

## CHAPTER ONE

A few things New York CEO Taylor Randolph had learned during the time he'd spent serving as an Army Ranger were how to hear the lies. See the trepidation. Smell the fear. Long since out of the military, those same instincts now guided him in his position as head of T-Randolph Environmental Development (TRED). And the man he'd just fired had dinged every one of those tells.

Taylor walked to the door of his office and braced his hands against the side doorjamb. Watching the hastily retreating back of the ex-employee charging down the short hallway, he briefly glanced in the direction of his executive assistant's desk located outside his office.

"Mrs. Parker, call front door security. Tell them Chase Andrews no longer works here. Have them relieve him of his company credit card, phone, keys and anything else he was issued when he came on board."

"Should I also contact our site in Nature's Crossing?" She reached for the phone.

"Yes. Jake will know what to do on that end." He turned his attention back to Chase just in time to see the angry man shoulder-shove a woman out of his way.

She stumbled, slamming against the wall before bumping her head. Reactively, her arm collided with the table lamp, knocking it to the floor as her briefcase fell from her fingers. The satchel landed with a thud spewing pens, notebooks and a pink cell phone across the carpet.

Taylor rushed to help the blonde-haired woman trying to regain her balance. She rubbed her shoulder as she kicked her phone from beneath a chair, then grimaced with the move. Hurt? That was all he needed to make this day one perfect disaster.

“Darn it, darn it...”—she mumbled in exasperation—“...double dang darn it!”

“I’m sorry. What did you say?” Taylor asked.

Kneeling on both knees now, she reached under the side chair trying to grab her pens. “I said darn it.” She glanced up at him. “Got a problem with that?”

“Nope. No problem.” The touch of a southern accent made him inwardly smile. And her eyes—the color of melted caramel—took his breath away.

He prided himself on trying to know every employee in the office, but he’d never seen this woman before. Maybe she was a new hire or lost on her way to Human Resources. Moving closer, he offered his hand to assist her in standing. “Here, let me help you up. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Thank you kindly.” She barely glanced at his offer of assistance. “I don’t need any help.”

In one fluid motion she nudged back on her high heels and flexed upward. Trying to avoid contact, he stepped to the side as she tugged her suit into place. Brushing her skirt smooth, she blew out a soft sigh and lifted the corners of her mouth in a half-smile.

He took in the trim navy suit cropped above the knees, showing only the business-proper amount of skin. Long legs that flowed into conservative heels. And what looked like blonde hair. Hard to tell with the way her hair was twisted up tight on her head like some high fashion model.

“Human Resources is down the hall.” Taylor jerked his hand to the left and pointed. He’d had enough disruption to his day. “Be sure to tell them you fell after being pushed by Chase Andrews. They can help you fill out the proper paperwork. Get you medical attention.”

“There’s no need for that. I’m fine. I just—”

“Fine now, but you could wake up tomorrow with a concussion.” Yeah, he knew he sounded over reactive. But, damn it, he didn’t like anyone getting hurt on his watch.

She didn’t budge. “I don’t need to fill out paperwork.”

“Human Resources.” He pointed to the left again. “Fill out the paperwork. See the nurse.”

“Oh, excuse me.” She stooped to pick up a pen laying by his foot, and stood again. Her fingers lightly touched the side of his arm as she steadied herself, then blushed and stepped back. “Sorry.”

His mouth dried like sand in a high noon desert sun. The warmth of her touch lingered on his skin, shocking him with the unexpected sensation. He glanced at his forearm then felt the heat travel all the way to his core.

He needed this reaction like he needed to be called up on active duty again. Thankfully, he’d never been attracted to an employee and he sure as hell didn’t plan to start now. He gulped in a breath of air a moment before he focused on her face and opened his mouth to speak.

She stop-signed him with the palm of her hand. “Okay...okay...okay. If it makes you happy, I’ll fill out paperwork.”

“Good.” He had things to do. People to see. The past to get past. He half-turned away. “Keep a copy for yourself, too.”

“Why not? In fact, maybe there’ll be a hundred pages.” The woman pushed wisps of her hair, that had loosened in the altercation, back in place. “I’m sure the world won’t mind losing a tree for the tiny bump on my head.”

Sass? She’d sassed him? “Do you know who I am?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes, it matters.”

“Why?” She stared into his eyes. Didn’t blink. Didn’t smile. Didn’t appear intimidated in the least. “Why is knowing who you are so important?”

“Because...because I said so.” That even sounded childish to himself. He inwardly winced at the wrinkling of his forehead as his eyebrows pinched together. The woman had turned him into a babbling idiot. Exasperating...that’s what she was—exasperating.

