



# BOSS

## UNYIELDING

A SECRET BABY OFFICE ROMANCE

NICOLE R. LOCKER

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PREVIEW

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Farren sloshed her soaked stilettos into the lobby of Rayner Technologies and tried to shake the excess droplets from the messenger bag hanging at her side that held her probably rain-soaked résumé. How appropriate, she thought, that a torrential downpour would erupt before she could get half way to the building for her second-round interview at the illustrious, Houston-based technology firm. Obviously unprepared with no umbrella, her soaked, silk charmeuse blouse she had splurged on just for the occasion clung to her trim, statuesque frame.

The blast of cool air conditioning raised chills across her flesh before she could take in the modernistic and masculine décor she had seen on more than a few occasions now. Her eyes zeroed in on the front desk, and she approached a pale, lanky, young guy in a crisp, black, polo shirt, who seemed to be engrossed in the computer screen sitting in front of him.

“Hi, I’m Farren Fields. I’m here for a ten o’clock interview with Mr. Rayner.”

The guy looked up at her, and his eyes went wide. She knew she probably resembled a wet Colley at the moment, but surely he had seen a person come in out of the rain before.

“Umm, I’m sorry. Can you let Mr. Rayner know that I’m here for my interview?” Farren repeated, as the guy continued to stare at her without a word.

“Right. Okay, should I just wait here, or...?”

She left the question hanging in the air until a woman with tight, bright-red curls framing her face came around a corner and walked toward the front desk.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, Toby, you act like you’ve never seen a pretty girl before. Give me back my chair and I’ll handle it,” the girl said in a thick, Southern accent, shooing Toby out of her space. As she took her seat, the sound of shuffling ice rattled inside a large, Styrofoam cup that she took a quick sip from and sat down beside her computer monitor.

“You’ll have to forgive him. He’s not used to being around women much, except for me, I guess. You’re a pretty, young thang, too. Just look at that long, dark hair you’ve got. Here, take these,” the red-haired girl offered, handing Farren a box of tissues.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Farren said, accepting the box and drawing out a few tissues that she dabbed at her blouse with.

“You can call me Rita, hon’. I’ve got a ways to go before I start goin’ by ma’am.”

“I’m sorry. Thank you, Rita. I’m Farren. I’m here for-”

“For the ten o’clock interview with Mr. Rayner,” Rita interrupted. “Yes, I’ll let them know you’re here. If you’d like, you can go on and have a seat right there by the other lady in the waiting area.”

Farren looked over in the direction Rita had pointed and noticed a woman who was likely a few years older than herself, pristine and polished in a pencil skirt and button-down blouse. The woman’s hair was coiffed meticulously in a low bun, and she wore a pair of stylish, red-framed glasses. She had clearly arrived prior to the downpour.

Looking down at her own outfit splashed with rain water, Farren had to refrain from an outward sigh. Sizing up her competition was deflating at best, and for a split second, she considered leaving before they had the chance to reject her. She pushed the thought away immediately, knowing it would take a lot more than a wet outfit and dripping hair to stop her from at least trying.

Farren had dreamed of working at Rayner Technologies since her sophomore year of high school, about six years prior. She had researched the company and written a report on it for a school project she’d been given in a dual-credit programming class. A newspaper article about the cutting edge work Rayner Technologies was doing for businesses all over the world had appeared just days before the

assignment had been handed out, so she'd immediately known who she'd had in mind for it.

At the time, touring their office had been fascinating to a computer geek like herself. Seeing the software development, the inventive and creative processes, and the hands-on work of building computer-based robotics and other machinery had sealed her desire to pursue an Information Technology career, and Rayner Technologies wasn't just her top choice, it was her only choice.

Before she even had a chance to take a seat, the other interviewee was called back, so she now had the whole seating area to herself. She tried to comb her fingers through her sopping hair before picking up a *Wired* magazine that sat at the top of a small stack of other tech magazines lying on the coffee table in front of her. She leafed through its thin, glossy pages without actually seeing the words or photos printed on them. She was way too nervous at this point to focus on anything else, anyway.

She sat as patiently as she could until she saw the other woman emerge from the hallway she had been taken down earlier, and Farren did not miss the smug look on the woman's face as their eyes met when she passed. Farren could feel her hopes fall into the hollow of her stomach, but she smiled at the woman and looked back down at her pretend-reading.

A few more minutes passed, and when Farren thought she would explode if she had to wait any longer, she heard a timid, male voice call out her name. She sprang from her chair, threw *Wired* back onto the table, and walked around to where the man was standing in his light-colored, ironed, khaki pants and another crisp, black polo she realized had the Rayner Technologies logo on it.

"This way," he said as he motioned for her to follow him down the hall. "Do you have a résumé for Mr. Rayner?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, reaching into her messenger bag and pulling out the folder that held the documents she had prepared. The folder was a little damp, but thankfully, it looked as though it had caught the worst of the rain, and the papers it held inside were, for the most part dry. She handed it to him as they walked.

He led her to a large, corner office in the far back of the building, the front of which was walled with large, floor-to-ceiling windows, covered by wide, vertical blinds that were drawn open at the moment. They allowed her a view of an older, dark-haired and rather attractive man with a five-o'clock shadow, wearing a blue, button-down shirt. He had his sleeves unbuttoned and rolled up to his mid forearms, and the top button at his collar was undone as well, splaying open just enough to give a casual air to him while still looking professional.

Farren observed the man as she entered the door and approached his desk. Her heart caught in her throat and her nerves wound her into a tight coil. He didn't acknowledge her, but his attention went to her escort who approached him and handed over the folder holding her cover letter, résumé, and reference letters.

The man who had led her in directed her in a quiet voice, as though he were in a public library. "You can just have a seat here. Mr. Rayner, your ten o'clock appointment."

