

## Passion and Scandal

### Excerpt – Chapter One

THE VIETNAMESE-OWNED French bakery on the street level should more rightly have been a sleazy bar or a pawnshop but everything else was exactly as Willow Ryan had expected it to be. The stairs creaked. The walls were dingy and needed painting. The narrow hallway was lit by a single naked bulb. The gold letters stenciled on the frosted-glass door panel were peeling at the edges. Gingerly, Willow reached out and put her hand on the doorknob, then hesitated and drew back, giving herself one last chance to reconsider the wisdom of what she was about to do.

At the very least, her actions could end up embarrassing someone. At worst, she might be ruining lives.

If she considered it logically and reasonably, things were fine the way they were. If she went away now and did nothing, they would, in all likelihood, remain fine. But for the first time in her life, Willow found herself unable to be either logical or reasonable.

She had to know.

It was as simple—and as complicated—as that.

She had reached a point in her life when *she had to know*.

Willow smoothed her thick, chin-length hair back behind one ear, took a deep breath, and reached for the doorknob. Turning it firmly in her grasp, she pushed the door open and stepped into an office that looked as if it had been furnished to function as a set for a classic 1930's detective movie.

There was an old-fashioned wooden desk, two chairs with cracked, brown leather upholstery, and a low rectangular table littered with a stack of telephone books and a large glass ashtray that looked as if it hadn't been emptied in over a week. The scarred desktop held a telephone, a pencil cup with a motley collection of writing implements and emery boards in it, a leather blotter, and a fashion magazine opened to the monthly horoscope column. A lone calendar with a scenic view of the Sierra Mountains in springtime hung on the dingy beige wall behind the desk. The smell of stale cigarette smoke and burned coffee permeated the air, mingling with the scent of fresh-baked bread wafting up from the bakery below. The only thing missing was a tart-tongued, gum-chewing, blond secretary in a tight sweater.

And her hard-boiled boss, of course.

Willow eyed the half-open door leading into what she presumed was an inner office. Maybe the missing secretary and her boss were in there, going over the day's appointments or discussing a case or something. "Hello?" she called, raising her voice slightly. "Anybody here?"

There was no answer.

Willow took a reluctant step toward the half-open door. "Hello?" she repeated, louder. "Mr. Hart? Are you here?"

The only response was a soft, muffled noise that bore no resemblance to the usual sounds of business in progress. Willow opened her mouth to call again and then hesitated. Maybe they weren't going over the day's appointments. Maybe they were...

She glanced down at the plain gold watch on her wrist. "No, surely not," she muttered to herself.

It was only 9:25 in the morning, after all, and, no matter how disreputable looking, this was a place of business, not a scene from the pages of a potboiler detective novel. Besides, her appointment was for 9:30. She'd carefully arranged her day's schedule around it, leaving her afternoon free for meetings with two of her family's biggest Los Angeles customers. Time was money and she didn't like to waste either one of them.

With a determined step, Willow crossed the small reception area and rapped sharply on the half-open door. "Mr. Hart?"

The low snuffling noise continued unabated and Willow's determination wavered a bit. What if he and his secretary were really in there having sex on the desk? If she just barged in it would be humiliating for all three of them. As much as she hated to do it, maybe she should just write the morning off as wasted time and come back later. Or, better yet, find another detective to help her. Preferably, someone who knew that offices were for working.

She had half turned, ready to leave, when she heard what could only be described as a garbled snort. It didn't sound amorous at all. She leaned toward the door, head tilted as she listened intently.

Someone was snoring.

Loudly.

Willow pushed the door all the way open and stepped inside.

It was another set a classic film noir whodunit, incongruously dressed with props from *Rocky*. There was another battered wooden desk, twin to the one in the reception area, another

couple of worn chairs, a row of gray metal filing cabinets against one wall, and a low wooden credenza under the single large window overlooking the street.

There was also a punching bag suspended in one corner, an open gym bag spilling sweaty socks and damp, ratty-looking towels onto the floor, and a pair of boxing gloves sitting in one of the chairs in front of the desk. A personal computer, obviously brand-new, judging by the empty box and packaging materials strewn about, occupied the other chair. The desktop was buried in a jumbled mess of books, crumpled papers, empty Chinese take-out containers, fast-food wrappers, and an open pizza box with two slices of pizza left. The smell of burned coffee came from the empty pot on top of the filing cabinet. The snoring came from the man stretched out on his back on the cracked leather sofa.

