

Full Tilt

Chapter One

"Our relationship has grown stale."

"Give me a break, Max."

"You're shallow, Muffin."

"Shallow?" She gave a snort of disgust. "This coming from a man who was married to a gold-digger named Bunny for three years? Now, there's a relationship with depth."

He grinned. "There's something to be said for gold-diggers. A man always knows where he stands. In the end, both parties get what they want."

"And we both know you always get what you want. But let me remind you, Maximillian Holt, I'm the best thing that has ever happened to you. You need me. I listen to your problems, I feed that enormous ego of yours, and I can match wits with you any day. With both hands tied behind my back, I might add."

"Don't forget I made you what you are today, sweetheart. Without me you'd be nothing."

"And don't you forget, I'm the one who bails you out every time you get your ass in a sling. Speaking of which, you're out of fuel. You're running on fumes."

"How far to the nearest gas station?"

"A good ten miles."

"You could have told me sooner."

"Yes, I could have."

"I've created a monster."

Max guided the radically customized car down the narrow mountain road, taking each twist and turn with the precision of a professional driver. A Pink Floyd CD played from a cutting-edge sound system that would not be available to consumers for at least another year.

Max took a great deal of pride in his automobile, the same one his friends laughingly referred to as his Maxmobile. The car had been designed from the chassis up by former NASA scientists. The body and frame were composed of titanium and a newly identified polymer that offered the lightness of fiberglass and the durability of the strongest steel. The end result had resembled a Porsche, but Max's version was bigger, better, and could do things that car manufacturers would

not find on their drawing boards for years to come. Nothing was indestructible, but the Maxmobile came close.

The dashboard was more complicated than the cockpit of a Lear jet. A team of first-rate computer whizzes, hired away from top government contractors, had created the car's instrumentation using state-of-the-art equipment. Spread out among luxury automotive goodies like a tachometer, an altimeter, and a global positioning satellite system were a highly enhanced PDA, keyboard, a digital speech recognition module, a photo-quality printer, a fax, a satellite phone, an HDTV display screen, and a full video conferencing suite, all operated by a high-powered computer that was smaller than an ashtray. Thanks to all these modifications, Max, if he wanted to, could run his vast business empire without ever getting out of his car.

Only a man like Max Holt would have laid out the kind of money it had taken to build such a machine; and only a man like Max would have created computer intelligence with voice recognition technology and a sassy personality to match. Just for the fun of it, he had named her Muffin and programmed her with a sexy voice that one employee claimed gave him a stiffie every time he heard it.

There were those who'd said it couldn't be done. Max had proved them wrong. He insisted on the best. He drove himself and his employees hard. If he exuded confidence it was because he always succeeded in what he set out to do. Always. Not a difficult task for a man with an off-the-charts IQ, and a business acumen that put fear in the hearts of his toughest competitors. He'd created two companies, simply to put a scare into AOL and Microsoft. The television network he'd purchased ten years ago had grown far beyond even his own imagination. He had recently sold all three companies for a king's ransom, simply because they no longer offered the challenges he craved.

The New York Times, Newsweek, and Money Magazine were clamoring for interviews, but Maximillian Holt did not give interviews. He maintained a low profile at all costs. Sure, photographers had grainy pictures of him slipping into buildings wearing expensive Italian suits, or ducking into stretch limos with a gorgeous model or actress on his arm, but he was clever at keeping his image out of the media. Most people wouldn't recognize him, even if they did know his name by heart.

And that's the way Max liked it.

He had homes all over the world, but he preferred his horse farm in Virginia, not far from his cousin Nick who'd not only offered him a home, but had instilled in Max a love of horses. His farmhouse offered sanctuary from his hectic lifestyle, and he maintained his privacy with cameras, an alarm system he'd personally created, and enough security personnel to guard the White House.

People called him eccentric and egotistical, but Max had never cared what others thought. He made his own rules, especially when it came to women. He didn't like entanglements. Commitment was a four-letter word that spurred him to move on the minute a woman mentioned it. As a result, he had a reputation of being a ladies' man, but he was generous to a fault and did

his best to end relationships on a positive note that often created close friends out of once intimate relationships. This included his ex-wife, Bunny, whom, with his help, had launched a new line of bath and body products that competed heavily with the likes of Crabtree and Evelyn. Max liked to think women benefited from knowing him because he believed he was a better man from having been in their company.

