

# Outside The Fire



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For my own handsome husband  
who never stops believing in me,  
and for those fabulous Berlin women.



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## Chapter One



“He wants me to meet him where?”

Brandy Brigham, professionally known as Elastic Inspector Number Twenty-seven, had just been promoted most mysteriously to Assistant to the Executive Assistant to the President of Walford Enterprises.

Her head still spinning from the news, she placed the factory’s wall phone on its cradle and returned to her spot in the crowded assembly line. Somehow her heart just wasn’t in underwear anymore.

“Whose crazy idea was that?” Thora laughed when Brandy told her about the promotion. “Hell, Brandy, you can’t even type!” Thora chuckled to herself, and snorted a ribald comment.

“I’m supposed to show up at his hotel room tomorrow. What should I wear? What does an assistant’s assistant dress like anyway?”

“Humph. More likely ol’ Walford wants a little *personal* assistance, if you ask me.” Thora held up a pair of underpants that would have fit a small elephant. “Maybe this is all you’ll be needing from now on.” She draped them over her curly grey hair and made a goofy grin, high-stepping in a circle.

“Thora!” Brandy’s cheeks flamed. “It’s not that ridiculous for me to get this job. Even though I never asked for it, never heard of it, can’t possibly be qualified to do it... Oh, crap,

Thora, I hope you're wrong." Brandy cringed. They had all seen the photo of Douglas Walford on the memo that came out when he bought the underwear factory. He was at least seventy, and more wrinkled than a Chinese Shar-pei puppy.

The five o'clock whistle blew, signaling the mass exodus of the majority of the residents of Bathsheba, Virginia from their jobs at Worth's Foundations. Brandy shut off her section of the motorized belt that gave each garment a tour through the inspection corridor. She looked around, amazed that she felt sadness. She was actually going to miss this place!

Following her co-workers to the locker room, she removed her jacket, draped it over her arm, and looped the nylon strap of her burgundy lunch bag over her other shoulder. The locker door banged shut with finality, and she imagined herself closing a chapter of her life. The old locker door jammed and only the top corner shut completely. Brandy wondered if it was a sign, and began having second thoughts.



Keeping Thora's comments in mind, Brandy chose her outfit carefully for her first morning on her new job. A long brown wool skirt and a grey turtleneck would help present a conservative image and cover her from head to toe. She pulled her waist-length straight brown hair, her one vanity, back with a brush and twisted it into a conservative bun at the base of her neck. She looked a bit like a school marm or a spinster librarian, but that was exactly the effect she had in mind.

Crossing the length of her doublewide trailer—a bequest from a great uncle—she hurried out the door. Living in a trailer park so close to so many people, all of whom knew every move she made, was not her ideal of home. When she'd lived at Grannie's, days at a time went by without seeing a soul. Here, the neighbors even knew what time she visited the privy each night. But Brandy didn't have much choice if she wanted

a place of her own. A girl had to grow up sometime, even in Bathsheba.

Her parents had not been much better off than she was now, and she'd lost them and everything they'd owned when she was only four years old. Shuttled off to live with her father's mother here in Bathsheba all those years ago, she'd been unable to get out. Like so many residents of the rural town with only two paved roads, she had become dependent on her job at the factory, and made only enough to get by. Those few lucky enough to get scholarships after high school escaped, never to return. Most of the local school's graduates worked alongside their parents at Worth's, reaching for the brass ring—a pension after thirty years service.

Brandy slid into her aging car, turned the ignition switch and waited. Thankfully *today* it decided to start. Unfortunately, after going a few miles she discovered the heater was stuck on high. Sweat beaded at the top of her back, moistening her turtleneck. She swept a hand across her forehead, hoping her makeup wouldn't run too badly, and rolled down the window, wincing as the broken crank handle scratched her palm.

She dabbed at the scratch after she knocked on the door of Mr. Walford's suite at the Royal Arms Motor Inn. It had been a forty-two mile drive out of Bathsheba, the heater blasting all the way.

A stunning woman, tall and lithe, with a head almost buried in curly red hair, swung the door open in a rush. "Ha!" She glanced at Brandy's attire, then backed away, allowing her to enter the room. "She's here, Mrs. Hart."

Brandy wondered why the woman had laughed, then pictured what she must look like after an hour in the steaming car. Certainly anyone resembling the ethereal being who'd opened the door would find Brandy amusing, and lacking. Brandy waited, flexing her fingers.

A matronly lady, wearing a deep blue blazer and matching skirt, stepped in from another room, and held out her arm,

firmly shaking Brandy's hand. "Brandy? Margaret Hart, Mr. Walford's Executive Assistant. You'll be working with me."

Brandy forced a smile to her lips. Mrs. Hart appeared sincere. Her laughing eyes were set in a good-natured, but pudgy, face, and her hair was almost completely grey. She looked like she had worked with Mr. Walford for quite some time.

"N–Nice to meet you."

The redhead set a glass down with a loud clink, causing Brandy to turn her way. She felt Mrs. Hart pat the hand she'd shaken but still held in her cool palms. "Tamara Louvain. Don't mind her. She's just Mr. Walford's—"

"*She* is just his girlfriend." Tamara burst into laughter. "Sorry, it's just so—" Tamara apparently caught the frown Mrs. Hart sent her way and calmed herself, smoothing her suede skirt over her thighs. "Nice to meet you, Brandy," she managed.

Brandy, already beginning to rethink the wisdom in accepting this job, sat in the chair toward which Mrs. Hart propelled her. "I am still a little unclear on what my job actually is..."

Mrs. Hart handed her a manila folder of personnel forms. "Fill these out." She sat across from Brandy. "It's really quite simple. Mr. Walford is rewarding me for years of good service by giving me an assistant."

"And you hired *me* because...?" Brandy paused, the pen just above the first line on the form.

Mrs. Hart and Tamara shared a look Brandy thought was rather suspicious. "We reviewed the files of individuals at Worth's, Mr. Walford's newest acquisition, and found you to be the most qualified."

Brandy squinted. Uneasiness crept over her shoulders. These two were lying through their teeth.

"Tell her the truth, Margaret," Tamara blurted.

Mrs. Hart's face reddened.

Tamara took a step toward them. She bent at the waist, giving Brandy the same heartless face the social workers had

given her when they dropped her off at her grannie's house. "We drew your name out of a hat." She straightened, looking up to the left. "Okay, not really a hat, more like a vase, but still, we put all of the names in there, and we picked yours. So there you are."

Mrs. Hart stared at Tamara blankly for a moment, then bounced once in her seat. "Yes, well, if we must tell her that. It's true, your name was selected. Rather randomly. Not at all on purpose. But still, you're here, and we need to get back to work as soon as possible."