Rayner took the folder, opened it, and began scanning its contents through a pair of black rimmed glasses.

The man remained stationery where he stood, clearly waiting for a sign that Mr. Rayner had heard him.

"Thank you, Mickey. That will be all," Rayner stated, dismissively, in what Farren thought may have been the sexiest, deep, masculine voice she had ever heard.

Realizing the direction of her thoughts, she tried to rein them in. This guy had to be at least ten to fifteen years older than her. That was way too old for her, even if he wasn't her potential, future employer, which made it even more ridiculous that thoughts of how attractive he was had even entered her

mind. She had to focus.

She sat quietly as he flipped through more papers in the folder he held. She noticed a large frame on the wall behind him with a University diploma centered in the middle of it that read *Rogan Rayner*. She thought the name was fitting of the rugged, muscular man sitting before her. He certainly stood out among the others she had encountered in this place.

She tried to decipher his facial expressions, wondering if they might give her any idea of what his thoughts were as he thumbed through her papers. His face remained expressionless, though, putting her even more on edge.

Finally, he closed the folder, sat it down on the desk in front of him, and looked up at her.

“Miss Fields, is it?” he asked, and she found herself distracted by the deep blue of his eyes that the lenses of his glasses did nothing to dampen.

She realized he had asked her a question, so she quickly recovered. “Yes, Farren Fields. It’s such a pleasure to meet you, sir.” She continued to sit, rigid in her chair under his scrutinizing gaze as the knots tightened inside her stomach.

He picked back up her résumé, giving it another glance, and then looked back at her with one eyebrow quirked up in skepticism. She felt herself shrinking under his critical stare. This was not a good sign, she realized. Shouldn’t he have a list of questions to ask her or something? This was not at all how she expected this to go, and definitely not what she had tried to prepare herself for.

“Miss Fields, I’m going to level with you...” he began, and it already sounded like this wasn’t going to go well.

## TWO

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Mr. Rayner steepled his hands in front of him as he continued. “You’ve managed to charm my staff that have interviewed you and gotten you to this point in the process, but unfortunately, I am not so easily impressed.”

Farren’s stomach dropped as she realized he was telling her he was not going to hire her. She knew she would have to think fast if she had any chance at all to turn this around. She just had to convince him to change his mind.

She inched herself forward to the edge of her seat. “Sir, I realize I may not be as experienced as your other candidates, but I hope you’ll at least give me an opportunity to address any concerns you have about my fit here in your company.”

“My worry is not about your fit. I have no doubt you would fit amazingly.” She thought she saw the corners of his mouth twitch ever so slightly.

“Therein lies the problem,” he continued, setting her documents on the desk before him once again. He removed his glasses, folded them, and sat them to the side before leaning forward in his own chair.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, sir. I’ve been interested in working for Rayner Technologies for a long time now. Years, actually. I’m willing to put in the extra effort to make up for whatever it is you think I am lacking.” She was trying not to sound desperate, but that was exactly how she felt at the moment.

He was silent for what seemed to Farren like minutes, but was probably only several seconds, contemplating how to proceed.

“Miss Fields, I’m sure you probably noticed that this company is predominately employed by men. I’m not saying I don’t want to hire you because you’re a woman, and I certainly do not want a civil rights law suit claiming that as the reason I cannot hire you. Please know that all the remaining candidates are women, and the position will be filled by one of them. However, I’m afraid hiring you, specifically, would cause too much of a distraction to my employees, and for that reason, I cannot justify selecting you for the position.”

He was looking her straight in the eyes, delivering the death blow to her dreams like a Total Knock Out in the ring, ruthless and with lightning speed and precision.

“A distraction, sir? I assure you that I would take great care to not distract anyone from their work,” she reasoned, nervously scratching her thumb nail against the nail of her index finger.

Rayner’s head lowered as he shook it in frustration. “I’m very sorry for taking up your time, Ms. Fields. Please let me know if you need someone to show you out.”

At that, he stood and walked coolly to the office door behind her, held it open, and stood watching her until she rose from her chair and scurried out like a dog with its tail tucked between its legs. She had never felt more humiliated, confused, or downright betrayed by the unfair circumstance as she felt in that moment.

As Farren left Rayner Technologies, she felt deflated. It was all she could do not to burst into tears as she passed Rita and Toby on her way out the door. She had been waiting for so long and had gotten her hopes up so high. That meant a long, hard way to fall, and she felt it deep in her chest where the disappointment settled like a heavy weight.

It was still raining when she stepped outside, but this time she made no hurry to get from the

building to her car. Her hair was dripping wet again when she climbed into the tiny confines of her Chevy Spark. She tossed her messenger bag into the empty passenger seat and dug her cell phone out of the middle console where she had left it before going into her interview.

She retrieved the phone and straightened in her seat, staring at her screen. She was torn between calling Shea or Paul, or just keeping quiet about it for a while longer. If she said it out loud, then it was real, and she wasn't sure she was ready for that.

Ultimately, the need to vent her frustrations and have her emotions validated won out, and she hit the send button to make the call. It rang twice before Shea picked up.

"So? How did it go?" Shea asked upon answering.

"Umm, not great. They don't want to hire me." Farren tried unsuccessfully to keep her voice from cracking.

"Don't be so dramatic. I'm sure you did better than you think," Shea argued with a dismissive air.

Farren shook her head, even though Shea wouldn't have been able to see it through the phone. "No, Shea. He told me he's not going to hire me. He said I would be a distraction or something. I tried to tell him I wouldn't, but it was like he had his mind made up before I ever had a chance. There was no interview, no questions about the job, my qualifications, *nothing!*"

Farren wiped the tears that now flowed freely down the curves of her cheeks.

"What a jerk! You don't want some ass-hole boss like that anyway," Shea snapped in her friend's defense.

Farren sniffled. "I guess not," she said in a small voice, but didn't sound convincing.

