cooking skills with the good folks of Brooklyn without having them packed into her kitchen as tightly as olives in a jar.

With the help of his closest friend, Matt, he'd set up his own company and developed a piece of encryption software which was bought by a major defense company for a sum that ensured he would never have money worries again.

Then, bored by the overcrowded cyber security market he'd turned his attention to the growing field of digital marketing.

Now his company offered everything from creative content to user experience design although he still accepted the occasional private request to consult on cyber security issues. It had been one of those requests that had kept him up until the early hours the previous night.

His office door opened again and Dani, one of his junior staff, entered carrying coffee.

"I thought you'd need this. That girl was harder to shake off than a mosquito on a blood bag." She was wearing striped socks and no shoes, a dress code followed by at least half the people working for him. Jake had no interest in what people wore to work. Nor was he

interested in where a person went to college. He cared about two things. Passion and potential.

Dani had both.

She put the coffee on his desk. The aroma rose, strong and pungent, slicing through the clouds in his brain that reminded him he'd been working until three in the morning.

"She asked you questions?"

"A few thousand. Mostly about your personal life. She wanted to know whether the reason you rarely date the same woman twice is because of your messed-up childhood."

He peeled the cap off the coffee. "Did you tell her to mind her own business?"

"No. I told her that the reason you don't date the same woman twice is because at last count there were around seventy thousand single women in Manhattan, and if you start seeing them more than once you're never going to get through them all." Her expression cheerful, she handed him a stack of messages. "Your friend Matt called four times. The guy sounded stressed."

"Matt is never stressed." Jake took a sip of coffee, savoring the aroma and the much-needed pump of caffeine. "He is Mr. Calm."

"Well he sounded like Mr. Stressed a moment ago." Dani picked up the four empty coffee cups from his desk and stacked them together. "You know, I don't mind feeding your coffee habit but once in a while you could eat a meal or sleep at night. It's what normal people do, in case you were wondering."

"I wasn't wondering." What he was wondering was why his friend was calling in the middle of the working day. And why leave four messages with his assistant rather than calling him directly? Picking up his phone he saw six missed calls. Concern tugged at him. "Did Matt say what it was about?"

"No, but he wanted you to call back as soon as possible. That reporter was impressed that you turned down business from Brad Hetherington. Is that true?" She made a grab for a cup that almost toppled off the stack. "He's one of the richest guys in New York City. I read that piece in Forbes last week."

"He's also an egotistical dickhead and I try really hard not to do business with egotistical dickheads. It puts me in a bad mood. Word of advice, Dani—don't ever be intimidated by money. Follow your gut."

"So we're not going to work with him?"

"I'm thinking about it. Thanks for the coffee. You didn't have to do that." He'd told her the same thing every day since she'd first started working for his company. She still brought him coffee every day.

"Think of me as the gift that keeps on giving." He'd given her a chance when others had closed the door in her face. She was never going to forget it. "You worked late last night and started early this morning so I thought you could do with something to wake you up." The look in her eyes told him she would happily have found other ways to wake him up.

Jake ignored the look.

He happily broke rules made by other people, but never the ones he made himself and right at the top of that list was *don't bring your private life to work*.

He'd never do anything that might threaten his business. It was too important to him. And anyway, he might be a genius with computers but he'd be the first to admit that his skills didn't extend to relationships.

As soon as Dani had left the room, he called Matt. "What's the emergency? Did you run out of beer?"

"I assume you haven't seen the business news."

"I've been in meetings since the sun rose. What have I missed? Someone hacked your website and you need an expert?" Suppressing a yawn, he tapped a key on his computer to wake it up, wishing he could do the same thing to himself. "Another corporate takeover?"

"Star Events has laid off half their staff."

Jake woke instantly. "Paige didn't get her promotion?"

"I don't know. She's not answering her phone."

"You think she's lost her job?"

"I think it's possible." Matt sounded tense. "Probable. She's cut herself off, and that's what she does when she's in Brave Mode."