Willow sidestepped the gym bag, stepped over a pair of size-twelve Reeboks, and turned off the heating element under the scorched and stinking coffeepot. Standing at the end of the sofa, she looked down at its sleeping occupant.

Several inches too long for his makeshift bed, he lay with one hand flung over his head and the other resting, palm up, on the floor. His bare, bony feet dangled over one sagging arm of the too-small sofa. His long legs were encased in faded jeans, torn at one knee, and there were pizza stains smeared down the front of the pale blue T-shirt stretched over his wide chest. His sun-streaked, dark blond hair stuck up in a half-dozen different directions and there was at least two days' worth of golden stubble covering his tanned jaw—which hung open, slackly, revealing a glimpse of toothpaste-ad-perfect teeth. He was snoring rhythmically, each deep sonorous exhalation causing the chiseled curve of his lower lip to vibrate.

*This* was the man she had come to see? This was Steve Hart, the private investigator who had been so highly recommended? The ace detective who was going to help her find out what she had to know? Willow stood there in uncustomary indecision, staring down at him for another minute or so, debating with herself.

On the one hand, he looked like a California beach bum, an aging, rather dissolute California beach bum, at that. The kind of man who was still trying to coast through life on his golden good looks and a killer physique. On the other hand, he'd found Angie Claiborne's runaway teenage brother three months after everyone else had given up.

Maybe this wasn't what it looked like, she thought, trying to give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he hadn't passed out on the office sofa after a night of carousing. Maybe he'd been

up all night working on a tricky case and this was the first chance he'd had to catch a little shut-eye. And she was already *there*, after all, in his office, her morning already invested in the meeting. It would be foolish to waste both time and opportunity simply because of a misleading first impression.

She reached down and jostled his shoulder. "Mr. Hart?"

The rumbling cadence of his snores didn't change.

She tried again, shaking him a bit harder.

He made a snorting noise, sounding very much like a pig at a trough, and shrugged away from her touch.

Recognizing the signs of a heavy sleeper, Willow abandoned the effort to shake him awake. Carefully setting her briefcase on top of the unused computer, she stepped around the desk to the window. With a flick of her wrist, she opened the old-fashioned Venetian blinds, letting in a flood of bright morning light.

The man on the sofa drew his arm down over his eyes and kept on snoring.

"All right," Willow murmured to herself. "You force me to take drastic measures."

A quick perusal of the cluttered desk revealed a large, battered, hardcover book entitled *Accounting for Your Small Business*, half-buried under the pizza box. She picked it up, raised the book over her head with both hands and slammed it down on the floor as hard as she could. It landed with a loud crack that ricocheted through the room like gunfire in a shooting gallery.

The man on the sofa bolted upright before the last echo of sound had faded. "What the hell...?" He lifted his hand in front of his eyes in an effort to block the glaring sunlight, and peered in her general direction. "Who's there?"

"I'm sorry I startled you like that, Mr. Hart, but we have a nine-thirty appointment and I—"

"Who the hell are you?" he growled, squinting at her over his upraised hand. All he could see was a vaguely female shape silhouetted against the light from the window. "And what are you doing in my office?"

"My name is Willow Ryan. We have a nine-thirty appointment and I—"

"Oh, yeah, an appointment. Right." He rubbed his hands over his face, as if to wash away the effects of sleep, and squinted up at her again. He was still unable to make out little more than the outline of a woman. She appeared to be above average height, maybe five foot six, with a

slender build and dark hair that gleamed in the nimbus of light that surrounded her head. "Close the blinds, will you? I can't see a thing."

"Are you sure you're awake?"

"I'm sitting up, aren't I?" he snapped. "Close the damn blinds."

With a quick frown to let him know she didn't appreciate being barked at, Willow moved to comply, tilting the blinds just enough so that the sun didn't shine directly in his face. "Better?" she asked tightly.

"Yeah, fine. Thanks." He sighed heavily and scrubbed at his face again. "Look, ah... Wilma, is it?"

"Willow," she corrected him. "Willow Ryan."