"You know what will make you feel better?" Shea asked, and then proceeded to answer her own question. "A drink with your best friend. Meet me at Charlie's. I'll be there in ten."

Shea hung up before Farren had a chance to decline the offer, so she gave in, started up her car, and headed downtown to Charlie's Bar.

\* \* \*

Farren parked a short distance down the block in front of a nearby restaurant where the nearest parking space was that she could find. She got out and jogged as best she could in her soggy stilettos down the puddled sidewalk, into Charlies where she found Shea sitting at a table by the front window.

Shea already had two bottles of Blue Moon sitting on the table in front of her. As soon as Farren slid into the seat across from her, Shea slid one of the bottles in Farren's direction.

"Thanks," Farren muttered, watching the rain pounding the windows and thinking how she really needed to find her umbrella.

Shea eyed Farren's soaked hair and outfit, trying to hold back a smile. "You did know it was going to rain today, right?"

"No, actually. I've been a little busy the past few days trying to prepare for an interview for my freaking dream job. I haven't thought about anything else!"

"Damn. I bet Paul was thrilled about that." Shea's lackluster words were dripping with sarcasm. It was no secret that she did not care much for Paul, and hadn't since he and Farren had started dating a few months prior.

At the mention of Paul, Farren remembered to send him a text, so she pulled out her phone and messaged him that she was at Charlie's with Shea if he wanted to join them. It had been several days since they'd seen each other, so she figured she would try to see him before she went home.

Her phone chirped a short time later with Paul's response.

“So, I take it Paul is on his way?” Shea said, rolling her eyes.

Farren didn't respond right away but sat staring at her phone screen. Paul's unusual response had made her stomach churn momentarily.

“It looks like it. He says he needs to talk to me about something.”

Everyone knew that ‘we need to talk’ was never about anything good, but what could he possibly be upset with her about? Sure, she hadn't spent much time with him lately, but she had a good reason, and she thought he understood. Surely it was something innocent and nothing to get worked up over, she reasoned. He'd be there soon enough and she knew she would feel better once she saw him.

“So who is this boss guy who didn't hire you? Do I need to go egg his car or send him some dog pooh in a paper bag?” She asked with a straight face.

Farren wouldn't have put it past her friend to be crazy enough to actually do it.

“What? No! That's disgusting, by the way,” she laughed.

Shea just shrugged, taking a sip of her beer. “Hey nobody messes with my Fair Child,” she said, using the nickname she had given Farren back when they were basketball teammates in seventh grade.

Farren sighed. “I just can't believe he didn't even give me a chance.” She knew that life wasn't always fair, but it still hurt, all the same.

When she heard the door open, Farren looked up to see Paul coming in from the rain. She immediately felt a rush of excitement run through her at the sight of him, having not seen him for several days. She raised her free hand that wasn't holding her Blue Moon to get his attention and waved him over.

Paul approached the table with an indiscernible expression, and when he reached them, he looked at Shea, gave her a disinterested nod, and then turned his attention to Farren.

“Can I talk to you outside?”

*Not even a hello?* Farren broke eye contact with him to steal a glance out the window, seeing the rain still pounding the sidewalks outside. She looked back up at Paul who stood with his body angled toward the door as though he were in a hurry.

“Seriously? Paul, it's pouring out there. Why don't you sit down with us and have a drink?” She motioned to the chair on her left that he stood next to.

Paul didn't move, but put a hand on Farren's shoulder, motioning for her to get up. “Come on, Far. I really need to talk to you. The door is covered outside.”

Farren looked over to Shea, whose forehead was crinkled and nostrils were flared, but whose lips remained uncharacteristically pressed tightly together.

“I'll be right back,” Farren said to Shea as she stood and followed Paul out the front door.

## THREE

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Farren and Paul stood beneath the awning of the building that covered the sidewalk. It only helped a little, since the wind blew the rain at an angle, casting a light spray against Farren's back as she waited to hear what Paul needed to talk about.

"What's wrong, Paul? Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine, it's just..." He paused, taking in a deep breath and letting it out. "Look, I don't know how to say this, but I think we should take a break."

Farren could feel her stomach turn, and she felt like a rug had been yanked out from under her.

"A break? But... why?"

"I just need some time to figure things out," he answered, looking at her hairline instead of in her eyes.

"Figure what out, Paul? I don't get it." She could feel the hot tears filling her eyes again, threatening to spill over at any moment.

"Just things, okay? I just need time to think about what I want." He crossed his arms over his chest.

"You're breaking up with me?" she said, but it only came out as a whisper.

"It's not forever. Just for a while. You understand, right?" He unfolded his arms to place them on the sides of her shoulders, giving them a squeeze before he let them go and started inching himself away to leave.

"So that's just it? You're just going to dump me and leave? No legitimate explanation or anything?" The tears began falling freely now for the second time in as many hours.

"I'm sorry, Far. I've really got to go. Please don't be upset," he said, but it was no comfort to her. He was already walking off toward his car parked down the block in the opposite direction from hers. She wondered what he was in such a damn hurry to get to that he just left her standing out in the rain, but she had a feeling she didn't want to know.

She stood there outside Charlie's for several minutes, trying to pull herself together before she went back inside to rejoin Shea. She was completely blindsided by the whirlwind breakup she had just experienced, and she needed a moment to regroup so that she wasn't a blithering mess when Shea saw her again. She knew her best friend would never rub it in her face, but she could just imagine the cold satisfaction Shea would probably get when she found out Paul was finally out of the picture like she'd always wanted.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been standing there when a voice calling her name caught her attention and caught her off guard.

"Miss Fields?" A deep, masculine voice pulled her out of her trance. It was a voice she immediately recognized, because she had heard it just a couple hours earlier. She looked up in the direction it had come from, a short distance down the sidewalk.

