

## CHAPTER 1



She felt the intensity of his gaze. Always, always he was looking at her, watching her, yet each time she turned to confront him, his eyes were front and center. He was doing it again. Standing so still just inside the living room door, his hands clasped in front of him, his gray suit impeccably pressed, he held his position easily.

Why didn't his feet hurt? He was on them hours and hours at a time. His expression revealed nothing and that annoyed her as well. Prickles began at the back of her neck and she longed to lift her hair and fan herself. Instead, she walked to the bar and poured herself a glass of ice water. Her white shorts hugged her ass and she bent to pick up a piece of imaginary lint from the carpet and turned her head at the last second. He was looking at her, she knew it, but couldn't catch him. He was good, she'd give him that. A barely perceptible smirk tilted the corner of his lips. With a defeated sigh, she plopped on the leather sofa and swung her legs onto the coffee table. John would be here soon, although she couldn't imagine what he wanted to see her about. Usually, after a particularly bad night he avoided her for a day or two and last night had been particularly bad.

The ice water tasted good and she held the glass against the side of her neck. She thought she heard a slight, muted growl coming from the man's throat and rose. Swiftly, she marched over to him and poked him in the chest.

"Did you say something?" she demanded, looking up into eyes the exact color of his suit.

"No, ma'am."

"I could have sworn I heard you say something," she reiterated.

"You're mistaken."

"Why are you here?" she hissed.

"Ma'am, you know I'm with security. It's my job to be here."

Joy hated the smooth, controlled tone of his voice. It told her nothing. He was simply answering her questions, but she felt there was much more to him, something she was missing.

"Well, I don't like you," she hissed, poking him again.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, ma'am."

"You're always hovering, snooping around," she continued, stabbing her finger into his hard chest a third time.

"Joy! I've asked you repeatedly not to bother the staff," John barked from across the room as he entered from the foyer.

Instantly she backed down, running her hand down the front of the man's broad chest.

"Sorry," she whispered, hanging her head.

He gave a slight nod and kept his eyes focused on something above her head. Sighing, she turned away.

"You wanted to see me, John?" she asked, her voice coolly polite.

"Ah, my pet. I can see you're still angry about last night. I'm sorry I lost my temper. It won't happen again," he said smoothly as though they were alone.

Joy said nothing.

"If only you wouldn't try so hard to antagonize me," John

lamented, shaking his head. "You can be such a good girl when you want to. All I ask for is a little obedience, a little respect."

"Must we talk about this in the presence of strangers?" she asked, feeling her face heat.

"He's an employee and has signed a nondisclosure agreement. Anything we say in front of him or any of the staff will go no further."

"I still don't like it," she snapped, watching John's mouth tighten. She wondered if the man would stand at attention, frozen if John slapped her and decided he would. Her shoulders slumped. What had she ever seen in John, beyond the fabulous wealth of course?

In the beginning she'd been young and naive. Fresh out of business school she'd taken a junior accountant position at Barrows Enterprises. Even though she had a degree in forensic accounting it was the best she could get. Like most of the other young women in his employ she'd dreamed of being swept off her feet by the good looking billionaire. If only she'd known then what she knew now.

"So why did you want to see me?" she asked again, walking to the huge windows and looking out at the meticulously landscaped lawns.

"I thought we might go shopping this morning," he suggested.

"No thank you. I have work to do," she replied without turning around. Another trip to Cartier's wouldn't cut it, not this time.

"Surely it can wait."

Joy noted the touch of annoyance in his voice. It pleased her.

"No, John, I'm afraid it can't," she replied, lightly stroking her throat through the high necked sleeveless top she wore. "I'm working on payroll. Your lackeys want to be paid on time."

"I see. That's a pity, but I guess if it can't be helped," he replied, ignoring her insult to his staff. "Perhaps I can pick out something that will please you on my own."

“Yes, you do that,” she suggested with a tight smile. Tossing her dark hair over her shoulder, she walked to the bar and placed her glass on the shiny surface. Without another word she left the room, the sound of her heeled sandals clicking on the parquet floor.

“Women,” John sighed, watching her walk away. “You can’t live with them, yet you can’t kill them,” he continued with a brittle laugh as he too left the living room.

J.R. didn’t comment, he simply narrowed his eyes at the man’s retreating back.



BACK IN THE CONTROL ROOM, J.R. watched Joy go into the kitchen and pour a cup of coffee. Reaching into a cabinet she removed a bottle of whiskey and added a generous shot, giving the camera a one fingered salute as she did so.

“Man, she hates you,” Travis laughed as he watched her on the bank of cameras.

“I know.”

“Why?”

“I have a couple of theories,” he lied.

“Care to share them?”

“No.”

In truth, he knew exactly why Joy Bradley hated him. He watched Barrows leave the house in his expensive sports car and drive away. Watched the guard at the gate salute him in what was almost a military fashion. God, he was a pompous ass but at least she was safe, for now.