"Well, look, Willow Ryan, I'm not at my best first thing in the morning, so just bear with me, okay? I'm sorry I snarled at you but I don't turn into a human being until I've had my first cup of coffee."

"Then I'm afraid you're going to continue to be less than human." She nodded toward the coffeemaker, her expression not without a certain amount of sympathy. She, too, needed a stiff shot of caffeine to jump-start her in the morning.

He followed her gaze with his own. "Oh, hell, I burned up another pot. That's the third one this year." He rose to his feet as he spoke and dug into the front pocket of his jeans. "Here, take this." He thrust a couple of folded bills toward her. "Run downstairs to Thuy's and get me a large coffee and a raspberry Danish. Get something for yourself, too, while you're at it. You don't look as if a few extra grams of fat a day would hurt you any."

"Coffee? You want me to run downstairs and get you coffee?"

"Oh, for cryin' out loud. Let's not make a federal case out of it, okay? It's just a lousy cup of coffee, not an attack on modern feminist principles." He waggled the money at her impatiently. "Just do it this once, while I get cleaned up," he wheedled. "I promise I'll do it the next time."

Willow doubted there would ever be a next time but she reached out to take the money; it seemed more expedient than standing there arguing with him. "How do you like your coffee?"

"Black with two sugars," he said, his impatient frown disappearing at her easy capitulation. "And thanks." His lips turned up in smile that revealed a deep dimple in one lean, stubbled cheek. "You're a real lifesaver, Willow."

Willow's breath caught in her throat. Sound asleep and snoring he'd been undeniably attractive. Barely awake, all squinty eyed and grumpy, he'd had a certain rough charm. But with his eyes wide open and his dimple flashing he was easily the kind of man who would have no trouble at all if he wanted to coast through life on looks alone.

Angie Claiborne had said he was good-looking. Actually, the exact words she'd used to describe his appearance were *Greek-god gorgeous* but Willow had discounted that as an example of Angie's usual exaggeration where men were concerned. It looked as if she owed Angie an apology when she got back home to Portland. The man was every bit as gorgeous as she'd said—and then some.

A lesser woman might have been bowled over by the rugged charm of his smile and the sparkle in his bright blue eyes but Willow was made of sterner stuff. She swallowed hard and cleared her throat.

"I'll be back with your coffee in ten minutes," she said crisply, her manner all-business despite the warm flutter of feminine awareness that rippled down her spine. She turned away from the splendor of his dimpled smile and headed for the door, then paused, just for a moment, and glanced back at him over her shoulder. "I'll expect you to be ready to get down to business," she said sternly.

"You got it, sweetheart," he said, with a jaunty little salute. "Ten minutes."

\* \* \*

THERE WERE THREE PEOPLE ahead of her at Thuy's bakery so it was closer to fifteen minutes than ten when Willow returned with the coffee and Danish—but Steve Hart still wasn't ready to get down to business. He wasn't even in his office.

With an exasperated sigh, Willow abruptly decided she'd wasted enough time for one day. Much as she hated to admit defeat, it was time to cut her losses and move on. Gorgeous or not, Steve Hart wasn't the only private investigator in the city of Los Angeles and, despite what he'd done for Angie Claiborne and her family, he probably wasn't the best one, either. For one thing, the best private investigator in L.A. would have a much nicer office than this—one where a person could set a cup of coffee and a small bag of pastries on the desk without having to move a ton of garbage out of the way first.

"Here, let me clear some of that junk out of the way for you."

Willow jumped at the sound of his voice, startled to realize he'd come into the room and was right behind her. So close behind her that she could smell the fresh scents of menthol shaving cream and deodorant soap, and warm, red-blooded man.

"Hey, careful there. Don't burn yourself." He plucked the cup of coffee out of her hand before it spilled. "Thuy makes it hot enough to melt steel." He took a quick, appreciative sip, then handed it back. "The place isn't usually so messy," he said, turning away from her to gather up some of the crumpled papers and empty food containers from the desk. "But I've had a real busy couple of days and my last secretary quit over a week ago, so—" he picked up the metal trash can by the desk and began cramming the debris into it as he spoke "—things have kind of gone to hell around here. I'm not much of a housekeeper," he added unnecessarily, flashing his dimple in a self-deprecating, aw-shucks grin meant to charm and disarm.

