

Chapter One

The man must be out of his ever-loving mind.

Evelyn tried hard not to yell, or otherwise overreact, ever aware of her reputation as one of the sole females in this testosterone-soaked world of beer sales. But she simply could not stand for this sort of manipulation.

She rose to her feet. "I won't do it."

From his position behind the desk, her boss, Grant Taylor, president of Tri-City Distribution, tipped back in his chair and appraised her from head to toe. "He asked for you specifically. And I am certain I don't have to remind a professional such as yourself that Fitzgerald is our best craft beer brand – one of our *only* craft beer brands and the one I hope to use to build a better beer portfolio." He feigned a pitiful look.

"You look like a constipated crocodile when you do that." Even as she accepted that her day had just grown that much worse, if it were cosmically possible, she slumped back into the chair on the other side of his desk.

"Evelyn, honey, it's not that bad. He's a good guy, really."

The foul liquid that passed for coffee at the Tri-City offices polluted her throat, giving her a few seconds to think. After only two years in the beer and wine sales business, she'd found her niche, and she even had an incentive trip to Barbados from the Corona guys nearly within her grasp. A day spent – more like wasted – trying to shove hipster beer down the throats of savvy buyers at her best stores would not get her any closer to that goal. Evelyn stared out of the window at the annoyingly perfect blue sky.

"Grant, you know I need a heads-up longer than an hour. Seriously, I have to shuffle the whole sales day. Jesus. I don't even know where –"

Grant held up a hand. "Spare me, please. I know you've already committed where Fitzgerald products are placed to that gorgeous, top-selling brain of yours. You sold more

of their amber, IPA and Winter Spice bullshit than anybody. Don't kid a kidder." He grinned at her.

Stress bloomed in her chest and spread, bringing a familiar anxious mantra to the forefront of her mind.

This stupid job is the only thing between me and the homeless shelter.

Nothing would make her jeopardize what she'd built out of, essentially, nothing. A two-year associate's degree was all she'd been able to afford before she'd started working in a trendy downtown craft beer and cocktail bar. When a Tri-City sales rep had mentioned they were hiring and how much she could make in commission, she'd jumped at it.

Who knew she'd be a sales star?

"Fine. But if you think I'm gonna suck up to the Chosen Son of the Fitzgerald fortune, you are sadly mistaken. He can ride in my car and go on calls with me, but he'd better understand that I have a full day already set and I won't be giving him any special attention." She drained the last of the caffeine then set the mug down on Grant's desk with what she hoped sounded like a decisive bang. A sudden puff of air blew past her, ruffling the papers on Grant's desk.

Her boss's eyes widened. He pointed to something behind her and started to open his mouth.

"No," she cut him off. "Don't say another word. You know I'm right. Everybody knows he's just a trust-fund baby, opening a brewery with his daddy's money, then gallivanting around the world, getting his degree" — she hooked her fingers in the air around the word — "in brewing science. Jesus. Who needs a degree in that? He should just stick to improving his golf handicap and deflowering debutantes."

The petulant sound of her own voice annoyed her, but stories like Austin Fitzgerald's made her the maddest. She'd been raised by a single mother who'd waitressed by day and, she'd later learned, turned tricks at night while the young Evelyn had done homework and watched TV at her aunt's house. Her mother had died during Evelyn's

second year of college, forcing her to quit after she'd figured out that the modest funeral would eat up every cent her mother had managed to save.

Grant cleared his throat and stood, buttoning his suit coat. She watched him, her brain still on fire with helpless frustration. Even if she'd agreed to haul Fitzgerald around, she had no plans to sell craft beer that day.

"I *need* to schmooze my wine buyers today, Grant. I can't be babysitting this guy." The back of her neck tingled when the ends of her hair fluttered in another sudden breeze. She frowned, observing her boss stick his hand out as if about to shake hers, a big smile pasted on his face.

"Well, if I weren't deathly allergic to both golf and debutantes, that might have been a career choice," came a low, raspy voice from right behind her.

Evelyn's entire body broke out in goosebumps.

"Grant, good to see you again," the voice continued.