JOY WALKED to her office behind the massive house. It was a sepa-

rate building, but she knew she was watched there as well. She reached the pool and paused for a moment to take in the beauty of the crystal clear water, the tinkling waterfall. She was going to miss it, that and the spectacular food, and maybe Brittany.

The tan she'd acquired while living here was the best in her life and she was in great shape. John believed in eating healthy. Apparently, he liked his victims to be able to put up a good struggle, and she had. She'd noticed several flesh covered Band-Aids on his wrists and hands in the living room. No doubt the wounds beneath them were in the crescent shape of her fingernails.

Joy moved on, approached her office and nodded to the guard.

"Hi, Joey."

"Good morning, Miss Bradley," he replied with a small smile.

He was friendly. One of the few who were and she wondered briefly if she could confide in him. Would he help her? Shaking her head, she discarded the idea. Why put someone else in danger? He was a kid, well, young anyway. Perhaps he had a girl, maybe a family of his own, who knew? No, she wouldn't risk it. She'd gotten herself into this mess, she and her rose-colored glasses. She'd get herself out, or not, she thought giving a shrug as she punched in her security code and opened the door.

At her desk, she set her coffee on the marble surface and opened the top drawer removing a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She looked directly into the camera as she lit one and took a deep drag, blowing the smoke up and out.

"Go ahead and tell him," she said defiantly, taking another drag.



J.R. WATCHED HER. God, she was beautiful and oh, so foolish. She was taunting him, angry because he knew all her secrets. Still, it was not necessary to put herself in any more danger than she

already had. Then he did something he never did, something completely against the rules. He keyed his mic, flipped a switch that connected him to her office and only her office.

“Put it out, Miss Bradley,” he said in warning. “Smoking is bad for you.”

She laughed; a bitter sound that rubbed against his nerves like sandpaper.

“This whole place is bad for me,” she snorted indelicately. “Don’t act like you don’t know what’s going on here,” she jeered. “You’re all nothing but a pack of miserable lap dogs, spying for your master. Fuck you... whatever your name is.” Her voice trailed off as she turned away.



SHE HEARD the faint hum stop and knew he’d disconnected. Bastard! Walking to the bathroom, she tossed the butt of her smoke into the toilet and flushed it away. Unfortunately, the jerk was right.

Joy had only been at Barrows Enterprises a few weeks when she began to spot the telltale signs of corruption. Even though she was only a junior accountant, forensic accounting was her area of expertise. At first she tried to ignore it. Maybe they knew the books were cooked. She could lose her job simply by pointing it out. For sure someone would lose their job and probably be prosecuted if they didn’t know.

For a while she toyed with the idea of going to her boss, Mr. Thomas, but she couldn’t be sure who was behind it, not without further investigation and she really didn’t have the right to probe the work of other employees, some who had been there for years. It was a dilemma, one she wished she’d stayed out of.

She began to keep a record, noting suspicious funds transfers and their destination. Soon she realized this was no skimming off

the top, this was theft to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars, most going to a Swiss bank account, some going to accounts in the Cayman Islands, and it had been going on for a very long time. Keeping quiet would make her an accessory after the fact. When she could no longer avoid it she contacted John Barrows directly, surprised when his secretary put her through.

“Mr. Barrows, this is Joy Bradley in accounting.”

“Yes, Miss Bradley. What can I do for you? I hear you’re settling in nicely.”

“I need to speak with you privately,” Joy said quietly.

“We are speaking now, Miss Bradley,” he replied cordially.

“I know, but this is very important and I don’t think we should discuss it over the phone,” she continued nervously.

“I see. Well, now I’m intrigued,” he drawled. “Perhaps we should have dinner?”

“That’s not really necessary, Mr. Barrows. What I have to say won’t take long. Maybe we could take a little walk on my lunch hour and grab a cup of coffee?”

“Nonsense, I’ve been meaning to come down and see you. You’ve been on my mind.”

“I have?” she gulped.

“Yes, you’re a lovely young woman and I’d like to get to know you better. You are unattached?” he asked smoothly.

“Unattached?”

“Yes, Miss Bradley. Have you a boyfriend, a significant other?”

She could almost hear the humor in his voice.

“No, I’m unattached,” she nearly whispered.

“Good. I’ll send my car for you at 7:30. Dress casually, Miss Bradley, we’ll be dining at my home.”



CALLING his expansive estate a home was a huge exaggeration.

Homes had warmth and laughter, white picket fences and back-yard swings. John Barrows' 'home' consisted of more than a hundred rooms immaculately kept by a regiment of servants.

Nearly everything was pristine white, even his slacks and polo shirt when he met her at the door. It accentuated his tanned skin and his highlighted hair. He showed her around the first floor. There were splashes of brilliant, vivid color in the art work on the walls and huge vases of flowers strategically placed for effect. Deep turquoise, red, rich royal blue drew the eyes where he wanted them to go. Cool and beautiful is how she would have described it, obviously decorated by someone with great talent for the dramatic.