"Speaking of women," Max said after a moment. "I want a complete printout on Jamie Swift. See if you can find a photo."

"What do you mean see if I can find a photo? Of course I can find a photo. I can get everything on anybody at any time, including where they purchase their lingerie."

By the time Max stopped for gas and filled his tank, Muffin had a complete dossier and recent photo of Jamie Swift. "Not bad," he said. "You know how I like blondes."

Muffin gave a snort. "Not to mention brunettes and redheads. But you can forget this one, stud. She's engaged to one Phillip Ravenal Standish, a well-respected tax attorney, and the most eligible bachelor in Beaumont, South Carolina."

"Your point being?"

"Hands off. Besides, you're going to Beaumont because your sister Deedee needs you."

Max smiled. "Deedee needs more help than I'm capable of giving her. Besides, there's no sin in checking on my investment with the Beaumont Gazette while I'm in town. And having the pleasure of meeting Miss Swift. After all, I'm her partner."

"Silent partner. And when she finds out Deedee asked you to help her financially..."

"She's not going to find out."

"The woman isn't stupid, Max. As soon as she discovers you're Deedee's brother, she'll put two and two together. She and Deedee might be close friends, but I'm willing to bet she won't appreciate people discussing her financial problems. She's struggled for years to keep her newspaper afloat."

"She was looking for an investor, and I have a fondness for the newspaper business. Don't forget I cut my teeth on my cousin's newspaper. There isn't much I don't know about it."

"Just don't lose sight of why we're really going to Beaumont," Muffin said. "Sounds like Frankie's in trouble."

"I still can't believe it," Max said. "Who would have thought my brother-in-law would run for mayor?"

"He's not the first wrestler to run for political office."

"I wonder if people still refer to him as Frankie-the-Assassin?"

"I'm sure he's maintained a following, despite having retired. By the way, it doesn't sound like Deedee is thrilled about his decision to join the political arena. Her last e-mail wasn't good."

"You should realize by now that, although my sister is about as sweet as they come, her life is one crisis after another. Just like our mother," he added. "One big calamity after another."

"You don't sound especially fond of your sister."

"Oh, I'm crazy about Deedee, although we've never had much in common. She's ten years older than me. Not to mention a little flaky at times," he added.

"Your brother-in-law doesn't seem at all concerned about what's going on," Muffin said.

"Frankie knew what he was getting into when he decided to go into politics, and he's not the first politician to receive hate mail." Max paused and smiled. "You know, Muffin, you're supposed to read my mail and report to me, not make judgments or offer advice. And then pout when I don't agree," he added. "One would think you were capable of emotion." The pride in his voice went unchecked. "And they said it couldn't be done. Guess I proved them wrong."

"You're gloating, Max. It's not flattering. Somebody needs to teach you a little humility."

"A good woman could do that."

"She'd have to be armed and dangerous."

"Do me a favor. Send a fax to Miss Swift and tell her I'll drop by after lunch tomorrow. That'll give her time to have her hair done and buy a new dress for the occasion."

"Oh, puh-leese."

"Then take a nap. You're getting moody on me."

"You know I don't nap. That genius mind of yours couldn't find its way out of a paper sack without my assistance; much less make it all the way to Beaumont, South Carolina. Face it, Max. I'm indispensable."

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"Double damn!" Jamie Swift dropped the fax as though it were hot to the touch. It fluttered to the top of her desk, face up, as though openly defying her to ignore it.

Her secretary, Vera Bankhead, drew herself up sharply. "You'd better be glad your father isn't alive to hear you, young lady. I have warned you about using foul language in this office, what with me being a God-fearing Baptist and all. You owe the kitty one quarter for cursing."

Without taking her eyes off the fax, Jamie reached into a side drawer of her desk where she kept a stash of change. She pulled out a quarter and handed it to Vera. Sixty years old and the closest thing Jamie had ever had to a mother, Vera Bankhead was a woman to be reckoned with, and the only thing Jamie feared.

"Mr. Holt is coming here? Tomorrow?"

"That's what it says."

"This must be some kind of joke."

"Looks serious as an open grave to me, but then I'm just a lowly secretary who hasn't had a raise since they did away with garter belts."

"We have to stop him."