She gritted her teeth and rose, giving Grant what she hoped was a sufficiently withering look before turning around. Deep green eyes met hers. She was struck dumb by their depth and humorous sparkle. Dark jeans and a simple navy blue crew-neck—undoubtedly cashmere—sweater, brown box-toe loafers and a camel-colored dress jacket completed the look. He would have been at home on a GQ model as easily as he navigated a brewery floor. Close-cut dark-brown hair topped a clean-shaven, angular face.

A face that seemed pretty amused by her at that moment.

"And you must be Evelyn Benedict, saleswoman extraordinaire." His smile lit up the room, rendering Evelyn speechless. Grant nudged her arm until she stuck out her hand. Austin's warm, firm grip lingered long enough to make her uncomfortable.

"I see she's mesmerized by the size of my...trust fund already." He glanced over her shoulder at Grant then at her, pinning her in place again with that intense, still amused gaze. "Austin Fitzgerald, the albatross around your neck for the day." He gave her palm a friendly squeeze before letting go. "At your service."

Austin's gaze remained squarely on hers. She had on her best thrift store designer suit over a silk blouse open at the neck. Used to men eyeballing her from tip to toe, she found it refreshing for one not to automatically zero in on her cleavage.

"Never had such a lovely babysitter before, Grant. Thanks."

She swallowed when his eyes narrowed, then frowned as he gazed quickly up and down her front, lighting an unwanted and unexpected fire in her belly. Since when did she like it when some guy checked her out in such an obvious way?

He shrugged, sidestepping as if to get out of her way, the moment between them over. "Ready to go when you are. Rumor has it you have a big day ahead," he said, the expression on his handsome face suddenly neutral.

"Yes. I do." She strode past him, needing to regain her composure. Loud, masculine laughter echoed in her ears all the way to the ladies' room. She splashed water on her face and stared in the mirror while her heart took up a loud drumbeat in her ears.

He is nothing but a spoiled-rotten trust-fund brat. No matter if he wears it like a stockbroker-slash-daytime drama hero. I do not need this distraction right now.

* * * *

Austin tried to focus on the guy behind the desk as they stood in the claustrophobic office. But his brain spun with a combination of fresh perfume and sudden, kneejerk lust for the woman who'd just stalked out of the room.

The day suddenly looked a lot better—less 'annoying ride-along crap' and more 'honest to God, get to know a beautiful woman.' He had countless headaches back at his brewery to deal with. Didn't need the time away any more than she seemed to want him around, but he grinned at the sight of her rich golden-blonde hair and deep blue eyes when she emerged from around the corner. Her expression was flat. He sensed her determination to resist whatever had occurred between them earlier.

Yeah. Not if I have anything to do with it.

"After you." He held out a hand and followed her down the narrow hall toward the parking lot door, adjusting himself behind the zipper of the stupid jeans he'd grabbed off the rack yesterday, desperate for something to wear that was suitable for selling and not brewing.

Good Lord, but she's hot.

Alarmed at his instant, adolescent response to her, he held the door open. She breezed past him. He had to shut his eyes against the quick breath of light, clean scent that invaded his nose again.

He helped put his sample bottles in the trunk of her one-step-from-the-graveyard car, then climbed into the immaculate interior, watching as Evelyn pulled out her itinerary for the day and studied it, a frown marring her perfect face.

"Okay, so I'm trashing this, I guess." She tossed the papers into her briefcase with a sigh. "Let's hit it, shall we? By the seat of our pants? Not the way I usually like to approach a work day."

"Yeah, good plan." Without even realizing he was doing it, he touched the hand she had resting on the gear shift between them. It was meant as a 'we're in this together' sort of gesture. Nothing more. She stared at it, then up at him. Utterly unprepared for the spark that leapt from her skin to his, he swallowed hard and jerked his arm back.

"Sorry," he muttered, grabbing his own thigh while she backed out of the parking space. Trying to quell the alarm rising in his chest, he risked a glance at her while they waited at a light. Her angry stare made him smile and hold up both hands. "Don't nail me for harassment, okay? My mommy and daddy won't bail me out anymore, or so they claim."