She looked up to see Rogan Rayner standing beneath the awning of the restaurant she had parked in front of. A beautiful, blonde woman had a delicate hand resting in the crook of his arm, and Farren noticed her icy, blue eyes seemed to jump right out at her they were so prominent in her stunning face.

Soft waves, unaffected by the rain, cascaded around her shoulders, the highlights in stark contrast against the rich, blue dress that hung just right off of her tight curves.

Mr. Rayner looked perfectly in place with the beautiful woman draped on his arm. Farren

couldn't help but notice the difference his surroundings made in bringing out his rugged good looks, with muscles in his chest, arms, and legs, filling out his clothes in a way that made a woman take notice.

Even behind the black-rimmed glasses, she could feel his eyes piercing into her, and even through the pain that weighed on her chest in that moment, she couldn't deny the effect this man seemed to have on her.

He was seriously hot.

"Miss Fields, is everything okay?" he said again, and this time, Farren forced herself to respond.

"I... yes, I'm okay," she managed, though her blank expression remained on her face as her body remained unmoving.

Mr. Rayner turned to his date, apologizing and whispering for her to meet him inside, assuring her that he would be right there. He held the restaurant door open for her and waited until she was inside before guiding the door closed once more and turning to face Farren.

He walked over to where she stood, also seemingly unaffected by the rain that persisted as Farren stood frozen in place, frozen in time. She didn't know what to say to him. Not now, with her heart laid bare and ravaged raw. And in no small part thanks to him, no less, even if Paul had been the one to deliver the final blow.

Her eyes finally caught his as he moved closer, within just a few feet from where she stood beneath the awning. Her arms were now folded across her stomach, as if trying to hold herself together. She knew she was vulnerable and defeated beneath his neutral gaze.

"Miss Fields, is there someone I can call for you?" His voice was soothing and sympathetic.

She shook her head. "No, my friend is inside," she choked out, and the tears spilled down her cheeks again.

It would have been so much easier on her had he not sounded so sympathetic in a moment when all she wanted and needed was to be comforted. Where was the insensitive ass-hole she had encountered earlier?

"Farren, not getting the job is not the end of the world. You are a bright, capable, young woman. I have no doubt you'll find a job much more suited for you than mine." The soothing tones of his voice continued, but his patronizing words and his egocentric assumptions sparked a flash of anger inside her.

"Seriously? Don't flatter yourself, *Mr. Rayner*." She spat his name out like bile on her tongue. "I'm not upset because I didn't get your job."

Well, she wasn't completely upset for that reason, but she wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of giving him full credit for her current misery.

Surprise flashed across his face momentarily, but he quickly composed himself.

"I see," he said. "Well, then, what *is* bothering you to the point of tears?"

She wanted to lash out at him, tell him it was none of his business, and what did he care, anyway. She wanted to push him away from her, or slap the concerned look right off his face. But when she looked past the flecks of water that clung to the lenses of his glasses, to a scar that divided his eyebrow, her venom was replaced with an endearing curiosity.

Her eyes moved from the scar on his brow to another, barely noticeable, just beneath his lower lip. That's when her own sympathy got the better of her, and she could feel the anger seeping out of her like a deflating balloon.

She hung her head and lowered her eyes to the ground. "My boyfriend. He just told me he wanted a break."

Even as the words left her lips, she realized how silly she must look to a mature man like Rogan Rayner. She felt about six inches small in that moment and wished she could crawl beneath a rock or just

cease to exist.

“I know, it sounds stupid,” she added.

Rogan gave a knowing nod of his head, and the corners of his eyes crinkled in thought for a moment. “The only one who sounds stupid in this situation is the dolt who let you go. That says to me that you can do better.”

When Farren looked back up at Mr. Rayner, she could still see the crinkles in the corners of his eyes that were now cast by his muted smile. She said nothing, but gave a nod in acknowledgement. She couldn't help but think of the irony that Mr. Rayner was calling Paul a dolt for letting her go when he himself had done just that only hours ago.

“I'd better get inside. Shea is probably wondering where I am, if she hasn't drank herself into a stupor by now. And you should probably get back to your date. I'm sorry I held you up.” Farren imagined that women like the beauty inside the restaurant waiting for Mr. Rayner did not like to be kept waiting.

At that, Rogan gave Farren a nod and headed back in the direction of the restaurant. When he got just outside the door, Farren called to him.

“Mr. Rayner?”

He paused and turned around to face her.

“You're right, by the way,” she continued. “I will find something I'm better suited for. I always land on my feet.”

At that, she smiled, turned, and disappeared into Charlie's.

## FOUR

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When Farren got home that evening, she tiptoed into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee, maneuvering her way around in the dim stove light. She planned to scour the internet for more job openings, which she knew would take hours, and she would need the boost.

She was surprised when the light was flicked on in the kitchen, illuminating her movements, along with her mascara-streaked face.

“Gramma, you scared me!” she exclaimed, realizing her heart was beating in her throat at ninety-miles-an-hour. She hadn’t expected her Gramma to still be awake, since it had been around eleven when she finally parted ways with Shea after hours of venting, bashing, and having an all-around bitch-session.

“I was anxious to hear how the interview went,” Gramma said. Her voice was small, but always seemed to carry such large amounts of patience and wisdom.

Farren took a moment to answer. She took in a deep breath that she pushed out slowly before she sat at the kitchen table next to her Gramma who was watching her expectantly.

“I didn’t get the job, Gramma,” she said with disappointment coloring her voice.

“No?” Gramma asked, sounding surprised and raising an eyebrow. She leaned in to rest her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, as though she knew something Farren didn’t.

“No... I guess it wasn’t meant to be. They, I mean, he... said he was going to hire one of the other people.”