Brandy tilted her head down and wrote in her information, all the while thinking how strange this all was. Thora would be laughing herself silly right now. Name from a hat.

Brandy cleared her throat when she finished the forms, bringing Mrs. Hart back from her conversation with Tamara. "That's good, dear. Now, we need to discuss your moving arrangements."

"Moving?"

Mrs. Hart lifted both eyebrows. "Well, yes. Mr. Walford's headquarters are in Eastown. If you're working with me, you'll need to live nearby."

Brandy exhaled, her shoulders drooping. Her last bank statement flashed in her mind. She had a grand total of thirty-six dollars after the most recent draft had been taken out. "I'm sorry, there's no way I can afford to live in Eastown." Even though she'd lived by the grace of others, she knew apartments required deposits, and that was not something she could manage. With the bills rolling in, she wouldn't be out of debt until the end of the decade.

"Don't worry about that. It's part of the incentive package."

"Incentive package?"

"Well, of course, dear! I have taken the liberty of securing you a small apartment. I'm sure it will do until you wish to make other arrangements. And this," she scribbled on an index card and slid it into Brandy's hand, "is what Mr. Walford

authorized me to offer as salary. Granted it will sometimes require hours that are a bit absurd, I'm sure this is more than fair."

Brandy nearly choked when she checked the figure. This amount would pay off her debt instantly. She quickly divided it by twelve. If she budgeted carefully, she would be able to get free of the collection agencies in less than two years. Bathsheba would never have anything this good for her again. This was her one shot, suspicious or not.

"Mrs. Hart, you've got yourself an assistant."



The blare of a car horn nearly caused Brandy to drop the crisp twenty-dollar bill she drew from her wallet. She held onto it a second more than the oily Eastown taxi driver would have liked. He gave the money a tug and peeled away from the curb as soon as Brandy had a hold of her lone suitcase.

She tilted her head back, eyeing the building that loomed in front of her. A woman in a dark uniform stood resolutely at the door. When Brandy approached her, the woman verified the address. Brandy gulped in disbelief. How could this possibly be the building in which Mrs. Hart had found Brandy's apartment?

Brandy walked through the revolving door, hopping out in a slight panic at the last moment before ending up back outside. It frightened her the same way the escalator had at the airport. They just didn't have those things in her one-horse town, at least not places she'd been.

"Excuse me?" Brandy hated to bother the crisply dressed man behind the elegant marble concierge desk, but she had no choice. She cleared her throat. "I'm... My name is Brandy Brigham, I—"

"Yes, Miss Brigham. Floor nineteen, apartment 'A.' We've been expecting you. Here are your keys. Your... er... things arrived last night. They'll be waiting for you upstairs."

Brandy ignored the questioning look delivered by the concierge. Her “things” consisted of about ten odd boxes and a rocking chair. She’d been embarrassed to bring any of the threadbare furniture from her doublewide, and reluctant too, in case she had to haul it back to Bathsheba once old man Walford decided to send her packing.

“Thank you, Sir.” She bent her knees slightly and lifted her suitcase. Her pinkie stuck to the duct tape that she’d wrapped around the vinyl handle to keep it attached. She hoped no one noticed.

The elevator stood open, so she stepped inside and pressed nineteen. Just before the doors closed, a newspaper plunged into the space she’d been ready to relax in, sending the doors skittering back open. A man entered the elevator behind the periodical. Brandy felt as though she’d been punched in the stomach. He was the most handsome man she’d ever laid eyes on. She tightened her grip on the suitcase and backed into the rear wall, trying her best not to stare at him.

He pushed the number twenty, but did not turn around. Brandy allowed herself to study him unabashedly. The Greek god stood over six feet tall, and in the brief glimpse she’d had when he entered, she’d noticed chiseled lips and magnetic brown eyes. He was a thing of fantasy.

And—he was watching her perusal in the reflection of the brass wall.

In her haste to appear nonchalant Brandy jerked, sending the suitcase down the few inches to the floor. She looked in her hand, as if surprised by the handle that remained there. She flicked her gaze back to the reflection, and thought she saw a smirk that disappeared so fast it left her thinking it had never been there at all.

She shoved the sticky “C”-shaped handle into the back pocket of her jeans and ran her hand across the back of her neck below her ponytail. She suddenly felt very warm in the elevator.

She heard a ding as the elevator lurched slightly to a stop. She tried picking up her bag with both arms, but it proved too awkward. Contemplating pushing it, she was afraid she might bump him on her way out, and wasn't sure she trusted herself to actually touch him. She might just burst into flames. She stood staring at her poor suitcase, willing herself to find a solution.

He solved the problem for her by pressing the hold button on the elevator, and then easily lifting her suitcase. He strode into the hallway, and set the monstrosity in front of her door. He returned and gestured for her to exit.

"Th-Thank you. How'd you know which door?" The elevator had closed and was on its way before she had the words out. Even though he was gone, Brandy could still see his face in her mind. Why couldn't they raise them like that in Bathsheba?

Of course, she told herself, everybody probably knew when someone new moved into the building. In Bathsheba, the whole town came out to help move new residents into their houses. Only a few families had ever come to the tiny town, and never anyone single. That was the trouble with Bathsheba, either everyone was related, or already married. At least no one dared use the term "old maid" around her. There was always an easier target. Miss Darby up on the hill above Barlow's Lake was seventy-five, and the only man she'd ever lived with was a tabby cat the size of a puma.

That's what her elevator angel reminded her of—a cat—a panther. He moved with a grace that implied a muscular body. Even with his expensive suit on, she could see his well-built form. She sighed. One floor up from her. She hoped he wasn't just visiting someone. Ugh—a woman? She had been so mesmerized by his looks she'd never thought to check for a wedding band.

Brandy unlocked her door and shoved her suitcase over the threshold with her foot. The drapes were drawn so she felt

along the wall for the light switch and snapped it on. What was she thinking? Men like him were for fantasies, not for her.

Her boxes blocked her view, so she stepped around them and was pleasantly surprised. There was more than one room! And furniture! She hadn't thought to ask if the place was furnished, she figured that would have been presumptuous on her part.

Brandy kicked off her shoes and peeled her socks over her heels, digging her toes into the thick beige carpet as soon as they were free. She let herself drop into a soft chair, flopping like a rag doll. Mm, this must really be a terrible job if they're treating her this good. That's okay, no matter what they need her to do, she'd done worse. One terrible summer she'd spent picking tobacco during all of her non-factory hours. The black tar from the juices of the plant colored everyone's hands, and the smell stayed with a person for at least a week.