"I keep a .38 in my purse. It'll stop a Brahma bull at one hundred paces."

"We can't kill him, Vera. Besides, he owns a sizeable portion of this newspaper. We simply have to find a way to detain him. I mean would you look at this place!"

Both women paused and glanced around the office, or what there was left of it.

Vera nodded. "Yeah, well, I told you not to sell all the furniture, but I knew you needed the money."

Jamie's managing editor, Mike Henderson, raced into her office, light brown hair uncombed, shirt badly wrinkled, and his coat askew. His briefcase reflected his personality; the fake leather pouches stuffed with papers and newsworthy articles that he planned to follow up one day but never got around to it. The tie he kept on hand in case he needed it, peeked out from the side pocket of his jacket.

"Wonder whose bed he just crawled out of?" Vera muttered.

"Sorry I'm late," he said.

Jamie pressed her lips together in irritation. Mike was a good editor, but his poor time management skills and sexual prowess kept him from doing the job he was capable of. She attributed it to immaturity; after all, he was only a year out of college, and he worked cheap.

"Do you know what time it is?" Jamie asked.

He paused and checked his wristwatch. "Oh, man, I'm later than I thought."

Vera gave a snort of disgust. "Long night?"

He looked slightly offended. "Okay, so I have a reputation of, well, never mind, but I actually worked most of the night and morning because of our deadline. I must've drifted off to sleep at some point because next thing I knew..."

"Well, Miss Swift has enough to worry about without you showing up this time of day."

He looked at Jamie. "Did another piece of equipment break down?"

"Worse," Vera said. "Mr. M. Holt is coming tomorrow, and this place is pitiful."

Mike looked around. "Yeah, we could use some furniture. Not to mention a few desks. I'm working on a card table. By the way, who is M. Holt?"

There were no secrets in the office. Everyone knew Jamie struggled to keep the newspaper afloat. "Mr. Holt is the investor who prevented the bank from foreclosing on this place," Jamie said. She looked at Vera. "Why does he get to curse, and I don't?"

"Cause I didn't practically raise him and teach him good Christian manners like I did you. Besides, he's going to hell anyway for his Tom-cattin' ways."

Mike sighed. "I have trouble committing."

"You need to learn to keep your britches zipped, mister, and you need to be on time for work."

Mike's face reddened, but he, like the rest of the staff, knew better than to talk back to Vera. "What does the M stand for?" he asked as though desperately wanting to change the subject.

Jamie shrugged. "Who knows? I was just so glad to get the money I didn't care." She pulled out the center drawer of her battered desk and fumbled through it for a pack of unopened cigarettes."

Vera planted her hands on her hips. "Don't you dare light that cigarette, missy, or I'm going to quit on the spot, and then you're going to have to pay someone real money to run this office. Have you forgotten how hard it was for you to give up smoking in the first place? The only reason you started to begin with was because your daddy smoked."

"I'm not going to light the darn thing, Vera." Jamie tore into the pack and stuck one of the cigarettes between her lips. Oh, how she craved one. If ever there was a time to light up it was now. "We've got to do something about this place."

"Why are you looking at me?" Vera asked. "I don't have any say-so around here. I just keep my mouth shut and do what I'm told when I'm told. But let something go wrong and everybody comes running to Vera. Yessiree." She sank into the old leather chair facing Jamie's desk. "Somebody get me a cup of coffee. It helps me think better."

Jamie hurried down the hall and into the small kitchenette or what had once been a kitchenette before she had been forced to sell the refrigerator, microwave, table and chairs, and everything

else that had not been nailed down. Thankfully, the cabinet and small stainless steel sink remained, which meant the coffee pot had a resting place and running water to rinse and fill it. Jamie returned to her office and handed Vera a cup of coffee that looked as though it had been brewed the day before. "It's hot," she warned.

Vera sipped cautiously. "Okay, I hate to do this, but I guess I have no choice. We can't allow Mr. Holt to see this place as is." She glanced around. "Lawd, I don't remember when these walls were last painted. We need to do something about that, too."

"You have an idea?" Jamie asked hopefully.

"A few people in this town owe me favors."

Jamie noted the thoughtful look on Vera's face. Baptist or not, the woman could be downright devious at times. "I'm listening."

"You know Herman Bates who owns Bates' Furniture? His son has been busted twice for DUI. Just so happens I was a nice person and kept it out of our arrest section. And then there was that messy scene between Tom Brown and his wife..."