Farren couldn’t imagine why she felt okay with this now, so soon after her botched interview, but she guessed it had everything to do with the moment she and Rayner had shared outside of Charlie’s that evening. She could almost smell the rain trickling off the awning they had stood beneath as he had given her the words she had needed to hear to bear the losses she had encountered within hours of each other that day.

“And you’re okay with that?” Gramma probed. She was now fidgeting with a plastic tub full of pill bottles that she pulled out to divvy up into a weekly pill container.

“Yes, I think I am,” Farren admitted, and it was true. “And I also think I’m okay with Paul breaking up with me tonight, too.”

That one she wasn’t quite as convinced of, but as Gramma would always say, *‘fake it ‘til you make it.’*

That had Gramma pausing to eye Farren until Farren shrugged with uncertainty. She stayed quiet, watching Farren as if waiting for her to continue.

Farren took the opportunity to turn her attention to the pot of coffee, preferring to submerge herself into her job search rather than rehash the sordid, painful details of her love life at the moment. She left her chair and moved to the counter where she pulled a large cup from an upper cabinet and poured herself a generous amount.

“I guess I’d better get started on a new job search, Gramma. Do you need anything before I go?”

“No, I’m fine, dear. I’ll be getting to bed myself.”

Farren went to hug her Gramma, holding her cup out to the side being careful not to accidentally spill any of the hot liquid on them. She kissed Gramma’s cheek and turned toward the hallway to her bedroom. “Goodnight,” she called over her shoulder.

“Goodnight. Oh, and Farren? A Rogan Rayner called while you were out. He said he’d see you on Monday at eight o’clock sharp, and not to be late.”

## FIVE

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Farren didn't know what had changed Mr. Rayner's mind about hiring her, but she wasn't about to look that gift-horse in the mouth. She found herself even more nervous than she'd been for her interview when she walked in the door of Rayner Technologies that Monday morning.

She walked in early to see an empty front desk, but a few of the other employees were already milling about in their black polos and khaki slacks. She saw Toby holding a bagel he was just taking a bite from as she approached him.

"Hi, Toby. I was wondering if maybe you could tell me where I need to go? It's my first day."

Toby froze with the bite of bagel in his mouth, and his eyes went wide like a deer in the cross-hairs of a set of high-beams. She could see his pronounced Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed, but even with a clear mouth no longer full of food, he was unable to speak. He apparently had a complex talking to girls. It reminded her of Raj Kuthrapalli on the Big Bang Theory sitcom, and she wondered what a beer would do for the poor guy.

As it was, he finally managed to point in the direction she remembered Mr. Rayner's office to be.

"Thanks, Toby," she said, patting him on the side of his upper arm before heading in the direction he'd indicated.

When she got just outside the closed office door, she peered through the windows to see Mr. Rayner sitting at his desk behind the screens of his computer. It was still fairly dim in the early, fall morning, and the light from his screens cast a flattering glow across his face. He looked as though he were completely engrossed in whatever his focus was on, and the sight of him so deep in thought sent a thrill rushing through her. There was just something about a complex man that always seemed to grab her attention and beg her to be explored.

That was one thing she wouldn't have to miss about Paul, at least.

She took in a deep, encouraging breath and rapped on the door. She watched as Mr. Rayner looked up and made eye contact with her through the glass. She waved to him, announcing her arrival, and he nodded, motioning for her to come inside.

With a click of the door knob, she pushed it open and crept into the office.

"Mr. Rayner?"

"Miss Fields, come in and have a seat." He pointed to the chairs in front of his desk, so Farren walked around them and sat.

"I was surprised to get your message. I thought your mind was already made up. Thank you so much for this opportunity, sir."

"Don't thank me yet. I'm not hiring you for the position you were interviewing for," he said.

"You're not?" she asked as a wave of panic spread through her.

He shook his head. "I have a special job in mind for you," he said, leaning forward with his hands steepled together in front of him.

"What did you have in mind?" she asked with no small amount of skepticism.

"It's a new position I've been thinking of creating for a while now. It will be somewhat of a personal assistant position. You would report directly to me and no one else. I'll pay you more than what you would have made in the other position, because you'll be working on some special projects I have in the works."

Farren thought for a moment. Did she want to be a personal assistant to Rogan Rayner? On one

hand, the title was a little off-putting. She hadn't busted her hump through college just to be someone's *assistant*.

"If you think you can cut it," he added.

On the other hand, it was *Rogan Rayner*. It was the company she'd dreamed of working for since high school. If she turned this down now, she may never have another chance. And she could definitely cut it, all right.

"What do you mean by, 'reporting directly to you and no one else'?" she asked.

"I mean that there are other men here in management positions who may feel they are entitled to your assistance, and that will not be the case," he answered.

"I see." She made a mental note and tucked that away to delve into later. "And these special projects I'll be working on, are they technical or... secretarial?"

Rayner thought for a moment before answering.

"Both."

Farren nodded with understanding and pursed her lips.

"Okay... Where do I begin?" she said finally, accepting the offer. She didn't know what the pay would be, but even at the amount for the other position, she would have accepted. Either way, it was more than she was making now, having just ended her college work-study program, and having student loans she would have to start paying back soon. Grandma's social security income only went so far.

Rayner smiled and stood from his chair. "Follow me," he instructed, and walked over to a door connecting his office to the one beside it.

As she fell in line behind him, she couldn't help but notice the muscle in the broad expanse of his back, and how the outline of a large tattoo was just barely visible through the fabric of his white, button-down shirt. Not to mention the way his butt filled out the soft, thin material of his dress pants.

When she caught herself checking out his ass, she snapped her gaze back up to eye level and admonished herself for allowing her thoughts to travel down such an inappropriate path. Mr. Rayner was officially her boss now! She couldn't be ogling his goods. She had to admit they were pretty good, though, even for an older man. It wasn't like he was *that* old, and he could definitely fill out a pair of pants much better than any of the guys her age.