Nothing could be worse than that.



Brandy could hardly believe her sour luck. She'd hoped to see her Prince Charming in the elevator again, but she'd missed him. She even tried hitting floor twenty, just to see the hallway where his apartment was located, but the elevator refused to honor her request. It carried her down instead.

She walked the six blocks to the building that contained the offices of Walford Enterprises. In front were scattered attractive benches full of even more attractive people dressed in tailored suits and carrying monogrammed briefcases. A wave of nervousness washed over Brandy. She'd worn her best dress, an ankle-length print of small purple flowers. Not exactly business attire, it was more suited to a picnic. She stopped just outside of the building and wrapped her long brown hair quickly around a fist, securing it to the back of her head with pins she fished from her purse.

Taking a deep breath, she went inside and squeezed into the first available elevator. There were three people inside, but she refused to meet their stares. Turning to face the elevator doors she stood just in front of them and felt their dubious glances on every square inch of her hide.

On the fifth floor two stepped out, and she was left with the third occupant. She ventured a peek and gulped. Prince Charming! She risked a direct look, expecting to turn to stone or melt into a puddle. She got a curt nod for her trouble.

No man had the right to look as good as he did. His black hair curled just over the edge of his starched collar. She wondered who cut his hair. That person got to run their fingers through that thick hair, see him close his eyes with pleasure when they gently massaged his scalp—Brandy opened her eyes. She had to keep her wits about her. Her ears grew hot. She hoped her flushed cheeks weren't too obvious to him.

Disappointed, she watched his back as he left the elevator one floor below the one where she was going. Oh well, at least now she knew she'd get to ogle him in two buildings, she reasoned as she stepped off into the bright hallway that led to old man Walford's offices.

Mrs. Hart was coming at her at a fast clip, folding a cell phone closed and depositing it in the pocket of her red blazer. "Don't relax yet, dear. You've got a job to do today. And it's not here." She waved over the receptionist in the next office. "I'm going out for a bit, Trish. You're in charge."

Mrs. Hart hooked her arm through Brandy's and led her back out. "We're going to get you some more appropriate attire, dear." She waggled a credit card in front of Brandy's face. "Courtesy of Walford Enterprises."



Nick Walford waited five minutes, then headed up to his office. He rolled his eyes as he passed Margaret Hart's empty

desk on his way to his door. What did he expect? He had laid this mess at her feet. He never should have gone along with the idea. The girl was a disaster.

Yesterday he'd given her the benefit of the doubt. After all, she was moving in, wearing casual clothes. He frowned. He wondered briefly if the suitcase she'd been carrying was her own, or if she'd dragged it from a dumpster. After seeing that sack of a dress she'd had on this morning, he was sure the worn out luggage was definitely her own.

He hadn't bothered to look beyond her clothes on either occasion. He'd known from the ache in his gut when he'd entered the elevator yesterday that she had to be Brandy Brigham. If this scheme of Mrs. Hart's, to bring Brandy in as an employee, didn't work out, he would just have to offer the young woman money. From the looks of things she could certainly use it.

Margaret was right—this was his chance to fix things with Miss Brigham. He'd carried his burden of guilt for far too long.

Nick retrieved his signing pen from his desk then reached for the steaming mug that sat on a coaster, sipped, and then checked his watch. Five minutes until the meeting with the heads of his latest acquisition. He clicked the pen open and shut. "Time to make the profit margin move," he smiled as he strode out of his office, toward the executive conference room.

## Chapter Two



It was nearly two o'clock when Brandy and Mrs. Hart finished making their purchases. Mrs. Hart suggested Brandy return to her apartment and organize herself for the next morning. The motherly woman assured her she could make up the time lost somehow, so Brandy had allowed herself to be driven back to the apartment building by the chauffeur who'd accompanied them on their trip.

Once she had all of the bags and packages in her bedroom, Brandy spread each outfit on the bed before hanging them in her closet. She had enough new clothes to easily wear something different every day for two weeks. After the first few items Mrs. Hart had insisted she buy, Brandy gave up checking price tags. The woman must know something she didn't. How could anyone in Easttown afford clothes at these prices?

Brandy lined up the five new pairs of shoes on the floor of the closet, shaking her head at the extravagance. She'd only ever had two pairs of shoes at any one time in Bathsheba. A pair of sneakers, and a pair of sandals. She'd bought the black flats she'd worn to the office that morning just for the job. And now it seemed she had one pair in each neutral color. And purses to match? That was where Brandy had finally drawn the line. She didn't think a body should have to transfer everything from purse to purse. One black bag would do just fine, she'd

told Mrs. Hart. The woman had caved on that point, and Brandy was grateful. By the time they took her clothing purchases and her apartment out of her pay, she'd be lucky to get any salary at all!

Brandy changed into her best jeans and a favorite lavender T-shirt. She checked her new hair-do in the mirror. She'd consented that morning to having it trimmed a few inches, and to the bangs. She'd never had bangs in her life, but now that she did, she decided she liked them. Mrs. Hart said they brought more attention to Brandy's face. Well, no one had directed any attention there yet in her twenty-three years. Brandy didn't think anyone was going to start anytime soon.

They'd even added in highlights, though she'd insisted that she got them in the summertime from the sun anyway. Mrs. Hart reminded her that she wouldn't be getting as much sun now that she was in Eastown. Brandy had reluctantly agreed.

Brandy heard the rumble of her stomach and left her apartment, locking the door behind her. Once she made it downstairs, she approached the concierge. She cleared her throat.

His eyebrows went up in question, but he smiled politely. "Yes, Miss Brigham?"

"I was wondering, where might I go if I wanted to buy some groceries? *Fresh* groceries?"

He narrowed his gaze, thinking, then nodded to himself. "Three blocks west, there's a chain store. Another two blocks is a little market with fresh vegetables and such."

Brandy smiled. "That's the one then. Thanks, Mister...?"

"Randolph. You're welcome."

Brandy walked the five blocks quickly, taking care not to make eye contact with any of the strangers. Thora had warned her about that. Thora's nephew had come to Eastown once on a school trip, and he'd fallen a few steps behind as they walked to a theatre. He'd locked eyes with some guy asking for change. The solicitor had screamed curses in the boy's direction

as he hurried to catch up to his classmates. Scared him so bad he'd needed to change his clothes.

The "little market" turned out to be a huge open-air market filled with vendors of all sorts. Brandy was grateful for the fifty dollars the girls at Worth's had collected for her. Without it, she might've gone hungry! She practiced her high school Spanish hopelessly with a Mexican woman from whom she purchased most of her items. The woman was very understanding, and only laughed at her a little. Brandy bought what she'd need to make a large meal that evening, and planned to eat the leftovers the next day. That way, she could shop every other day, and still eat fresh food.