Jake didn't have to ask what he meant. He'd seen Paige in Brave Mode often enough, and he hated it. He hated thinking of her scared, struggling and hiding it. "Well, hell—"

"She worked so damn hard for that promotion. It's all she's talked about all year. She's going to be devastated."

"Yeah." And he would have done anything to stop Paige being hurt. He considered how long it would take him to cross town and beat someone to a pulp. "Eva? Frankie?"

"They're not answering, either. I'm hoping they're together. I don't want her to be on her own, shutting everyone out."

Neither did he.

Jake stood up and paced to the window, mentally listing the options. "I'll make some calls. Find out what's going on."

"Why isn't she answering her phone?" It was a growl. "I'm worried about her."

"You're always worried about her."

"She's my sister—"

"Yeah, and you wrap her in cotton wool. You need to let her live her life. She's tougher than you think. And she's strong and healthy."

But she hadn't always been that way.

He had a clear recollection of Paige as a teenager, pale and thin in the hospital bed, waiting for major heart surgery. And he remembered his friend, white-faced and more stressed than Jake had ever seen him, hollow eyed after nights without sleep, nights spent sitting by his sister's bed.

"What are you doing tonight?" Matt asked, sounding tired.

"I have a hot date." Although whether he could wake up enough to perform he wasn't sure. His friend wasn't the only one who was tired. At this rate he might be the first man on earth to have sex while in a coma.

"With Gina?"

"Gina was last month."

"Do you ever see a woman for more than a month?"

"Not unless I lose track of time." He moved on. It suited him that way.

"So it's not true love?" Matt laughed. "Sorry. I forgot you don't believe in love."

Love?

Jake stared out of the window at a city washed with sunshine.

"Are you still there?" Matt's voice cut through the memories.

"Yeah." His voice was rusty. "Still here."

"If it's not true love, cancel and come over. If the three of them have lost their jobs I don't want to handle it on my own. My sister is hard work when she's stressed, mostly because she insists on pretending she's fine. Trying to get her to admit she's struggling is like drilling through steel. I don't mind her doing that with mom, but it pisses me off when she does it with me."

"You're asking me to turn down a night of sex with a Swedish blonde to help persuade your sister and her friends to be honest about their emotions? Call me boring, but I don't find that a tempting offer."

"She's Swedish? What's her name? Where does she work?"

"Her first name is Annika. I haven't asked her second name and I don't care where she works as long as it's not for my company." Jake walked back to his desk and when he sat down the woman on his mind wasn't Annika. Where was Paige now? He imagined her, pacing the streets somewhere, upset. Alone. Hiding everything she felt. *Shit*. He picked up a pencil and doodled on a pad on the desk. "I'm no good with tears."

"Have you ever seen Paige cry?"

Jake's fingers tightened on the pencil.

Yeah, he'd seen her cry.

He'd been the one to make her cry.

But Matt didn't know anything about that.

"I've seen Eva cry."

"Eva cries at sad movies and pretty sunsets," Matt drawled, "but she didn't miss a single day at work after her grandmother died. She dragged herself out of bed every day, put on her makeup and went to work even though she was devastated. That girl is tough." There was a pause. "Look, if there is crying, I'll deal with it."

Jake thought about his date for the night. Then he thought about Paige. Paige, who he tried really hard only ever to think of as his best friend's little sister.

Little sister. Little. Little.

If he repeated that word often enough, hopefully his brain might eventually believe it.

He could refuse, but then he wouldn't be able to help her and he had every intention of helping. The situation was complicated by the fact that he knew Paige wouldn't want to be helped. She hated being protected or smothered. She didn't want to be the focus of other people's anxieties.

He understood that. He understood *her*.

Which was why he was determined to structure his help in a way that was acceptable to her.

And the first thing he had to do was move her past the shock stage, into the action stage.

"I'll be there."

His Friday night of mindless physical entertainment evaporated into the ether.