"This will be your office. I want you to keep the blinds closed at all times. You have until the end of the week to acquaint yourself with our software programs. Beginning next Monday, if you're still here and think you can handle the work, I'll have you start working on a special project I've been asked to develop."

He walked behind her desk and pulled her chair out, motioning for her to sit. She crossed the short distance and sat, feeling the hair at the nape of her neck standing on end at Mr. Rayner's proximity to her. He leaned over her to move the wireless mouse, and doing so brought the computer screen in front of her to life.

"I'll help you set up a login, and then I'll leave you to learn the system on your own while I get back to my work for the time being. If you have any questions about anything, I want you to ask Rita, and no one else."

There he went again, Farren thought. She wasn't sure why he was so concerned about her not talking to any of the other people there in the office. She couldn't even open her blinds to see out into the hallway? She knew he didn't want her to be a distraction, but good grief, what did he think she was going to do?

Once he got her set up, he left back to his own office, and Farren got right to it, getting acquainted with the software on their system. She made some notes of questions she would ask Rita later on that day

if she ran into her.

By lunch time, she could feel her stomach growling, so she got up and went to the door that connected her office with Mr. Rayner's. She rapped lightly on it and twisted the knob to enter. Once it was open about half way, she noticed a woman in Mr. Rayner's office.

The woman had fiery waves of red hair, and she wore a form-fitting, black jump-suit with layers of fine jewelry on her neck, wrists, and fingers. She was standing in front of Mr. Rayner behind his desk, in front of him where he sat in his chair. She had her derriere leaned against the top of his desk as she leaned slightly forward, and though they weren't in a compromising position right in that moment, it was obvious they either had been or were about to be.

Embarrassed, Farren started pulling the door closed when both Mr. Rayner's and the woman's head turned to see her in the doorway. Farren's face flushed with heat, and she gave them an apologetic wave. "So sorry," she said, and pulled the door closed.

She took the other exit from her office that led into the hallway, and when she opened the door, she saw two men in dress shirts and slacks rather than the black polos the other employees wore. She thought they must be some type of management, and Mr. Rayner's unspoken warning about his management had her on alert. Was he protecting them from her, or was he protecting her from them?

Their heads had turned in her direction when she opened the door, and their conversation halted as she emerged. She gave them a timid, polite smile and a nod, but didn't speak to them. The way that Mr. Rayner had said she would answer to him and no one else made her wonder what kinds of things they might ask her to do.

She imagined herself being buried under mountains of paper they wanted her to file, alphabetize, or shred for them. Then her thoughts turned in another direction, and she imagined herself having to hack into their ex-wives' bank accounts or their girlfriends' bedroom security cameras.

She wondered what it said about her that she'd have preferred the hacking over the filing, and decided it didn't matter anyway since Rayner had made it clear they would have no authority over her. That and they could probably hack their own stuff if they wanted, she guessed.

She went out to the parking lot and sat in her car. She had brought a sack lunch that Gramma had packed for her that morning, but she wasn't about to bring it inside with her. She wanted to be taken seriously, and what self-respecting twenty-two year old had their grandmothers packing their lunches for them?

She supposed it could also be said that no self-respecting twenty-two year old would be living with their grandmother in the first place, but moving her Gramma in with her a couple years ago had proved to be an advantageous arrangement for both of them. After her grandpa had died, Gramma needed someone to look after her and take her to appointments now and then.

Farren's roommate had just moved out at the time, and she had been pretty desperate to find another one if she was going to make her rent, so the timing had been perfect. So what if it was her grandma? It wasn't like she lived a wild, party lifestyle or brought a bunch of guys home.

She tended to be more of a loner, anyway. She preferred to game online or build computers from scratch than to hit up a kegger. Not that Shea hadn't drug her to plenty of those over the years, too.

As she took a bite of the Italian sub, a movement at the entrance of Rayner Technologies caught her attention. She watched as the fiery red-head she had just walked in on in Rayner's office came strutting out.

This woman had the longest legs she thought she had ever seen, and there was a creamy glow about her skin that looked like someone had added Photoshopped her in the flesh.

Mr. Rayner seemed to have quite the harem of women, she thought, remembering the gorgeous

blond she'd seen him with at the restaurant next to Charlie's last week.

He seemed so at ease around women. He had certainly seemed attentive to both of the ones she had seen so far, and she wondered if he was some sort of ladies-man. She had experienced first-hand how the guys her age would lay it on thick and say just about anything a girl wanted to hear to get in her pants. She wondered if that was something guys ever grew out of and if Mr. Rayner was that way, too.

Though, he probably didn't have to be. Hell, he was so good-looking and all-around attractive, she wondered if he even had to say anything at all. She had to rein her thoughts in once again when she started wondering what it would be like to be one of the women on the receiving end of his charms.

When she finished her lunch, she dusted the crumbs off her lap and headed back inside to resume her software explorations. At this rate, she was in for a long week, because she knew it wouldn't take her that long to figure everything out. This was her world. Getting acquainted with software was a piece of cake, since she could basically write those types of programs in her sleep. She was in her element here, and couldn't wait to get into the good stuff.

After about an hour, the hallway door clicked open and her back straightened to attention. She watched as one of the men she remembered standing out in the hall earlier came strolling in, closing her door behind him.

"Hello. I don't believe we've been introduced. I'm Dallas Evans. I run the Marketing Department," he said as he approached her with an outstretched arm for a handshake.

He had a look about him that made Farren think he was probably a little, or a lot, full of himself. An errant thought crossed her mind that she doubted he would be able to hack his own stuff after all, like she had been thinking earlier.

"Hello. I'm Farren," she said, taking his hand.

"And what do you do, Farren? I don't believe I heard about any other new hires other than the one for the Tech Support opening. You have me intrigued."