Struggling to keep his reactions in check, he braced his hands on his waist. “As I was saying. Do you know—”

Behind him, he heard Mrs. Parker laugh along with a fake clearing of her throat.

He knew full well her cleared throat was his clue to calm down. Don’t over react. They’d worked together long enough to have their signals. But, the laugh? The laugh was new. “Mrs. Parker, is there something funny?”

“No, sir.” The middle-aged woman shuffled papers on her desk. “Not a thing.”

He focused back on the long-legged blonde who'd defied him. She met his gaze, confident and unapologetic. Then, as if everything was her idea, she turned and walked down the hallway toward Human Resources.

Unable to drag his eyes away, he watched the way her jacket hugged her waist. The glide of the skirt skimming her hips. Her slender ankles as they balanced safe and secure with every step she took until she turned the corner. With any luck, he wouldn't run into her again.

Although, if he wanted to, he could find out her name from Human Resources. See which department she worked in. Check on her progress and... Nope, one of his self-imposed rules was don't mix business and pleasure.

Besides this was the first woman, in a very long time, who'd stoked his fire the moment he laid eyes on her. Didn't mean a thing. Just an already rough day, sharpening a dull edge.

He'd made himself a promise years ago. The day his life had shattered in a barrage of bullets half way around the world. Loss was always hard. But failing so many people he'd cared about, all in one day, had changed his outlook on life forever. Some days he wished he could just move to Nature's Crossing permanently, instead of being stuck here at his office in Kansas City part of the week. At least this set-up had allowed him to move out of New York.

He rolled his shirtsleeves down and buttoned the cuffs before turning toward his own office. Time to focus on his next appointment. He lifted a couple of butterscotch candies from the dish on the corner of his assistant's desk. "Guess I got a little absorbed for a second."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Randolph." Mrs. Parker held out a folder. "Here's the extra info you requested earlier today."

Some days, Mrs. Parker knew him better than he knew himself even if she did try to mother him, telling him what she thought he should do. How he should move on with his life. He let her. Only her. Others knew to keep their thoughts to themselves.

“Thanks. You know, I think I’ll keep you around.” Taylor grinned and tossed a candy in his mouth remembering the day, almost three years ago, he’d inherited Mrs. Parker along with the chair his dad used to sit in as the head of TRED.

“Oh, that’s such a relief, sir.” She patted her heart in mock thankfulness at his remark. “You don’t know how worried I was about that.”

Trim, professional and somewhere in her late fifties, she’d let him know she expected to be treated with the same respect that she’d always garnered from his father. Part of which meant he’d call her Mrs. Parker and she’d call him Mr. Randolph. He smiled to himself. And any comments about her prematurely grey hair or dangly earrings would not be tolerated. That part he’d learned the hard way.

He pocketed another piece of candy, then walked across the hall to the executive conference room. The room and the view always seemed to center him. Today was no different.

Thinking about his upcoming meeting with Crawford Enterprises, he wished his old college buddy Mathew Crawford was the one coming. But today’s meeting would be with a company representative instead. Years ago, Mathew had mentioned about his brother and him planning a business after college, maybe that’s who was coming. But for the life of him he couldn’t remember the brother’s name.

If today’s deal worked out the way he hoped, he and Mathew would have plenty of time to hash over college times. They’d only been friends in passing, but they’d kept in

touch occasionally after graduation, then less and less. In fact, he hadn't heard from him since about the time his own life had been hurtling out of control. Life had been one giant blur of business since then.

Taylor left the calming atmosphere of the conference room and headed back to his office. The image of the long-legged blonde flitted through his thoughts. He wondered if she found her way to Human Resources. Before he left for the day, he'd make a call to see if she filled out the paperwork. Or had she simply ignored him once she turned out of sight?

"Anything else you need for your meeting?" Mrs. Parker asked as he passed her desk.

"Yeah. I can't believe I'm saying this, but..."—he felt better now, enough so to even laugh at himself. — "...well, I've completely forgot the name of the man I'm meeting from Crawford Enterprises."

"Rylie...Rylie Crawford."

## CHAPTER TWO

Bridgette Rylie Crawford walked a few steps down the hall toward Human Resources, and pretended to be rummaging in the side of her briefcase. She didn't need to fill out paperwork. She wasn't hurt. Sooner or later, Taylor Randolph would go back in his office, then she could introduce herself to his assistant. She'd already swallowed a ton of nerves when he reached out to help her up from the floor...

*AND THE STORY CONTINUES...*