Instead of spending the night with a stunning blonde he'd be behaving in a brotherly fashion toward a woman he made a point of avoiding whenever he could. Why did he avoid her?

Because Paige Walker wasn't little. She was all grown-up.

And his feelings toward her were far from brotherly.

"Thanks." Matt sounded relieved. "And Jake—?"

"What?"

"Be nice."

"I'm always nice."

"Not to Paige. I know you two don't really get along that well anymore," Matt sounded tired again. "Normally that doesn't worry me because—well, you know why. There was a time when I thought she might be in love with you."

She'd been crazily in love with him.

She'd told him as much, in a breathless hopeful voice, her eyes full of happy endings.

And she'd been naked at the time.

There was a sharp crack, and Jake glanced down and saw that he'd broken the pencil in half.

"You don't have anything to worry about. Paige definitely isn't in love with me now."

He might not have been able to fix her heart, but he'd fixed that.

He'd been careful to kill any soft feelings she might have had for him a long time ago. Now the only emotion she ever felt in his presence was extreme irritation. It was an art form, winding her up. There were days when he even pretended he enjoyed it.

He kept her annoyed.

Kept her irritated.

Kept her safe.

"That's good to know because you are the kind of trouble my sister doesn't need in her life. You promised not to lay a finger on her. Remember?"

"Yeah. I remember." That promise had handcuffed him for a decade. That, and the knowledge that Paige wouldn't be able to handle the realities of a relationship with him.

"Hey, you're my closest friend. You're like a brother to me, but we both know you'd be bad news for my sister. Not that you'd be interested. We both know she isn't your type."

"That's right." Jake kept his voice monotone. "Not my type."

"Do me a favor? Tonight I need you to find your sensitive side. Don't poke at her or take bites out of her. Be kind. Can you do that?"

Kind.

He yanked open the drawer on his desk and took out a new pencil. "Sure I can do that."

He'd be kind for five minutes.

Then he'd make up for it by driving her crazy.

He'd do that for Paige because he cared about her and he'd do it for Matt, because he was the closest thing Jake had to a brother.

And he'd do it for himself because love, in his opinion, was the biggest lottery on earth and the only risk he wasn't prepared to take.

Chapter 2

When life closes a door, you can always break in through a window.

—Eva

“You need to burn your lucky shirt.” Paige stood on the roof terrace of their Brooklyn brownstone, staring blindly through softly waving grasses toward the glittering high-rises of Downtown Manhattan. The shady garden provided a lush, fragrant oasis in a city dominated by steel and glass.

Her brother, a landscape designer, had seen the potential others hadn’t and purchased the run-down brownstone for a fraction of its market value. He’d proceeded to turn it into three apartments, each with its own charm. But the jewel in the crown was the roof. Matt had magically transformed the weathered, unused space into a calming haven. Tall conifers surrounded the bluestone deck, sheltering custom-built wooden planters overstuffed with juniper, crepe myrtle and roses. It was invisible from the streets below and unimaginable to any one of the thousands of tourists trying to breathe in the crush of Times Square. It wasn’t until she’d moved to the city that Paige had discovered New York’s secret rooftop world, a myriad of elevated gardens, topping the towering buildings like the decoration on a wedding cake.

In the summer they all met up here after work, sprawled on the loungers and deep cushions and drank and talked. Saturday was movie night and they invited friends over and watched on an improvised screen while the world passed by far beneath them.

It was Paige’s favorite place.

Candles flickered in mason jars and the air was scented with lavender and jasmine. It was a peaceful summer scene that felt a million miles from the urban madness of Manhattan. Being up here almost always soothed her.

Not today.

Unemployed.

The word filled her head, leaving no room for anything else.

In front of them, the table was loaded with delicious-looking dishes. Chickpeas roasted in spices, raw vegetables dressed in good olive oil and herbs. When she was stressed, Eva cooked, and she’d been cooking all afternoon. The fridge was full of food.

No one was eating.