"Tom Brown who owns the paint store?" Mike asked.

"Uh-huh. Seems he told wife Lorraine he had to work late one night so he could finish painting the VFW Hall, and Lorraine decided to check it out. Found him and Beth Toomey doing the nasty on a sofa in the back office. I heard Lorraine went after both of them with a letter opener. Beth managed to call 9-1-1, and Loraine was hauled in and thrown into the slammer."

"Oh, Jeez," Jamie mumbled.

"Yeah, and Tom refused to bail her out until she signed an agreement stating she wouldn't do him bodily harm. Didn't matter... cause there was some serious butt kicking when he got home."

"How come I don't know about this?" Jamie asked.

"I decided to keep it out of the newspaper, as well, because both families belong to my church."

Jamie shook her head. There were times she wondered who was in charge. Obviously it was a moot question. "So what's the point?"

Vera took another sip of her coffee as though trying to build the tension until she reached the climax of her idea. "We need this place painted, and we need furniture. Simple as that. Tom and Herman either do it my way or pay the price."

"Isn't blackmail a crime in this state?" Mike asked.

Vera set her coffee cup down and crossed her arms over her chest. "Not when it's for a good cause."

He and Jamie nodded as though it made perfect sense.

Vera rose from her chair in a queenly fashion. "Have either of you ever known me to fail when I set my mind to it? You can rest assured that it's as good as done. Vera Bankhead always comes through, and she doesn't mind getting her hands dirty in the process. Nosirree."

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Deedee Holt Fontana sat at her French provincial dressing table and gazed into the mirror, frowning. Her Maltese, Choo-Choo, licked the last of Deedee's Frappaccino from a dainty white cup.

The man fussing with her hair paused. He wore his own coal black hair in a buzz cut, with the exception of a few wispy bangs that he claimed were necessary because he felt his forehead too tall. "What's wrong, sweetie pie?" He had a French accent mixed with a Louisiana drawl that was sometimes difficult to understand.

"Oh, Beenie, I need another facelift," Deedee said in her Betty Boop voice. Despite having recently celebrated her forty-sixth birthday, Deedee had never lost the childlike quality that gave her an air of innocence, even though the woman could be quite savvy at times. The same voice that made Frankie, her husband of twenty years, want to take care of and protect her.

"You most certainly do not need a facelift! You have one more face lift, and your eyes are going to be at the back of your head, and you'll have to enter rooms butt first. You'll give new meaning to the words grand entrance." Beenie waved his comb from side to side as he spoke, as though conducting an orchestra. "Besides, how many women do you know who have an entire room devoted to their beauty queen trophies?"

"That was a long time ago, Beenie."

"Well, you're still a beauty queen as far as the rest of us are concerned but especially to that hunk of man you married. Why, the way he looks at you..." Beenie paused and shivered. "I get all goose-pimple every time I see it."

Deedee obviously wasn't listening because she seemed to take little delight in his words. "It's a wonder Frankie hasn't left me for a younger woman," she said. She picked up her magnifying mirror and looked into it. "Eeyeuuw!" she screeched so loud that Beenie's hand flew to his chest as though he feared his heart might take flight.

"Yikes, where did you get that mirror?" Beenie wrestled it from her. "How many times have I told you not to look into that mirror? Lord, girl, Britney Spears would look like a stray dog with mange in that mirror."

"Look at me, Beenie. I've turned into a frumpy housewife."

"You are definitely not frumpy."

"I have dark circles beneath my eyes."

"That's because you're not sleeping at night, sugarplum." Beenie patted her on the shoulder. "You spend too much time worrying about your husband and everybody else you can think of. You're the only rich person I know who worries about leaving a bathtub ring when you have a perfectly healthy housekeeper, who is overpaid in my opinion, to see to it. And if Frankie knew how much you were fretting over him he'd put you over his knee and give you a good spanking."

Deedee seemed to consider it. "That's not a bad idea, Beenie. Frankie and I could use some variety in our sex life." Beenie's hands fluttered about his face like butterflies, something he often did when he became anxious. "I do not believe what I'm hearing. Mr. F worships the marble floors you walk on. His eyes light up when you enter a room. It's obvious he thinks you're the sexiest woman alive."