"No, I can see that you aren't," Willow mumbled in a strangled voice.

It wasn't his dimpled rogue's grin that got to her this time—she wasn't even looking at his face—it was his body. He'd taken off his pizza-stained T-shirt to wash up and had apparently forgotten to replace it with a clean one. The white towel he had slung around his neck didn't even begin to do a decent job of covering him.

He was wide through the shoulders and well muscled without being the least bit bulky. His torso narrowed to a flat, washboard belly and practically nonexistent hips. Crinkly blond hair gilded his well-developed pectorals like gold dust on a living statue—Michelangelo's *David* came immediately to mind—before narrowing into a tempting arrow of silky blond hair that disappeared into the waistband of his jeans.

"There, that should be good enough for now," Steve said as he set the trash can back on the floor beside the desk.

"Mmm?" Willow mumbled, unable to think of anything more intelligent in the face of so much glorious masculine pulchritude.

"Just let me get these out of your way—" he grabbed the boxing gloves off of the chair by their laces and tossed them on the sofa "—and you can sit down. Go ahead," he urged when she just stood there. "Take a load off. I'm just going to put these away—" he lifted a stack of file folders up off the desk with one beefy hand "—and grab a clean shirt. It'll just take a second and then we can get started. Okay?"

"Okay," Willow echoed weakly, her gaze following him as he moved away from her toward the filing cabinet.

His back was as appealing as his chest, with long smooth muscles that flexed and rippled under his golden skin with every little movement. Fascinated, her mouth all but hanging open, Willow watched the play of his muscles as he unlocked the top file drawer, dropped the folders in and relocked it. When he bent over to pull open the lowest file drawer, her mouth went dry. He had a better butt than Brad Pitt. Better than George Clooney. Better, even, than the anonymous male model whose jeans-clad fanny was currently plastered on billboards all over the country.

Willow forced her gaze away from his rear end. Perfect or not, it was undignified and unprofessional and just plain not nice to ogle him. Not to mention blatantly sexist and politically incorrect. She certainly wouldn't like it if he ogled her like that, she assured herself, staunchly ignoring the insidious little voice in her head that suggested she *would* probably like it very much, indeed, politically correct or not.

She looked down at the top of his still-littered desk, seeking something, anything, to focus her attention on besides Steve Hart's gorgeous body. There was an open ledger book in the center of the desk, its neat columns marred by dark smudges and eraser crumbs. Willow's smooth forehead crinkled up in a disapproving frown as she surveyed the mess he'd made of the ledger. Why on earth, she wondered, would anyone in business for himself in this day and age still be doing his books by hand when affordable PCs and great accounting software had been available for years now? Surely the computer sitting on the chair in front of his desk wasn't *his first*?

And then the file drawer slammed shut with a loud bang and Willow automatically turned her head toward the sound. Steve had taken the towel from around his neck, leaving it in a damp heap atop the filing cabinet, and was pulling a clean T-shirt on over his head. There was a delicious ripple of sinewy muscle as he reached up behind him to draw the soft yellow fabric down to his waist. Then, with his back still to her, he unfastened the fly of his button-front jeans, quickly tucked the T-shirt in, and began buttoning up again.

Willow felt her whole body flush with unaccustomed heat. "For heaven's sake," she muttered, appalled at her reaction to his reverse striptease. "Get a grip, girl," she admonished herself sternly. "You're not seeing anything you haven't seen before." *It's just arranged a whole lot better.*

"Excuse me?" Steve turned around, his hands still at the waist of his jeans as he nonchalantly slipped the last metal button into its buttonhole. "Did you say something?"

Willow hurriedly jerked her gaze away from the vicinity of his fly, focusing it on a point just over his left shoulder. "Your coffee's getting cold," she said, holding it out to him as he approached her.

"Thanks." He plucked the insulated foam cup from her fingers and lifted it to his lips for a long sip. "Mmm, that's good," he murmured, closing his eyes briefly to better savor the flavor. "I'm pretty sure Thuy grinds vanilla in with the coffee beans—" he put the cup down on the edge of the desk and reached for the bag of pastries Willow still held clutched in one sweaty palm—"but she says no, and I've never been able to catch her at it." He opened the top of the bag as he spoke and bent his head, taking a deep, appreciative sniff. "Ah, the tempting scents of fat and sugar. There's nothing else like it. Come to Papa," he crooned as he reached into the bag and pulled out a thick golden pastry, glistening with raspberry filling and smeared with creamy white frosting. "You didn't get anything for yourself," he said, frowning when he realized one pastry was all the bag held.