“I threw the shirt away.” Eva’s voice was thickened. “I probably shouldn’t have because heaven knows when I’ll be able to afford to buy a new one. I don’t know why I feel so miserable. I didn’t even *like* the job that much, not like you. I only did it for the money, and

because you were both there and I love working with you. It wasn't my dream or anything. My dream is to turn my cookery blog into something big that people actually read. But this was your dream and you must be so upset."

Paige stared across the rooftops, trying to sort her feelings into order and label them. Everything felt out of control. "I'm fine." She accessed the smile with the ease of someone who had faked it a thousand times before. "You don't have to worry about me."

Frankie was on her knees tending the planters. She watered, snipped, deadheaded, trimmed and said nothing.

Paige knew what that meant.

When Frankie was upset or angry, she raged.

When she was scared, she was quiet.

Tonight she was quiet.

Because of her upbringing, the ability to support herself was everything to Frankie.

Paige felt the same way, but for different reasons.

Claws, her brother's rescue cat, sprang from nowhere, and Eva spilled her drink.

"Why does she always do that? The animal is deranged." She stood up and Paige passed her a napkin.

"I know. That cat is the reason most of my clothes are covered in marks." She reached for the cat but Claws stalked off with a flick of her tail, disdaining physical affection. "Why didn't my brother rescue a cute puppy?"

"Because cute puppies need attention and Claws is the 'The Cat that Walked by Himself.'" Frankie quoted Kipling and Claws rewarded her by taking a detour and rubbing briefly against her leg. "I'm in favor."

"If she stopped scratching and jumping on people she wouldn't be the cat who walked by itself. She'd have friends." Eva mopped at her dress. "I thought animals were supposed to be able to sense when someone is traumatized and offer comfort." Her voice wobbled. "Tonight was all about celebrating Paige's promotion and now none of us have jobs. I don't feel so good. How can you both be so calm?"

Paige watched Claws stretch out on the terrace next to Frankie. "I'm a little angry." And a lot scared, but she wasn't admitting that to anyone. "I'm angry with Cynthia because she made huge promises and, it turns out, told a few lies. And I'm angry with myself because I was stupid enough to trust that they meant what they said. If I'd sensed something, maybe we wouldn't be in this position."

Eva reached for another napkin. "It isn't stupid to trust your employer."

"It's stupid to trust anyone." Frankie reached out to stroke Claws and the cat gave a warning hiss.

Paige shook her head. "Sorry. My brother is the only one she trusts, despite the fact I feed her when he's out. There's no justice."

Eva poured dressing onto a salad she'd made. "I don't know why I'm cooking when none of us are eating. It's my stress reliever. Fuck Cynthia. Fuck the lot of them."

Frankie raised her eyebrows. "I've never heard you swear before."

"I've never lost my job before. It's a first, although this experience definitely wasn't on my bucket list." Eva tossed the salad violently, losing a few leaves in the process. They gleamed under the soft light of the terrace, glossy with oil. "At least I won't have to tell Grams. You know the worst thing? Not working with you two anymore." Tears glistened in her eyes and Paige was by her side in seconds.

The job was important to her, but her friends, these friends she'd known almost all her life, were more important.

"It's going to be okay." She said it fiercely, as if by injecting the words with enough passion they might come true. "We'll find something."

"We looked." Eva's voice was muffled against her shoulder. "There's nothing."

Frankie stood up and walked across to them both. "So we'll keep looking." She rubbed Eva's shoulder and Eva sniffed.

"Is this a group hug? I know things are bad when Frankie hugs me."

"It was more of a pat than a hug," Frankie muttered. "And don't get used to it. Brief lapse on my part. You know I'm about as tactile as Claws. But I feel the same way you do. I don't care about Star Events. I do care that we won't be working together anymore."

Paige felt a rush of anger and helplessness and mingled in there was guilt.

She was the team leader. She should have known. Was there something she'd missed?

She kept going over and over it in her head. "It doesn't make sense to me that Chase Adams pulled his business because Matilda dropped a tray of champagne."