Deedee wasn't listening. She covered her face with her hands. Her long slender fingers flashed with diamonds, as did her dainty wrists and earlobes. She was still as slender as a college girl, and as much as she'd sworn off exercising in her youth, she worked out with a personal trainer three days a week. Of course it was up to Beenie to drag Deedee out of bed, kicking and screaming, and coax her downstairs to Frankie's gym each time her trainer arrived for their appointment. He claimed he was just doing his job, but it was obvious Beenie had a thing for the muscle-bound jock because he always wore his favorite silk Armani shirt, unbuttoned to his navel, and a light oil that left a slight sheen on his hairless chest when the man was expected. Today, Beenie was dressed in Armani.

But Beenie was like a pit bull when it came to Deedee, seeing she ate right, that her hair and makeup were perfect and her clothes neatly pressed. Deedee had stolen her "personal assistant" some three years prior from an exclusive spa, doubling his salary in order to get him. It had paid off. Beenie had transformed her, tossing aside Deedee's tight-fitting, rhinestone-laden outfits of linen and silk, designed especially for her and flown in from Milan and Paris.

"I never thought I'd be this old," Deedee cried. "I thought getting older was for everyone but me. I should have married a cosmetic surgeon instead of a wrestler. I tell you, Beenie, the stress is killing me. I don't know what Frankie is thinking. We should have stayed in Scottsdale where it was safe."

"Honey, you know Mr. Fontana loves this little town and the people who live here. He wants to make a difference."

"So why is Frankie receiving all those nasty letters?"

"People can be jerks."

Max had better get his behind here fast. Heaven only knows where he is. He's as bad as our father. Just can't stay in one place long enough."

"Now, now," Beenie said. "That's not fair. From what I understand, Max is a very important man with a lot to do. Frankly, your parents have always sounded a wee bit selfish to me, what with traveling all over the world without a second thought to their children. I would never do that to my children."

All at once, Deedee cried out. "Eeyeuuw, I'm perspiring! Quick, Beenie, turn down the air before I melt."

"The air is already as low as it can go, honeycomb. You're going to cause the units to freeze up like last time if you don't leave the thermostats alone. You're just having another hot flash."

Deedee met the man's gaze in the mirror. The look in her eyes would have wilted a head of lettuce on the spot. "I am not having a hot flash. I am not going through menopause or pre-menopause, as you call it, and that's final!"

Beenie slapped his hand over his mouth as though suddenly realizing his mistake. "What was I thinking?" he said. "Of course you're hot. It's the middle of June, and we're having a record heat wave. Look at me, I'm glistening myself." He pulled the lid off her most expensive talcum powder and made a production of powdering her neck and his. "There, now. Feel better?"

"I'm having a nervous breakdown, Beenie, that's what it is. I'm going to have to go on tranquilizers. I'll probably become addicted and have to spend time at the Betty Ford Clinic. It'll look bad for Frankie. He'll lose the election and blame me, then he'll get a mistress."

"Lord, girl, are you having a mood swing or what?" Beenie said, then winced and raised a fist to his mouth at the look she shot him. "Oh, my, I should cut my tongue out, chop it into little pieces and feed it to an alley cat."

"I need to be alone," Deedee said tiredly.

Beenie sighed his immense relief. "That's a good idea." He helped her into a satin Christian Dior bathrobe. "You need to rest now. Tonight is a big night for Mr. Fontana, and you want to be at your best."

"I want to be awake when Max arrives."

"I'll wake you the minute he gets here." Beenie paused and shot her a coy look. "What does he look like?"

"Oh, he's very handsome and polished, and don't think he doesn't know it. He's also a freakin' super genius. Used to blow up everything in sight when he was a kid."

Beenie's eyes widened. "Like in bombs?"

"Not real bombs, just stuff he found around the house. Kid's stuff, really. He had his own laboratory. Fortunately, our uncle and his wife took him in and turned Max around."

Beenie tapped a forefinger against his top lip. "And a genius, huh. I love brainy men."

"Don't get any ideas, pal. He's straight as a yardstick."

Beenie looked crestfallen. "I am never going to meet a good man. I'm going to end up an old maid like my sister."

* * * *

Frankie grinned and pumped Max's hand enthusiastically the minute the butler led him inside a living room that was the size of a bowling alley. "It's good to see you again, Max. Deedee will be thrilled."