She cringed internally at her title before she spoke it aloud, but it was what it was. "I'm Mr. Rayner's new... assistant." She managed to choke the word out.

She watched as his eyebrows lifted, not trying in the least to hide his surprise.

"Oh, really? Isn't that surprising?" he said.

"It is? Why?"

He shrugged. "It's been a while since Rogan's had an assistant. For one thing, he's too much of a control freak to let anyone do anything for him. Then there's the ordeal with the last assistant he had."

He played it off like it was no big deal, but this had Farren's interest piqued. She should have known it was a little strange for this nice office right next to Mr. Rayner's to be vacant when they hadn't been hiring for anything other than what she had tried to interview for last week. What was the story with this assistant situation, she wondered.

Unfortunately, she didn't get a chance to find out, because the door to Rayner's office swung open in a whir, and Rayner came stalking in.

"Evans, is there something I can help you with?" he asked, but his voice sounded anything but helpful.

"Rogan," Dallas nodded in a casual, unhurried greeting. "I was just introducing myself to your new *assistant* here."

"My new *assistant* is busy at the moment and can do without the intrusions. Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

And the insensitive ass-hole was back.

Dallas stood in his place as though contemplating a rebuttal, but ultimately backed down from the

challenge.

“Farren, it was a *pleasure* meeting you. I look forward to seeing you around.”

He didn't spare a backwards glance as he walked out of the office and closed the door behind him once more, leaving Farren alone with an intimidating Mr. Rayner.

She stood from her desk, facing her boss and feeling a flush warming her cheeks again as she recalled what she had walked in on earlier in his office.

“Mr. Rayner, I'm really sorry about my intrusion earlier. It was thoughtless of me, and it won't happen again,” she promised as her hands fidgeted together in front of her.

He paused as though thinking about it, then shook his head. “Don't worry about it. How are you doing so far? Do you have any questions about the software?”

She was a little jarred by the mercurial mood swings, but was glad the angry one wasn't directed toward her at the moment.

“No, so far I'm getting it. The main program is put together really well. It's complex, but at the same time, the interface is very intuitive and easy to follow.”

She noticed the corners of his eyes crinkle as he displayed a look of... pride? He must have written the program himself, she thought. Amazing.

“Very good. I'm going to have Rita come in and walk you through a few things in the next hour or so, as well as have you sign your I-9 forms and so forth. She'll be at the front if you need anything else today.”

And then he was gone once more. Her head was nearly spinning, she was so confused by the display she had just witnessed. She was a quick study when it came to computers and electronics, but she was finding it hard to figure out Mr. Rayner. The trouble was, now she was intrigued, and that meant she had to get to the bottom of it.

The first week flew by at Rayner Technologies. Apparently, word had spread that Farren was hands-off to the other employees, except for Rita. According to Rita, the other new girl had been a novelty to the men in the building, but that quickly wore off when they realized she was just another computer nerd like the rest of them.

Farren thought the same would have been said for her, had Rayner not made her off-limits. Instead, it had everyone curious to know what was so special about the boss's new assistant, the forbidden fruit.

By the end of Farren's second week, she had just about gotten the hang of things. She'd had some opportunities to show Rayner a little of what she was capable of, and from what she could tell, he liked what he saw.

She got the impression that he hadn't thought she would know what she was doing, and had been surprised to discover she was quite capable.

"You surprise me, Miss Fields," he told her that Friday evening as she was packing her things to leave for the night.

"I do?" she asked, stopping what she was doing to look up at him. She noticed he had taken his glasses off, and she had an unobstructed view of his eyes, which was a rare occurrence. The scar that divided his left eyebrow caught her eye again, and she vowed someday to ask him how he'd gotten it.

"You do. I had my doubts, but you've exceeded my expectations and proven yourself at every turn so far."

He stood in her doorway leading to the hall, waiting for her to follow so they could walk out together. They had stayed late that evening putting the finishing touches on a program design.

"I don't get why it's so surprising. I've been studying computer technology since before I was even in high school. It's just what I've always done, what I've always known." *My escape*, she added silently.

"Maybe. You just don't strike me as the typical computer geek," he admitted.

"What does that mean?" she cried defensively. She thought she knew what, but part of her wanted to hear him say it.

He stopped at the front exit with his hand on the door handle, but didn't push it open yet. Instead, he angled around to face her and replied, "You're much prettier than any computer geek I've ever met."

That shut her up for a moment. She stood, frozen in his glare, surprised by the candid response. Was he just being nice? She wasn't sure, but the way he was looking at her wasn't helping.

She lowered her gaze from his eyes to his lips, and she wanted to reach up and brush her fingers across the barely noticeable scar there. She was close enough to, and something in the way he looked at her acted as a magnet, an invisible pull that called to her, beckoned her to come closer, to touch him.

"I... guess I could say the same for you."

Shit! She just admitted he was much prettier than any computer geek *she* had ever met.

"That you don't strike me as the typical computer geek, I mean," she corrected.

He smiled. His arm lifted to touch the smooth, bare skin of her neck, and his thumb brushed the line of her jaw. His hand was so warm, it soothed her, and her instinct was to lean into it.

Was he about to kiss her?

She could feel the quickening of her heart at the very prospect of it. What would it be like to kiss

him? Maybe the more pertinent question should have been, what would it be like *after* kissing him? Did she really want to?

She knew she didn't *not* want to, which admittedly scared the hell out of her. She couldn't kiss her boss! Could she?

She could feel her tongue dart out to moisten her lower lip, the flesh of which she scraped her top teeth across in a nervous motion. She swallowed. She was frozen in place, unable to move, unsure of what to do next.

And then, the moment was over. Rayner's hand was gone from her skin, and his eyes broke their connection from hers.

"I suppose you've got me there," he said. "Well, goodnight, Miss Fields. Enjoy your weekend."

He opened the door and allowed her to walk through it, but stayed behind to lock up.