"Do you think Matilda knows she was responsible?" Eva sounded worried. "Do you think that's why she's not answering her phone? I hope she isn't feeling guilty."

"We'll keep calling. That's all we can do, Ev. And if we find another job, we'll try and get her hired. When," Paige corrected herself quickly, "I mean when we get another job." Being positive had never felt so exhausting.

She'd been keeping up the fake smile all afternoon as she'd tried to boost their spirits. People lost their jobs all the time, and companies hired all the time. They had skills. They needed to persevere. She'd parroted the words and tried to believe them. And as for her ambitions to run her own company one day, maybe it would be good to get experience elsewhere for a while. The dream was on hold. It wasn't dead.

She reasoned, rationalized and tried to come to terms with it but an afternoon trawling job websites with Eva and Frankie had slowly drained away her brief moment of optimism, until finally they'd given up and retreated to the roof garden.

Now she felt a rush of frustration. Sitting up here was getting her nowhere.

Eva sat down on one of the chairs, but Paige stayed standing up, staring blindly at the planters spilling over with spring color. She should call some of the businesses they'd run events for. See if they were hiring.

The sound of male voices and the clinking of glass disturbed her thoughts and Paige turned her head and saw her brother appear at the top of the steps.

She immediately conjured up her "I'm perfectly fine" smile. Her smile lasted as long as it took her to spot the glossy dark hair and powerful shoulders of the man behind him.

No, no no.

She was feeling weak and exposed, and the last person she wanted to be around in that vulnerable state was Jake Romano.

In a world where men were encouraged to get in touch with their feminine side, Jake was unapologetically male. Today, unusually, he was wearing a suit but his shirt was open at the neck and there was no sign of a tie. Even the perfectly tailored cloth did nothing to disguise the width of those shoulders or the raw, restrained power of his body. He was the sort of man you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley on a dark night. Unless you were a woman.

Paige looked away, grateful for the moonlight and flickering candles that created concealing shadows amongst patches of pooled light. Jake knew her better than anyone. Too well.

He'd been the object of all her teenage fantasies and the source of her disillusionment. There was nothing so raw as rejection when you were a teenager, and Jake had been responsible for what would surely have classified as the cruelest rejection ever.

If it had been left to her, she would have made sure she never crossed his path again, but unfortunately that wasn't an option.

Like it or not, Jake was entwined in their lives.

"There is no celebration. We've been laid off. Not only is there no promotion, I'm now officially unemployed." There was a knot of panic in her stomach. She could hide her emotions, but she couldn't hide the facts. At some point she'd have to tell her parents, and her mother would worry.

She'd already caused her mother more than enough worry.

Despite the fact she'd been healthy for years, her family still treated Paige like fine china and because of their tendency to worry she did everything she could to make sure she gave them nothing to worry about. They protected her and she protected them right back.

"I saw it on the business news." Matt put the champagne on the table and pulled her in for a hug. "You should have answered your phone."

The strength and familiarity of his hug was comforting and she stood in his arms, tense as a bow. "I'm fine."

"Yeah, right." His laugh was lacking in humor. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Tell me that you're fine when you're not." He closed his hands over her shoulders and eased her away from him so that he could look at her. "Why didn't you call?"

"I was busy looking for another job. I wanted to have good news, not bad."

He'd always been there for her. One of her earliest memories was of Matt picking her up when she'd fallen on her face in the sand. He'd brushed off the sand, scooped her up and carried her to the sea to make her laugh.

The only reason her parents had agreed to let her go to college in New York was because they'd trusted Matt to watch over her. At first he'd taken that responsibility a little too seriously and they'd had a few fights.

Gradually they'd learned to compromise, but he still had a tendency to ride to her rescue.

Some men were born protectors and Matt was one of those.

His fingers were firm on her shoulder. "I'm here to cushion the bad news. That's what big brothers are for. Do you want me to go and punch your boss?"