She clutched the two small bags and braved the revolving door back at her building. Relieved that she'd made it safely through, she entered the elevator, her gaze on the floor. She pivoted, pressed the button, and sighed.

She felt someone looking at her and peered up. It was Prince Charming, leaning over her shoulder and frowning into one of her paper sacks.

Brandy stepped slightly left and swallowed. "May I help you?"

"I was just—What are those?"

Brandy held back a chuckle. She set one bag on the floor and reached into the other, pulling out several small green tomato-shaped fruits. "These? Tomatillas." Her heart was pounding—he was talking to her! Albeit it was about a shriveled up fruit...

"What do you do with them?" His dark eyebrows were pushed together, and he lifted one as he met her gaze questioningly.

This time she did allow herself to laugh. "You put them in guacamole. Keeps the colors from turning icky."

"You cook?" She liked the way he was staring at her now, and not at the tomatillas. He had the warmest brown eyes. She would have sworn he was leaning closer, but the darned elevator dinged to announce her floor.

“Well, this is me.” She picked up the second bag and stepped out. “I’m Brandy, by the way.” She hoped he would tell her his name.

“Nick,” he answered just as the doors closed, as if he’d heard her thoughts.

Nick, she thought. Now I have a name to put to the dream. And boy had she had a humdinger of a dream about him the night before. He’d knocked on her door, walked in, and kissed her soundly. Swept her into his arms just like that. Then a car alarm went off on the street below and she’d been unable to get him to return when she managed to fall back asleep.

Just as well. Men like that didn’t go for girls like her. He was just too perfect.



She was darn near perfect, Nick thought as he slid his access card through the door to his penthouse on the twentieth floor. He’d had an image of her as a poor pitiful waif, scarred for life from her childhood trauma. But she didn’t appear any worse for wear. He’d taken in every inch of exposed skin, marveling at the smooth alabaster tone. The new haircut changed her face completely from this morning. The highlights were new, too, but suited her. And the wisp of bangs made her pretty brown eyes look, well, sexy. Almost as sexy as her full red lips. Kissable, red lips.

When he’d seen her in the elevator at work, he’d restrained himself from rolling his eyes and snorting. She’d been dressed more for a walk in the meadow at a bluegrass concert than for a secretarial position. He hoped Mrs. Hart had instructed her on proper business attire. He’d hate to see her ridiculed just because she didn’t know any better.

Nick crossed his living room and entered his bedroom. He slid his suit coat off, hung it up, and loosened his tie. He opened the curtains that sealed his bedroom from a wide

balcony that overlooked her smaller one below.

Guacamole. He hadn't expected that. She could cook? He'd only met one woman who did her own cooking since he'd been at Walford Enterprises, and once they'd started dating, she did so less and less. His stomach growled and he picked up the phone, ordering takeout from a nearby restaurant.

He returned to the glass doors, willing her to appear. She did, for just a moment. Her face peeked out through her own curtains and he stepped back as his heart leaped forward. He felt like a peeping Tom. He resisted the urge to go downstairs and see just what she was cooking with that guacamole.



Brandy pushed her balcony doors open and picked up the tray of food she'd fixed for herself. She sat in a wooden chair, taking care not to look down off of the building, but just enjoying the sight of the skyline. She inhaled the spicy scent of her dinner before she lifted her fork and cut a small piece of a chicken enchilada, placing it on her tongue. She closed her eyes as the tangy juices made her stomach stir.

Her grannie might not have taught her much, but she had made sure Brandy could cook. She'd prepared meals in the house from the age of six, and always liked to try new things. Grannie had indicated that Brandy could catch a man with food, but Brandy just liked to cook for the sheer enjoyment of it.

She sipped her iced tea and leaned back in the chair, nibbling on a salty nacho chip. Her gaze rested on a balcony above and across from hers that she had not noted before. The curtains were open, and light shone from within. She was being rude by continuing to peer, but she couldn't help but wonder if that was Nick's apartment.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, a man appeared on the balcony and caught her staring. He lifted a hand, and dropped it at his side. It had been nearly eight o'clock when Brandy finished

preparing her food, and in the darkness, she saw only his silhouette, but there was no doubt in her mind that it was Nick. And even if she couldn't see him, he could probably see her.

Suddenly self-conscious, she gathered her dishware and headed back inside. Her hands shook, rattling the plates until she deposited them on the kitchen table. Having him this close was going to drive her to distraction. She hoped she would have lots of work to do tomorrow. She needed something to take her idle mind off of her neighbor before she did something crazy. Like fall for him.



The next morning Brandy made it to old man Walford's offices with two minutes to spare. She touched her hair as she walked down the hallway to the executive office. Her locks were drawn back into a loose chignon, and wearing one of her crisp new business dresses, she felt like she fit in with the rest of the people in the building.

"Good morning, Brandy." Mrs. Hart took both of Brandy's hands in hers. "You look wonderful," she whispered loud enough for the folks back in Bathsheba to hear. She paused to take in Brandy's full attire, then led her to a desk on the far side of the office. "This will be your desk, dear. Whatever you find that you need, let Trish know."

Brandy peered at the small woman Mrs. Hart pointed out typing busily at a computer just down the hall. Her fingers were a blur. Brandy wondered how she typed without ever glancing at her notes. Brandy's method of typing was using three fingers on one hand and two on the other. She eyed the computer on her desk. It was on—that was good, at least she wouldn't have to figure out where the power button was, she thought. She'd have to find a manual and take it home to read tonight.

"Is that Douglas Walford's office there?" Brandy pointed a

bent finger at the large firmly closed dark door on the opposite side of the room

“Hmmm? No, dear. Douglas Walford isn’t in. He never comes in any more. We handle it all just fine these days.” She started to say something else, but closed her bright pink mouth, biting off the words.

“I need you to do some organizing for me today.” Mrs. Hart marched toward a stack of three boxes filled haphazardly with file folders and loose papers. “These are files from one of Walford’s latest acquisitions. I’m afraid they were... mixed up. In transit. So I need you to alphabetize the folders, as well as figure out what went inside of each of them. Can you handle that?”

Brandy shook her head. “Do you mind if I spread the stuff out somewhere?” She checked to see how much room there was on the floor.

“Sure. You can use Conference Room C. It has several tables which should give you enough space.” Mrs. Hart paged someone to carry the boxes for Brandy. As they entered the conference room, Mrs. Hart gasped and erased the writing left on the white dry erase board. All Brandy could make out was the last word, “Bathsheba.”