"I've already had breakfast, thank you."

"Hours ago, I'll bet." He gave her a quick assessing look over the pastry in his hand. "You look like an early riser. Up with the sun, right?"

"Well, yes, usually, but—"

"We'll share," he decided magnanimously, and began to tear the Danish in half.

"No, really." Willow reached out and put her hand on his wrist to stop him from mangling the pastry. "That's your breakfast. I don't want..."

Her voice trailed off as heat sizzled up her arm, and she stared, mesmerized by the sight of her long pale fingers against the tanned, hair-roughened skin of his thick, sinewy wrist. She couldn't seem to lift her hand away and her fingers moved, seemingly of their own volition, lightly caressing, unconsciously savoring the incredible heat and texture of him. And then the tendons in his wrist twitched once, hard, as he tightened his fingers on the pastry. Willow looked up and met his gaze, head-on.

Neither one of them said a word for a full ten seconds as they stood there, staring at each other, bright blue eyes boring into golden brown. Frissons of heat passed between them, full of

fevered imaginings and rampant speculation, intemperate fantasies and delicious, dizzying possibilities.

And then Willow gasped and snatched her hand away.

And Steve made a strangled noise, deep in his throat—like a chicken that'd just been grabbed by the neck—and beat a hasty retreat to the other side of his desk. "Well, let's get down to business, shall we?" He dropped the untouched Danish back into the bag and set it aside. Sitting down behind the desk, he reached for a stack of papers, busily flipping through them as if he were trying to find something important. "I suppose the agency has already filled you in on the basics?"

"Agency?" Willow croaked. She cleared her voice and tried again. "What agency?" Angie hadn't said anything about going through any agency. She'd just given Willow a phone number and said to call it.

"Did they tell you I require someone who can type at least eighty words a minute? And who can take dictation?" he added, making up the requirements as he went along. "You can take dictation, can't you?" he asked, hoping she couldn't.

He didn't want another secretary who looked at him as if she'd like to eat him up with a spoon, even when—no, *especially* when—he was so strongly tempted to return the favor. His last secretary had walked out—well, stormed out, actually—when he'd finally convinced her that his warm regard and affection for her as an employee would never translate into anything more. He'd hated like hell to have to hurt her feelings; she'd been a real sweet girl and a damned good secretary. Or so he'd thought, until he discovered the unholy mess she'd made of his bookkeeping system before she left, which hadn't been all that good to begin with.

"I'll expect you to make the coffee every morning," he said, determined to avoid another fiasco like the last one. "Or to run down to Thuy's if the pot's on the blink. I'll also want you to drop my laundry and cleaning off every week at By George down the block. And walk my dog and, ah... You're shaking your head," he noted, relieved. "Does that mean you don't want the job?"

"Yes. It means I don't want the job," Willow said. "It means I—"

"Great. Then how would you like to have—"

"—didn't come here for a job in the first place," Willow finished.

"—lunch with me today?" Steve said at the same time.

They stared at each other over the desk, both of them suddenly realizing they didn't have the faintest idea of what the other was talking about. Steve managed to gather his thoughts together first.

"We seem to have gotten our wires crossed somewhere," he said, the expression in his blue eyes sharp and considering as he stared at her. She was wearing an elegant charcoal gray pin-striped suit and a softly tailored white silk blouse. Her small hoop earrings and the heavy serpentine chain around her neck were real gold. Her dark brown hair was cut in a sleek, sophisticated style that swooped down from an off-center part, emphasizing her large golden brown eyes and delicately chiseled jaw. The black leather briefcase she'd placed on top of his computer would have cost four hundred dollars on Rodeo Drive. The woman was definitely upper-management material. "Obviously, you're not from the employment agency."

Willow shook her head. "No."

"And you don't want a job as my secretary."

"No."

"I see. So..." There was no idle sexual speculation in his eyes now; his gaze was direct and focused, intent on the possibility of a case. "What do you want, Willow Ryan?"

She met his direct look with one of her own. "I want you to help me find my father."