"No, but if I met Chase Adams I'd punch him myself." She was horrified by how close she was to tears.

"What does Chase Adams have to do with this?" Jake shrugged off his jacket and sprawled on the nearest chair. He reminded her of a lion or a tiger, always able to make himself comfortable regardless of his surroundings.

"He's the reason Matilda was fired and why we've all been laid off. With no warning." Paige pulled away from Matt and gave them the briefest of details. "Who does that? Who fires a kind, good person for one mistake?"

"Are you sure of your facts?" Jake picked up a plate. "Because that doesn't sound like Chase." His eyes were gray and they made her think of mountain mists and wood smoke.

"You know him?"

"We both know him." Matt sat down and Claws immediately leaped onto his lap. "I did some work on one of his properties and I agree with Jake. That doesn't sound like him."

Jake examined a bowl of chopped raw vegetables and pulled a face. "Don't you guys have anything unhealthy to eat? Greasy burger? Fries?"

"I could rustle you up an arsenic dip," Eva said sweetly, and Paige scowled at Jake.

"We've lost our jobs and you're thinking of your stomach?"

"I'm a man." Jake ignored the raw vegetables and added some olives and garlic bread to his plate. "There are two body parts that dominate my mind for most of the day, my stomach and my—"

"You're not funny."

"And you're uptight. You need to loosen up."

His words stung. "Well forgive me for caring that I lost my job." She rubbed her hands over her arms. "I trusted that company with my future and they betrayed that trust. I worked hard, I exceeded all my targets and yet they do this. I thought I had some control over my future and it turns out I had none."

After Cynthia had delivered the news, she'd gone in search of Frankie and Eva and found them in the same position as her.

In their brownstone, Frankie rented the garden flat, Paige and Eva shared the first floor, and Matt had the top two floors. It was the perfect arrangement, except she knew from the stiff set of Frankie's shoulders she was worried about how long she'd be able to afford the rent, even at the friendly rate Matt charged. They were all well aware that it was her brother's generosity that allowed them to live in this part of Brooklyn. Other people her age were living in the equivalent of a shoe box. But living somewhere else would have meant more parental anxiety so she'd accepted his generosity and vowed to pay him back.

At this rate, that moment was going to be a long way off.

She flopped down on a cushion opposite Jake.

Claws purred and stretched out on Matt's lap.

"The chosen one," Frankie murmured. "That cat has serious issues."

"That's what makes her interesting." Matt's fingers brushed lightly over the cat's fur. "I know you're all feeling bruised right now, but you'll find other jobs." His shirt was rolled back to his elbows and Paige noticed the scratches on his skin.

"Did Claws do that?"

"A bad-tempered holly bush. It wasn't supposed to be my job but one of my staff was sick."

And Matt would have done the work himself rather than let a client down. That was the sort of person he was and the reason his company was growing fast. He was in demand for his creative vision, but he'd never lost the ability to do the work.

"There's nothing out there, Matt."

Claws was purring, eyes closed, lost in the gentle slide and stroke of Matt's fingers.

"You can't expect to find a job in a few hours. You have to give it time."

"We don't have time. Eva and Frankie were given a measly severance package." And she knew that even if she could swallow her pride for long enough to accept financial support from her brother or her parents, that wasn't going to help her friends. Misery descended, chilling her skin. "And Eva is right. Even if we do find another job, we won't be together. We made such a great team. I don't know what to do." A solid lump blocked her throat. She hated herself for being so pathetic. She'd been through far worse than this. What the hell had happened to her backbone?

Jake's gaze locked on hers and she had a nasty suspicion he knew exactly how close she was to breaking down.

She hated that she couldn't hide her feelings from him as easily as she did with other people.

"I'll tell you what you should do." He reached for the champagne, his shirt molding to strong shoulders. He had the body of a fighter, powerful and thickly muscled. "You should

celebrate. And two minutes after you've drunk that bottle of champagne, you should start your own company. You want control over what your boss does? Make yourself the boss."