“Take your lunch whenever you like. The cafeteria is on the first floor at the back of the building. You come on down the hall when you finish up with the filing.” Mrs. Hart waited for Brandy’s nod before dusting her hands in satisfaction and heading back to her office.

Brandy opened the first box. She blew a puff of air and pushed her bangs upward with her hands. This was going to take forever.

She set the folders in one pile, then spread them around the three long conference tables in alphabetical order. Then the task of putting individual papers with the folders began.

After an hour, she sat in a chair and rubbed her eyes. Her gaze came to rest on the piece of paper she held in her hand.

Personnel files. And it seemed, as she checked around her, that many of the papers she was filing referred to severance pay. She wondered if she should be reading such sensitive material, but decided that Mrs. Hart wouldn't have asked her to do the job if she didn't think it appropriate.

The employee records were from a company called Kentucky Divisions. She figured it was some sort of factory by the written evaluations included in the files. She wondered why so many people had been let go. Hadn't Mrs. Hart said it was a *new* acquisition?

By twelve thirty, Brandy had separated all of the paperwork. She twisted her torso around to the left, leaving her feet in place, and felt her spine pop. The relief was instant. She'd been bending over too long. She stretched her arms out to the side, and stepped into the hallway.

She'd forgotten exactly how they'd come to the conference room, and the small clusters of cubicles all looked the same. She heard the occasional ding of the elevator, and finally found it. Without bothering Mrs. Hart, she went downstairs to the cafeteria.

While in line, waiting to pay for her Caesar salad, iced tea, and chocolate chip cookie, she realized she was searching the crowd of seated diners. For Nick. She wondered what he did for the company. She shivered just picturing him in her mind, and moved toward the cashier.

She sat in the far corner, preferring to observe the room. She listened in on a few conversations, but gleaned no thrilling news. That is, no one mentioned Nick's name.

After eating, she wandered back to the conference room and started stacking the filled folders. She held A through G in her arms and decided she could carry them back herself.

She knew how to get back to the elevator this time. She simply made a left at the cubicle with all of the upside down knickknacks. She set the stack down on her desk and looked around for Mrs. Hart. The door that had been closed before

stood slightly open, and she assumed Mrs. Hart had gone inside. Well, she considered, if old man Walford wasn't in, she might as well ask Mrs. Hart where she wanted the files stored. She lifted them into her arms, catching the top one just before it slid out of her grasp.

She pushed the large door open a bit further with her hip and turned to enter the room when she was flattened. She landed on the carpet in a snowstorm of eight by eleven paper before she could catch herself or any of the files. The huge barrier she'd crashed into was on his knees, his face pale as he reached for her upper arms and pulled her up, back on her feet.

Brandy could do nothing but stand struck dumb with his hands on her. It was none other than Nick. Her Prince Charming. And his touch was searing her right through her sleeves. Her heart raced.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you there," he managed. He dropped his hands from her, opening and closing his fingers, trying to find somewhere else to put them.

"My fault. I, uh, didn't know anyone would be inside. Well, that is, I thought Mrs. Hart might be in there, but not you." Her face flamed and she willed her tongue to stop before he realized what a total idiot she sounded like. Maybe he'd gone temporarily deaf and missed the senseless babble.

"Mrs. Hart? No, she's getting my lunch." He bent at the waist, sweeping up a handful of the papers she'd spilled. "What's this you're working on?"

Brandy opened her mouth to answer, and heard Mrs. Hart's voice from behind her. "That's the filing you asked that I have my new assistant work on today, Mr. Walford." Mrs. Hart was staring at Nick with pursed lips, her eyes bulging.

Brandy was still stuck on what Mrs. Hart had called him. "You're Mr. Walford? But you said your name was Nick—"

He smiled, enjoying her confusion. "And so it is. Nicholas Walford."

"But the memos sent out to us at Worth's... The photo..."

He stared at her, puzzled, and then understanding spread across his face. “My father. Sorry about that. I haven’t bothered to change it. I guess we forgot Pop was on the memo. Didn’t mean to confuse you.”

If that wasn’t his intention before, he was certainly doing it now. His direct gaze was boring straight through her eyes into her soul. If she were a Regency era romance heroine, she might have fainted on the spot. As it was, she turned away from him and began the task of breathing again and gathering the mess from the floor. He was still watching her. She felt his stare. She ignored it. Her heart raced. Nick was her boss?

Mrs. Hart’s expensive black heeled shoes moved carefully past her. “Your lunch, Mr. Walford?”

“Mm. Yes, thank you, Margaret.” Brandy heard bags rustling overhead and eased upward, moving to the side with her newly disorganized workload. She was going to excuse herself and get back to work, but the office door closed before she could muster the courage to speak to him again.



“You might have warned me.” Nick gestured toward the closed door with a thumb. “Why’d you give her the Kentucky papers?”

Margaret Hart, his father’s secretary for twenty years, and now his executive assistant—same job, better title, more work—lowered her right eyebrow. “We had to give her something, Nicholas Walford. She’s already a bit suspicious, I think. If she doesn’t have any work to do, she’ll realize *something* else is going on.”

Nick rubbed his fingers along the edge of his right hand, feeling the faint ridge of scar tissue that reached from the base of his right pinkie to his wrist. “You’re right. But can’t you give her some real work? I mean, we are paying her. No sense in losing money all the way around, is there?”

“I’ll see what I can come up with.” Margaret paused at the door. “She has no administrative skills. You *do* realize that?”

Nick’s mouth watered as he recalled the smells of spicy Mexican food wafting up to the balcony of his penthouse the night before. He swallowed, then glanced at the cold deli sandwich that awaited him on his desk. He regretted ordering it. He wanted Mexican. And the woman who’d prepared it.

Margaret cleared her throat. Nick sheepishly walked to his chair and sat, picking up the wrapped sandwich. Margaret nodded approvingly and left the room.

Nick leaned back and swiveled around to the large glass window behind him. Brandy was much more than he’d expected. All he had wanted to do was right an old wrong by bringing her here. He hadn’t expected her to be so damn pretty.

Nick took a bite of the sandwich. It didn’t satisfy him. His hunger wasn’t for food. He shoved it aside and picked up his schedule, dutifully handwritten by Margaret each day even though she knew he could access it on the computer with a simple press of a button. She believed in using technology, but she still wanted to do things “the right way” as she called it. And he didn’t mind.