"Have you grown?" Max asked, looking straight up in order to meet the man's gaze.

Frankie laughed. "Actually, I shrank an inch. I'm six foot seven now." He slapped his massive chest. "Still fit as a fiddle, though. I work out every day."

Suddenly, Max shivered. "Why is it so cold in here? Your butler is wearing an overcoat."

"Shoot, that's nothing," Frankie said. "The chef has a fire going in the kitchen fireplace." He glanced about as if to make sure they were alone. "It's Deedee," he whispered. "She's going through, uh, the change."

"You mean menopause?"

"Shhh, not so loud. She's in denial. Claims she's too young for that sort of thing, but it started about six months ago. You know how Deedee is about maintaining her youth. But don't worry, the housekeeper put an electric blanket on your bed so you won't freeze at night."

There was a squeal of delight that caused both men to turn. Deedee raced down the long, free-standing staircase, her robe swirling about her long legs. She ran right into Max's waiting arms. "Oh, little brother, it's so good to see you!"

Max hugged her. "Let me have a look at you," he said, stepping back for a full view. "You haven't changed a bit. How do you stay so young looking?"

"She has a facelift once a year," Frankie said, earning a dark look from his wife. As if sensing he'd said the wrong thing, he added, "Not that she needs it, of course."

"It's just a teeny-weeny procedure," Deedee said quickly. "Dr. Mitchell says I'm much too young for the real thing. Frankie, honey, why don't you fix Max a drink."

"What'll it be?" Frankie asked, heading for a cabinet that opened up into a wet bar. "We have everything."

"A soft drink will do."

"Sit down, Max," Deedee said, leading him to a group of sofas that were covered in a bamboo print and sat on a leopard skin rug. Tall wooden giraffes peeked through leafy banana trees, and brass elephants supported glass cocktails tables.

"Do you like what I did to the room?" she asked. "I was going for a jungle look."

Max took in the room. "You succeeded very well," he said. "I noticed you chose to paint the house pink."

"Salmon," she corrected. "It's the in color these days."

"It looks pink to me too," Frankie said, handing Max a cola. "Good thing I'm not still wrestling. The guys would think I had grown soft."

Max toasted his brother-in-law with his drink. "Congratulations on winning the primary, Frankie. You'll make a great mayor."

Frankie beamed with pleasure. "I still have a lot to do and Election Day is just around the corner, but I have a good campaign manager so it's going okay. The present mayor has been in office for ten years, and his father spent almost twice that time in office. I say it's time we get new blood." He leaned closer and gave Max a conspiratorial wink. "What I say in my speech tonight should win me the election."

Deedee covered her face. "Oh, Lord, he's going to make somebody else mad, and they're going to run us out of town." Suddenly, she cried out. "Beenie, come quickly!"

There was the sound of footsteps overhead. Beenie raced down the stairs. "What, what? Did your eyelash fall in your drink?" He came to a screeching halt at the sight of Max. He sucked in his stomach and went into a provocative pose. "You must be Deedee's brother."

Max glanced from him to an amused Frankie.

"I'm Deedee's personal assistant, of course," Beenie said. He held out his. "Charmed, I'm sure."

Max nodded. "Yeah, so am I."

"Stop socializing, Beenie, and pack my jewelry," Deedee said loudly. "Sew it into the hem of my dresses like they did in the Civil War when the Yankees came. And all my makeup and moisturizing creams," she added.

"But I don't know how to sew," he whined.

She ignored him. "And tell the housekeeper to start packing the china and silver. We'll have to bury it in the backyard."

Beenie planted his hands on his hips. "I hope you don't expect me to dig holes and risk ruining my nails. I just spent a fortune having them done."

Max watched silently, one corner of his lip turned up. He was obviously enjoying himself.

"Deedee, what on earth are you planning?" Frankie said, his black brows drawn together so that they touched and made him look stern, a look that was completely foreign to him.

She began wringing her hands. "That's what people do when they're getting ready to flee their homes."

He immediately softened and took her hands in his large beefy ones. "We're not going to be forced from our home, sweetheart. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Frankie, it's obvious somebody doesn't want you elected; otherwise, why would you be getting all that hate mail?"

"How do you know about that?"

She hitched her chin high. "I'm your wife. I make it my business to know what's going on around here."