"Goodnight," she said as she passed him going out the door. "See you on Monday."

\* \* \*

Rogan closed the door behind Farren. His fists tightened and released at his sides before he brought them up to scour his fingers through his dark hair. He blew out an unsteady breath and scraped his fingers over the stubble at his jaw. He had come so close to slipping, so close to acting on the thought's that had been plaguing him for weeks.

It was just one touch. One simple touch that threatened an avalanche, a snowball effect that he wasn't sure he could stop once it got going. It was so hard to resist, but he knew he had to shut it down before it got to that, and somehow he did.

He had been so close to taking her tight little body into his hands and doing things to her she'd be telling her friends about, comparing every other lover to that she'd ever take, for years to come. He could see the whole thing playing out in his mind as she had stood there looking longingly into his eyes. He knew she was always so careful around him, so reserved, but the way her pupils dilated every time he came near her was like a silent call, a secret wavelength pulsing hot desire straight to his cock.

Every time she spoke of codecs, dynamic tessellation, or fucking sensoration with her hands balls deep in a motherboard, he found himself overcome with the overwhelming urge to clear the desk top of any stray objects and lean her over it, getting balls deep into her.

He could have peeled that tight little sweater up and over her head, revealed the black lingerie he could see peeking out from the neckline at her shoulder.

Her neck... exposed and delicate. He wanted to graze his teeth across its sensitive flesh while running his fingers beneath her bra to clamp her tight little nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, grinding his hardened length into her as he pressed her up against the wall, right here in his empty office building.

He could imagine the sound of her whimpers and moans as he gave her all the pleasure she could withstand, imagined the look of rapture on her face as her body exploded with the intense, blissful sensations he wanted to inflict on her, over and over, until she begged him to stop.

She wasn't just some beautiful woman. He had beautiful women all the time, any time he wanted. It came with the territory. Women loved the ass-holes, especially ass-holes with more money than they knew what to do with. Was he an ass-hole with a fuck-ton of money? Guilty.

But Farren possessed the intelligence of no woman, or man for that matter, that Rogan had ever seen. She challenged him, and not just with the expert level she could handle the projects he had thrown her way to test her skills. The biggest challenge was keeping his hands off her when she licked her supple

lips when he caught her stealing glances at his body when she thought he wasn't looking.

It was a testament of his resolve every time he watched her sweet, round ass swaying side to side as she left his office, or when she pointed out an oversight in work he had checked. It infuriated him and turned him on so painfully, he'd have to send her out to hide the stiff bulge growing in his pants.

He would need a cold shower and a stiff drink to calm the blood that was currently raging to all the wrong parts of his body as he left the building that night, vowing to get a grip on the urges that his young, new assistant was arousing in him.

It couldn't fucking happen.

\* \* \*

Three more months had gone by since the near-moment she'd had with Mr. Rayner that night, and he hadn't slipped up where Farren was concerned since. A part of her felt relieved that he kept a professional relationship between them after that, especially when his various, strikingly beautiful conquests would make their appearances from time to time.

He hadn't tried to flaunt them in her face, but he didn't go out of his way to hide them, either. It was strictly business between the two of them, which made it much easier for her to work for him, overall.

And working for Rogan Rayner had proven to be more than she could have ever asked. Especially when he had come to her just the week prior with an enticing proposition she couldn't refuse.

"Starting next week, you'll be helping me with a project I'm working on for a company in Italy. Plan for at least four days of travel next week, and you'll have Friday off." He had said, speaking as though it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Wait, do you mean that I'm traveling with you next week to Italy? As in, the country in Europe, across the ocean?" she asked, trying not to sound too naïve. Maybe he was used to traveling the world, but she had never left the country before. She'd gotten her passport for a senior trip in high school several years ago, but she had gotten sick with the flu just before they'd left and had to miss it, so this would be her first opportunity.

"That's the one," he had said, and she had watched as the corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled at her.

Now, here she was sitting with Gramma in the living room of their apartment with her bags all packed and ready to go, in the cool, dark hours before dawn. In just a few hours, she would be on a private plane with Mr. Rayner on their way to Rome, Italy. She couldn't decide what she felt more, excited or nervous.

When she had applied for a job at Rayner Technologies, she never expected international travel to be a part of the gig, and definitely not so soon. She had a feeling that Rogan Rayner was more widely known and respected than she even realized. He had certainly made an impression on her and even with this hot and cold temper, she couldn't help but to be in awe of him. With his good looks, business acumen, and his brilliant mind, he was a walking, talking, lethal combination.

Farren had decided from watching Rayner these past few months that there were two responses he could frequently elicit: completely beguiled, or resentfully jealous. Farren, of course, found herself in the beguilement category, and she knew how dangerous this was. There weren't too many people in the world she truly respected, so when she did, it was easy for her heart to get involved. That was the last thing she needed with Rogan Rayner.

"Do you have everything you need?" Gramma asked, handing Farren a cup of coffee as they sat

down at the kitchen table together.

“I think so. Are you sure you’re going to be okay here while I’m gone?”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t you worry about your Gramma. It’s not like I haven’t been alone before.” She smiled at Farren and patted her hand for reassurance.

“I asked Shea to stop by and check on you every couple of days or so until I get back. I made sure to stock the fridge, and the emergency numbers are-”

“Farren, my darling, I’m not an invalid,” Gramma interrupted. “I’ll be fine. Thank you for worrying about me, but go and have the time of your life. Make some time for fun while you’re there. Don’t just work the whole time.”

Gramma winked at her and gave her hand another squeeze. Then a knock sounded at the door, letting them know that the car service was there to shuttle Farren to the airport to meet her hot boss to take her to one of the most beautiful countries in the world.

Find out how HOT things get in Italy, and what that will mean for Farren Fields and Rogan Rayner!

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