Nick’s stomach growled and he saw Brandy in his mind again, dining al fresco. He grunted, bringing his concentration back to work. His next appointment was with Charlie Jordan. The man had lost several thousand dollars of Walford Enterprises’ money from petty cash. Nick had the man followed to a gambling institution. Jordan had a problem, and while Nick didn’t usually like to be involved personally with anyone he employed, when their personal lives cost him money, he *made* it his business.

He and Charlie Jordan, and three other executives, as well as security, would be in on the meeting. He would have the man charged with embezzlement and escorted into police custody. It was just good business. Cover the company’s assets.

Nick checked his watch. It was nearly two. He chucked the

lunch into his waste basket and strode across the room. He paused at the door, wondering if Brandy was still out there. The vision of her as she'd been on the floor, her hair disheveled and her skirt rising to show just a hint of thigh... He shook his head and pushed the door open. She wasn't there. He was surprised to feel disappointment. He would have liked to have spoken with her.

Straightening his tie, he made his way to Conference Room A, finding Joe Roberts waiting for him outside.

"Good, you're here. Jordan's inside. He's nervous. I think he may have seen the security guys on his way in."

Nick nodded, all seriousness. "Let's do this."



Brandy closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and swept into Nick's office. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, I want you to take a letter for me." He smiled, causing her heart to catch in her throat. She was disoriented long enough to misconstrue what he'd said.

"Sure. To where?"

"It's for Chris Mullins, over at Baber Legal." He sat on the edge of the desk and clasped his hands, waiting.

Brandy looked around, scratched her neck, and pulled her hand back to her side. Nick raised his eyebrows and leaned toward her slightly. She did the same. "Well?"

Nick looked at her, as if he was trying to figure her out. "Well, what?"

"Where's the letter?" She held her hands out.

Nick laughed. "Okay, you're a funny one. Now let's get started." He walked around to his chair and sat behind the desk.

Brandy remained where she was, still uncomprehending. Then her hand flew up and covered her mouth. "Oh!" She glanced left and right, wiggling her fingers.

“The pad and pencil are there, on the small table in the corner.” He shook his head.

Brandy hoped he still thought she was trying to be witty. Take a letter? She grabbed up the pencil and tablet and sat in one of the smaller chairs.

“Okay, Chris Mullins, blah, blah, blah, Baber Legal, etcetera. The matter of Charlie Jordan has been dealt with as you suggested.” He stopped, rubbed his jaw and noticed she was not writing. “What have you got so far?”

Brandy frowned. She held the pencil up. The lead had broken off. Nick pulled a pencil sharpener from his top desk drawer and placed it on the desk. While Brandy quickly used it to sharpen the writing utensil, he poured himself a glass of ice water from a pitcher that sat to the side.

Brandy returned to the seat and waited. Just as Nick began to speak again, she realized she still held the sharpener in her left hand. She jumped from the seat to return it to his desk, and inadvertently tipped his glass over. She felt every muscle in her neck stiffen and cry out as she lunged, trying to prevent the liquid from completely soaking his leather desk blotter. A stream began to run off of the edge of the desk onto his pants legs.

In her haste to stop the flow with her hands, she bumped the side table, sending the pitcher and the extra glasses placed next to it crashing to the floor. Brandy’s blood felt as cold as the water. She was going to lose her job. She couldn’t even last one lousy week!

Nick leapt to his feet, dashing away the water from his thighs with a swipe of his hands. Brandy searched frantically for something to clean the sopping mess. She heard the office door open and a faint “oh my.” Seconds later Mrs. Hart was by her side, handing her several white towels. Tears burned Brandy’s eyes, but through the resulting blurred vision, she still mopped at the spill.

She realized she was sobbing only when Nick’s tanned hand

landed on her wrist, stopping her panicked attempt at clean-up.

“It’s okay, Brandy.” She focused on that wrist. The heat radiating from his skin to hers warmed her from the tips of her fingers to the bottoms of her feet. Her gaze was compelled upward. Nick’s other hand began to rise toward her cheek.

“Install a shower in your office now, Nicky?” Tamara stood behind them, one hand on a hip, the other clutching an accordion file full of papers.

Brandy jerked her hand from Nick’s and backed away, staring at the carpet. “Excuse me, I need to... Excuse me.” She spun on her heel and fled the room.

She practically ran all the way to the ladies’ room, then entered a stall and closed the lid of the toilet, sitting on top and allowing her tears to flow. She held herself silent, as there were others present.

What had just happened? She was losing it. She should have just told them she couldn’t do the job. But she didn’t want to lose the position. She liked being near Nick. And that was the scariest thing of all.

## Chapter Three



Brandy dropped her purse into the bottom desk drawer and closed it. She wondered where Mrs. Hart had gone. The woman usually met her at the door with some gargantuan assignment. After the great flood, Brandy had been doled out tasks that, due to sheer tediousness, took her most of the day to complete.

She slipped the computer manual from her shoulder bag and flipped it open. A bobby pin marked the spot she'd stopped reading the night before. She tried to stay a step ahead of the game. She wanted this job to work. She needed this job to work. Her mail had been forwarded from Bathsheba, and a whole new set of bills filled her box the previous day. It seemed the hospital now added fees to their payment system.

Brandy looked up from the monitor as Nick's door opened and Mrs. Hart emerged, clearly upset. "Don't worry, we'll find someone to do it."

Nick rested his back against the side of the door frame. "On this short notice? I don't think so." He struck the wood with his fist. "How could Tamara do this? Today of all days!"

Mrs. Hart cleared her throat and gestured at Brandy with a tilt of her head. "Careful."

Brandy peeked over the computer. "Is there something I can do?"

“Unless you are a chef with excellent hostessing skills, dear, I don’t think so.” Mrs. Hart picked up her phone and spoke to Nick. “I’ll start calling around. Surely there’s someone available.”

“I—I can cook,” Brandy began timidly. When Mrs. Hart’s fingers paused on the keypad, she went on. “I don’t know what exactly you need, but I can do it. Really.”

She could see all her office mistakes running through Mrs. Hart’s eyes. The woman smiled indulgently, shook her head in the negative, and opened her mouth.

Trish leaned into the room and pointed a finger at Brandy. “You!” She crossed the room, a cookie in her left hand. “These are fantastic! Where did you get them?”

Brandy smiled and looked over at Nick. “I made them. I accidentally sent an e-mail to the whole administrative staff yesterday that sort of jammed things up. I thought I would bring in something to make peace.”

Nick held up a hand and placed it on Mrs. Hart’s phone, hanging it up as he approached Brandy. “What is it?” He held out his hand and Trish dropped the round brown cookie into his palm. The surface was cross-cut and crusty. He sniffed at it and took a hesitant bite, his eyes widening as the flavor of the melted chocolate interior hit him.