Frankie looked hurt. "Do you think I'd let anything happen to you? Deedee, I'd risk my own life for you."

"Listen, Frankie, I've watched you in the ring, and I dealt with it better than most wives, but this time I'm scared."

"I thought you trusted me."

"I do trust you, but I still worry."

"That's for sure," Beenie said. "Why do you think she's got those God awful bags under her eyes? Lord, I couldn't conceal them with white enamel paint." Beenie seemed to catch his mistake the minute he said it because his hands fluttered about his face and he turned three shades of red. Deedee glared at him. "Could we forget I said that?" he asked. "I would agree to forego this year's Christmas bonus if we could just pretend I'd never uttered those words."

"I want you to stop this nonsense," Frankie told his wife. "We are not going anywhere. I am going to protect you. Besides, all your jewelry is insured. If somebody takes it I'll just buy you more."

"Oh, Frankie. What would I do without you?"

He leaned over and gave his wife a long kiss.

Max chuckled. "When are the two of you going to stop acting like newlyweds?"

"When you find the right person, it just keeps getting better and better," Deedee said dreamily. "You should try it sometime, little brother."

Frankie checked his Rolex. "It's getting late. We have to get ready for the fund-raiser at the local country club."

Deedee looked proud. "Frankie's trying to raise money for the park he's planning. He's going to put it right smack in the center of town, and dedicate it to the founding fathers."

"Yeah," Frankie said. "It's going to have this big fountain, and in the center a raised statue of two bronze wrestlers, one of them caught in a body scissor."

"Like one of those Michelangelo statues," Deedee added.

"I figure the kids will get a kick out of it," Frankie added. "Oh, and there's going to be a playground for the little ones."

"Sounds like you thought of everything but a wrestling ring," Max said.

"Oh, Frankie has already had one built at the YMCA," Deedee said, "and he gives lessons once a week."

"He's very devoted to this town," Beenie said, still eyeballing Max.

"Doesn't sound like you're taking retirement very seriously," Max said.

Frankie shrugged. "I like staying busy, and it's for a good cause."

Finally, Max stood. "Guess I'd better clean up."

"I'll show you to your room," Beenie offered, already moving toward the stairs gracefully. "I'll even see that your bags are carried up for you."

"By the way, there's a tux in your closet," Deedee called out once Max was halfway up the stairs.

He turned and scowled down at her. "You did that on purpose. You know how much I hate to dress up."

* * * *

Max stood beside Frankie, shaking hands and making small talk, but the look on his face suggested how bored he was. Deedee had simply introduced him as Max, her little brother, and

nobody had made the connection. After an hour, Max slipped through a pair of French doors leading to a large balcony that overlooked a perfectly manicured golf course.

He gazed at the woman for a full minute, a smile playing on his mouth. It would have been impossible not to recognize her. Jamie Swift was even better looking in person.

* * * *

Jamie Swift was one irritated woman, and she didn't notice the stranger at first. Her mood had only worsened since she'd learned her investor was coming to town, and the last thing she wanted to do was mingle with the crowd inside. Frankie must have invited close to two hundred people, most of them couples, and she was without a date.

Where the heck was Phillip? Here she was, dressed in her navy silk cocktail dress, the one Phillip claimed showed off the best legs he'd ever laid eyes on and brought out the highlights in her blond hair. Oh, what she'd give to be wearing her comfortable jeans and loose-fitting t-shirt and sprawled on her sofa reading a good book.

And what was with these high heels? The sales lady at the discount shoe store had talked her into buying them. Dumb idea. She preferred sneakers. The spiked heels added a good three inches to Jamie's five-foot-seven and made her feel as though she should have strapped herself into a parachute before putting them on. If she fell she would break every bone in her body.

Not that it would be the worst thing that had happened to her that day. She took a sip of her wine, her second glass.

"Darn you, Phillip," she muttered. "Of all times to be late." He was probably sitting in his private club right now, sipping a Dewars and talking about tax law. Tax law, for Pete's sake! Who cared? The subject held as much interest to her as a hernia operation. "Oh, double damn," she said.

Jamie caught movement and turned quickly, almost spilling her wine. Her mouth flew open, and her cheeks burned with embarrassment as she found herself gazing at one of the best looking men she'd ever laid eyes on. And he had caught her talking to herself.