"Come this way, Joy," he said with a smile. "May I call you Joy?"

"Yes," she murmured as she followed him along a wide hall from the foyer, the floors so highly polished she could see herself take each step. She was glad she hadn't worn a thong as their surface could almost be a mirror, reflecting what was beneath her short skirt.

They entered a room with floor to ceiling windows and he seated her on a white leather sofa. Going to the bar, he poured them each a glass of white wine, all without asking.

"You look lovely tonight," he said as he handed her a glass, his eyes taking in her white skirt and Hibiscus colored sleeveless top. "Very vibrant, I like that. With your dark hair, it's stunning, although you really should spend more time in the sun. A tan would make all the difference."

"I'm afraid I don't have much free time during the day," Joy replied before taking a sip of her wine. "This is wonderful," she praised.

"Yes, isn't it? It's one of my favorites," he stated, taking a seat on the sofa and turning slightly toward her. "Now, tell me what you wanted to discuss with me, Joy. It's going to be a lovely evening and



you're much too beautiful to waste it talking business. Are you happy in your new job?"

"Yes, Mr. Barrows, but—"

"Please call me John," he insisted with an indulgent smile.

"All right, John, but what I have to tell you may ruin your evening," Joy replied slowly. "I've uncovered some pretty disturbing things."

John laughed.

"What sort of things? Is someone having sex on the copier?"

"No, I mean not that I know of, but someone is stealing from your company on a regular basis," she informed him earnestly.

The smile immediately left his face and his eyes narrowed, giving him a far different look from the congenial man who greeted her and made her welcome in his home.

"Stealing? Are we missing a few pens or are you talking about serious theft?"

"Very serious theft," Joy continued. "Hundreds of thousands of dollars are being diverted to various offshore accounts as well as into international banks."

"How can you know this?" he demanded, his face growing dark.

"I know I'm a new member of the team and a junior one at that, but it's what I trained for," Joy informed him. "At first I thought I was mistaken. Firms typically use different accounting practices and I thought it might be me, getting used to the way things are done at yours. I'll admit I was curious when I noticed the same codes again and again and well, I did a little snooping. It didn't take me long to realize something was seriously wrong."

"Have you told anyone else about this?" John asked, rubbing his forehead.

"No. I wasn't sure who to trust," Joy admitted, looking down into her glass. "I didn't want to go to my supervisor, Mr. Thomas. For all I know he could be involved in some way."

“I see. How long have you known about this, Joy?”

“I’ve suspected from the very beginning, but I wasn’t sure until about three weeks ago.”

John rose and retrieved her glass, refilling it at the bar.

“Yet you waited to tell me?” he asked, staring into her eyes when he returned and handed her the wine.

“I know,” she admitted. “I really wasn’t sure what to do about it. I’m so new to the firm and I need this job. I wasn’t even sure you’d believe me,” she confessed. “It was only this morning I decided to call you myself and tell you what I’ve uncovered. Keeping quiet about it puts me in a difficult position, as though I were somehow involved. If you didn’t believe me, at least my conscience would be clear.”

“Are you sure no one else knows about this?” he asked pointedly.

“Of course I’m not sure,” Joy replied a bit defensively. “How could I be? If I hadn’t had to go into international accounts, I wouldn’t have known either.”

“I’m sorry, my dear. I don’t mean to be accusatory. It’s only that I’m so surprised and disappointed. Some of my employees have been with me for a long time and it’s very distressing to consider that my faith in them may have been misplaced.”

“I understand,” Joy replied sympathetically.

“Let’s have dinner,” he suggested rising. “We can discuss this further over our meal,” he said holding out his hand to her.

She took it and followed as he led her to the terrace. They dined on grilled chicken and asparagus, slices of sun dried tomatoes topped with soft mozzarella cheese and drizzled with olive oil. Dessert was a fruit plate with pineapple, papaya, mangos and kiwi served with a yogurt sauce. It was delicious and very refreshing.

Despite his earlier comment, they did not discuss things further, beyond Joy’s suggestion he call the authorities. John

replied he preferred to handle things internally, whatever that meant.

After dinner he showed her the grounds, walking her through the garden and showing her his stunning pool with the lighted waterfall, but he seemed distracted. All too soon he was escorting her to his car. What he did next stunned her completely, for he pulled her against him, angled his head and kissed her. It was not the gentle first kiss she might have expected given his attentive and complimentary attitude toward her. Instead, it was forceful and a touch brutal. Releasing her, he let his driver help her into the back seat assuring her they would see each other again soon. Then she was whisked away and driven home.

In bed later that night she wondered what that kind of a kiss meant. Now, she knew. It was simply his way of branding her, 'Property of John Barrows'.