“They’re called Dutch chocolate macaroons. What do you think?”

Nick finished chewing before responding. “Are you familiar with chicken picatta?”

Brandy smiled. The dish had been one of her grandfather’s favorites. Of course, first she’d been taught to catch the chicken...

“Yes. Really, Nick, I can do this.” She met him halfway across the floor.

He stopped just in front of her and stared into her eyes. “Okay,” he said after a moment. He turned back to Mrs. Hart, leaving Brandy bereft without the warmth of his gaze. “Give

her an access card for my place, and a copy of the menu Tamara planned.”

Nick lifted Brandy’s fingers into his, sending a shock up her forearm. “I have no idea if Tamara’s already purchased the ingredients. Just check the kitchen and see if anything has been delivered. If not, use this,” he fished his wallet from his back pocket and handed her three one hundred dollar bills. “Get what you need. There will be twelve, including you.”

“Me?” Brandy gulped.

Nick chuckled low in his throat. “I’ll need a hostess. Besides, eleven would look asymmetrical at the table.” He squeezed her hand before dropping it. “Margaret, does she have anything appropriate to wear?”

“I’ll have something sent over.” Brandy heard the curiosity in Mrs. Hart’s voice, but she couldn’t bear to drag her away from Nick’s a moment before she had to.



Brandy ran a hand over her pulled back hair, tucking stray strands behind her ears. The steam rising from the large kettle of rice settled on her skin as she stirred and fluffed. The chicken was nearly done, she had only to add the sauce. The vegetables she’d steamed in a separate container were ready to be added to the rice. The individual tiramisus she’d constructed were set and resting in the huge metal refrigerator.

She didn’t dare leave Nick’s apartment to shower. If the chicken started to burn, she’d be ruined! So far, she’d only explored the kitchen and pantry area. All of the appliances were fronted with metal, giving the room an industrial feel. Seemed out of place for a single man. The pantry had many nonperishable items, but Brandy obtained fresh ingredients for Nick’s dinner. After all, he’d given her more than enough money.

Brandy felt she had to improve on Tamara’s menu. The plain rice with the chicken picatta had struck her as too simple.

She'd steamed broccoli, red peppers, and zucchini to mix in for color. The huge frozen tiramisu she'd found in the freezer was totally unacceptable. It was a store bought dessert for heaven's sake! Instead, Brandy had made the concoction herself.

She walked down a hall toward what she hoped was a bathroom equipped with a shower. She discovered a bedroom that smelled of aftershave and followed the scent, finally finding the bathroom. She ran the tips of her fingers over the masculine toiletries on the top of the sink. She jerked her hand back. She had no right to be in here. This was too intimate. There must be another bathroom. Nick's place was bigger than her grannie's whole house.

As she began to leave Nick's bedroom, she couldn't resist a peek at his bed. The sheets were rumpled, but would pass for being a made bed. Before she could change her mind, she whipped a pillow from the bed and hugged it to herself, inhaling his scent. Just as quickly, she tossed it back into place. Smiling, she went in search of another shower.

When she'd finished drying her hair, she lifted the delicate pink frothy dress from the box. It had been delivered while Brandy was covered in flour from mixing the ingredients for the dessert. The dress practically floated out of the tissue paper. Then Brandy noticed it was backless. Biting her bottom lip, she lowered the beautiful creation back to its container and topped it with the lid.

She pulled on her jeans and one of Nick's shirts she'd had to appropriate when she'd spilled the rum on her own T-shirt. She made a last check on the food in the kitchen. Everything would be ready just in time for Nick's guests. She turned off the burners and slipped the plates and dishes of food into the warmer. She picked up the tray of hors d'oeuvres and put them in the living room just in case she didn't make it back upstairs before they arrived.

Brandy opened the door to go down and find something to

wear that was a little more conservative. Standing before her was Tamara Louvain, dressed to the nines in scarlet.

“You?” Tamara took in Brandy’s appearance with a single glance. “Why are *you* here?”

“I—I’m making dinner.” Brandy checked her watch. They would be arriving any minute.

Tamara smirked. “Didn’t you get the message from Nick?”

“Message?”

“Um... hmmm. I managed to get out of my... er... prior commitment, and he asked if I would still play hostess for him.” She pushed past Brandy and sat on a sofa, peering inquisitively at the tray of canapés.

Brandy still stood in the doorway.

“So everything is ready to go, then?”

“Dinner is in the warmer.” She swallowed, trying to hide her disappointment. Nick preferred Tamara as his hostess, even though Brandy had slaved in his kitchen all day. Oh, well, it was to be expected. After all, the woman was his girlfriend.

“Well, don’t just stand there like a statue. Get out of here. They were getting out of the limo when I came up.” Tamara walked back toward Brandy, shooing her with her fingers.

Brandy nodded. “Sorry. Tell Nick I hope everything is to his satisfaction.”

“It will be now, honey. Bye-bye.” Tamara gave a slight wiggle of her fingers as an encouragement to her exodus.

As Brandy stepped into one elevator and the doors closed, she heard the second elevator ding. If eleven people were in there, she’d be surprised. Lucky thing Tamara had thought to press the hold button so one elevator would stay at the twentieth floor long enough for Brandy to make her exit.



Nick was never more surprised than he was when he led his guests into his penthouse and Tamara emerged from the

kitchen carrying a tray of appetizers. She placed the tray on the coffee table and kissed his cheek.

“Where’s—”

“She bailed on you, Nicky. Good thing I made arrangements to get here, hmmm?”

“Bailed?” Tamara moved away from him rather than answer him. She greeted his guests in true schmoozy Tamara fashion.

The five couples didn’t detect anything amiss. He did his best to conduct his business, and made a successful night, but he was still thinking about Brandy. Why had she not come through for him?

After the last couple said their good-byes, gushing with compliments for Tamara on the dinner, he voiced his concerns. “She seemed so eager to prove she could do this.”

“Who?” Tamara sat, a thin thigh exposed by the slit in her dress.

Nick frowned. “Brandy. I don’t get it.”

“Don’t let it bother you, Nicky. You knew when you brought her from that doomed town that she wasn’t qualified to do anything. Those hicks just don’t have any sense of responsibility.”

Nick turned his head toward the balcony doors. He wondered if she’d seen him tonight. Her lights were off. He’d checked several times. He guessed maybe she found a better evening. It was too egotistical to think she might have been there the whole time, watching him. But he would swear he’d felt her gaze.

He shook off the arm Tamara snaked around his waist. “Thanks for coming through tonight, Tam. I guess I was wrong about a lot of things. Including you.”

“Me?” Her insincere pout made him want to laugh, but he controlled himself.