Her quick laughter was music to his ears.

"I'm sorry. I was just..." Her jaw clenched and he had to force away the urge to run his finger over it if only to get her to relax. Such a beautiful woman should not be so uptight. A surge of protectiveness nearly suffocated him.

Wow, Fitzgerald. Get a hold of yourself.

For a guy who'd never worried about where his next meal – or his next pair of designer sunglasses – would come from, Austin remained fairly introspective. He was well aware of his reputation, but hearing it tumble from Evelyn's mouth earlier had pissed him off, making him want to prove something to her.

The fact that he'd finally given in to his mother's harping on about marrying the Masterson girl had honestly slipped his mind since laying eyes on the gorgeous creature behind the wheel. He suppressed an inward groan at his dilemma. But couldn't resist encouraging the connection between them. He somehow sensed she'd love to play along. Some light flirting, nothing more or less. Harmless, really.

"It's okay. Really. Just an awkward moment we'll laugh about with our kids someday."

She snorted. "Sure we will. Just before you dump me and the brats for the trophy wife your mommy always wanted for you."

He narrowed his eyes, hoping she didn't realize how close to the truth she'd gotten about the mother-approved arrangements. When she grinned at him, two amazing dimples appeared on her cheeks, making him grateful he was sitting, since his knees had officially turned to jelly.

He looked away from her. Staring straight ahead, making a mental count to ten, he calmed his breathing, reminded himself he was there to work. Evelyn cleared her throat at that moment, effectively ending the internal break-up monologue he'd begun with his almost-fiancée.

Valerie, a girl who would have been a debutante – had such things existed in Grand Rapids, Michigan – as heir to the Masterson restaurant empire. She was an interior designer of some repute, pretty, bossy, and desperate for the Mrs. Fitzgerald designation. He liked her well enough and was so sick of the nagging about his continual reluctance to put a ring on her finger that he'd been ready to close the deal.

He put a hand over his eyes and muffled a groan at the mess he was about to make. All over this one, single, first impression.

But what an impression.

“All right, we’ll swing north and hit the big chain stores first.” She spoke as she drove, and Austin used every ounce of his willpower not to stare at the leg exposed by her short skirt, at the way her thigh muscle flexed when she worked the clutch, gunning the engine too high every time. “I’m close to getting the winter lager placement alongside your amber. Then I know the boys at Beer Baron and Hop Town would love to see your rock-star face, so we’ll stop in there.”

He glanced over to gauge her level of seriousness. The tingling sensation in his scalp at her ironic smile alarmed him all over again. Every single memory and thought of the woman he’d been half-heartedly screwing for years had gone in the blink of Evelyn’s amazing blue eyes. He swallowed hard and listened to her talk business.

“Also, I’d like to drop in on a couple of new boutique beer and wine stores that opened last month. Your esteemed presence gives me the excuse I need.”

“Uh, okay. You’re in charge. Just give me the high sign when I’m supposed to speak.”

“Oh, don’t worry, you’ll figure it out. I’ll have to do some inventory stuff at most of these places, so there will be time for you to bond with whatever management is on hand. A few of them are ladies – you’ll make their day, I’m sure.”

Unable to stop himself, he touched her again, this time letting himself own the heat that passed between them. “Don’t be jealous, honey. I’d never cheat on you.”

“Ha! I’ll farm you out in a heartbeat, *sweetie*. You’ll do whatever it takes to increase our bottom line. Hope you took your vitamins.” She yanked her hand out from under his.

Smiling at her once more, he shifted in his seat to relieve the pressure building under his zipper.

He’d been damn close to asking Valerie to marry him, willing to leave her and her bitch of a mother to the wedding arrangements, ready to nod in agreement at what he hoped were the proper intervals. His mother had finally stopped haranguing him, left him to run his brewery in peace and he’d made a similar peace within himself, realizing the Faustian bargain he’d struck.

But now, as he sat in the passenger's seat of Evelyn's car staring out the windshield without seeing anything , a long-buried urge almost blinded him. And he knew Valerie was history.