“I suppose I thought you were trying to teach me some sort of lesson. For declining your offer earlier.”

Tamara's expression slipped and her eyes squinted. She recovered quickly. "I'd never really hurt you, Nicky." She shrugged into her coat when he held it for her. "Are you sure you want me to go?"

"Yeah." After the scene with her in his office that morning, he didn't feel comfortable with the idea of sleeping with Tamara. Not that he could have. It would be hard to concentrate on kissing Tamara when Brandy's big brown eyes were on his mind.

Tamara had talked to her girlfriends and they'd made her believe that if she offered him an ultimatum, he would make theirs an exclusive relationship. He had declined, sending her into the tizzy that resulted in her refusal to prepare the menu for the dinner party. He'd almost burst into laughter at the icy look she'd sent him when he'd said he would find a way to make it work without her catering expertise.

"Still picking me up after work tomorrow for the charity auction, right?"

"Um, hmmm. Five o'clock."

He found himself at the balcony doors again as Tamara reluctantly left. He pulled the curtains apart, leaning his forehead against the cool glass. He felt ridiculous. He barely knew Brandy, and yet he wanted to refuse to believe she was the type to break promises.



Brandy watched Nick walk away from the glass. The light went out in the room, and she wondered if Tamara was spending the night. Now that the dinner party was finished in the penthouse, she allowed herself to turn on a lamp. She walked to the kitchen, switching on that light as well.

She opened the refrigerator, poked at the last of the chicken she'd fried a day earlier. She would make soup with it tomorrow, she decided. No use letting it go to waste. Her stomach

growled, and she reached for a slice of American cheese. She chewed, trying to get the thought of tiramisu out of her head. It was perhaps her favorite dessert, and she'd been coveting it ever since she'd read the menu Nick wanted prepared.

But she hadn't gotten what she wanted. Again. She'd deluded herself. For a few minutes she'd had the image of being at Nick's side as he conducted his business, while she played the gracious hostess. She was a little tired of building up her hopes where he was concerned. So what if her heart beat faster any time his name was mentioned? She was reaching for the unattainable. She raised her chin a notch. Well, then she had nothing to lose.



Friday morning Nick headed out to the office. He was not looking forward to the day. Brandy would have to be given a reprimand of some sort for bailing out. But she didn't have the skills for the job she currently had, much less any below that. And he needed to keep her close by, to make sure she was doing okay. He owed her that for what he'd done.

He let his head fall back against the elevator wall as it descended to street level. He'd come to accept that she'd deserted him when he clearly needed her. At least Tamara had come through. She'd proved herself to be reliable. A first for her. And the dinner had been amazing.

For all the training she'd received at the French culinary academy he'd sent her to, he'd never tasted any of her meals that were quite like the one last night. She'd taken some chances with some of the ingredients, and they'd improved foods he'd not thought could be improved upon. Then again, Tamara hadn't cooked for him since they'd slept together three months prior. That had been a mistake. One he hadn't repeated, and she never let him forget it.

He stepped into the lobby, smiling at Matilda as she held

the outer door for him. "Morning, Matilda."

"Morning, Mister Walford." She waved a taxi for him. "How'd that big dinner go last night?"

Nick nodded. There was nothing that went on in his building that Matilda wasn't privy to. "Just fine."

Matilda opened the cab door as it slowed to the curb. Nick got inside and she touched the edge of her hat brim. "I'm glad. Brandy must've made four trips to the market yesterday just so she could carry everything she needed back to your place." She took a step back. "Have a good—"

"Brandy?" Nick handed the driver a few bills and exited the cab. "I'm going to walk today, thanks." The driver shrugged and drove away. "What time was all this?"

Matilda looked befuddled. "Hmmm. Seems as she made the first trip about ten. Then the next two right away... Yes, and the last trip was just before four. She wanted to know where she could find fresh parsley. Can you believe that?" Matilda retreated toward the entrance of the building to open the door for another resident.

Nick lifted a hand in thanks. As he crossed the street the strangeness of what she'd said confused him. He turned back again, nearly causing a driver to hit him. "Matilda?" His voice boomed across the noise of traffic. "What time did Miss Louvain arrive?"

"Humph." Matilda twisted the side of her mouth downward. "Six-fifteen or so."

Nick retraced his steps and went back inside the lobby. He took the elevator directly to Brandy's floor. He strode to her door and raised his hand to knock.

He couldn't do it. What could he say? Maybe Tamara had handled her little deception tactfully. It was possible that Brandy was just fine about the whole thing. Yes, even relieved that she didn't have to be at his side during the evening. He frowned. He would wait and see how she acted this morning. If she wasn't angry, he wasn't going to bring it up. That would

be the safest solution.

However, Tamara needed to be taught a lesson. He pulled his cell phone from his jacket as he once again rode the elevator down.

Even though he practiced it regularly himself in business, he detested subterfuge when someone else used it to manipulate him. He had to face facts—Tamara had lied by omission and had used Brandy. He didn't like it one bit, even if Brandy wasn't upset by Tamara's actions, he was.

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Catherine grew up on a farm in rural Virginia. She has been writing stories and spinning tall tales from the time she could talk. In high school, an aptitude test revealed that Catherine should become a writer, a lawyer, or an actress. Instead she paid for college by singing in a rock band.

She was valedictorian of her high school class and graduated cum laude from Longwood College. She has been a teacher of three languages, a lead singer, a lobster flipper, and a bagel maker. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts degrees in English, and in Modern Languages, along with a minor in anthropology.

Catherine lives in Virginia with her wonderful husband and two fantastic children. In her spare time she tutors, hides from the lawn mower, reads voraciously, and critiques manuscripts.

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"*Outside The Fire* contains a lot of elements, yet the characters' growth is powerful, and their story is quite moving. The conclusion is shocking and will truly bring readers to the edge of their seat." *Robin Taylor, The Buzz*

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Nicholas Walford nearly killed a little girl in a fire that he set as a boy. Now a ruthless businessman, he discovers she is an employee in one of his factories. Out of guilt he offers her a dream job in his office. But he never expects her to be attractive, or a wonderful cook—nor does he expect to fall in love.

Brandy Brigham has lost her parents, her baby brother, and her hope. Trapped in a job going nowhere inspecting elastic in undergarments, she jumps at the chance to escape the small town of Bathsheba, Virginia. She accepts a mysterious job offered by her new boss, and wants to accept his love, but when she learns he is responsible for all of the misery in her life, will her love be strong enough to forgive him?

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"Catherine describes emotions so touchingly that the reader can't help but feel them. A compassionate and profoundly moving story."

*Dee Herga*

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