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**by Leigh Michaels**  
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**CHAPTER ONE**

WHITNEY SHOOK HER HEAD at the skycap who offered to take her luggage; her single leather bag had wheels on it, and she had learned in years of flying never to let go of the matching carry-on that held her emergency supplies. She looked at her watch and wanted to swear. The delay in Customs hadn't been the problem; it had been brief. And they had left Tokyo right on time. It was the long, unscheduled layover in Alaska to check out some mysterious malfunction in the monster aircraft's engines that had landed her in a predicament. If it hadn't been for that stupid airplane, she wouldn't have missed her connection with the flight that should have taken her on home.

She yawned, and shook her head wearily. All she wanted right now was to open the door of her own apartment and creep wearily into her own bed to recuperate from jet-lag and exhaustion.

But that was only an idealistic dream, she reminded herself. Even if she could get home, the apartment wouldn't be entirely calm. There would be two weeks' worth of mail to cope with, and the telephone would probably be ringing off the wall. Ross always knew the instant she walked in, and he would want an immediate report on her trip. He had some sort of sixth sense where she was concerned, Whitney thought. It was one of the disadvantages in working so closely with her brother.

*I've got the answer, she thought. I'll just check into a hotel here and sleep for a couple of days, and then go on home.*

It was a tempting idea, but she pushed it aside and walked on towards the airline desk to see what they could do about her ticket to Chicago—a useless scrap

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of paper now that the jetliner she should have been on was thirty thousand feet in the air, speeding eastward, somewhere over Denver by now.

A mechanical voice crackled over the public address system. "Whitney Lattimer, call the operator, please. Whitney Lattimer, call the operator."

*Dammit*, she thought. *He couldn't even wait till I was home!* She found a house phone.

The operator's crisp, clear voice warmed into pleasantness. "We've been paging you off and on for hours, Mrs. Lattimer."

"Sorry," Whitney said crisply. "I couldn't hear you in Anchorage, I'm afraid." She didn't need to jot down the number the operator gave; she had learned it by heart long ago. It was the private number that rang into Ross's office.

The telephone was snatched up as soon as it started to ring. "Well, that's flattering," Whitney said. "Have you been sitting there all day waiting for me to call?"

"Where in hell have you been?" There was undeniable anxiety in her brother's voice, and Whitney could picture him at his desk, bracing one hand on the edge of it. He had really been worried about her, she thought, and a trickle of pleasure warmed her.

"Having engine trouble in Alaska," she said. "Didn't you bother to check with the airline?"

"What was wrong with the engine?"

"How should I know? They never tell the passengers. Perhaps the mechanics in Tokyo forgot to change the spark plugs or something."

"Jets don't have 'em."

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“Why does it matter, anyway? I don’t have the vaguest idea what the problem was. I only know that I’m hours late. Did you want me to call just so we could chat about the airline’s equipment?”

“Not exactly.”

“Well, if you want a report on my trip, I’d much rather wait till I’m back in the store tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is what I want to talk to you about.”

“That makes two of us,” Whitney said. “I missed my connection, so I’m going to stay overnight and come back to Chicago tomorrow. All right?”

“Not all right. I need you in Kansas City in the morning.”

Whitney’s hand clenched on the telephone. “If this is your idea of a joke, Ross—”

“Unfortunately, it’s not. Max Townsend’s spent the last two weeks studying the problems in the Kansas City store, and he needs one of us there tomorrow so he can make his report.”

“If it has taken two weeks already, can’t it wait another day or two?”

“Max says it’s too important to be put off.”

“Then why not make him come to Chicago?”

“He can’t bring the evidence here.”

“Well, Max Townsend is your treasure, not mine, Ross. It’s got nothing to do with me.”

“You are still a vice-president of this corporation. Besides—” His voice tightened. “—you owe me one, Whitney, and you know it.”

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Whitney smothered the urge to click her heels together and salute. If she had been face to face with him, she would have done it, she swore. Ross could be an inconsiderate swine at times.

But this time, he was right, the little voice at the back of her brain reminded her. Ross could also be the world's most thoughtful brother, and to tell the truth, she owed him a great deal more than one favor. *But not today!* she protested to herself. Today, she just wanted to sleep.

"Can't it wait?" she pleaded.

"Max says not."

"Max says," she repeated irritably. "Really, Ross, it sounds as if you've abdicated all responsibility for the entire chain of stores. It seems that Max is suddenly the one with all the power."

"Max knows what he's talking about, Whitney."

"How can he? He's never even worked for a department store."

"He was right about the problems in Lake Forest."

"That, my dear brother, was a lucky guess. And what the Lake Forest store has to do with Kansas City is beyond me. There is nothing wrong with the Kansas City store beyond the fact that it's only six months old. Whatever problems it has, it will outgrow. I never thought it was necessary to send an efficiency expert in."

"Max is not an efficiency expert. He's a management consultant, and a damned good one." There was a brief silence. Then he said, in a softer tone, "Look, Whitney, I know how you feel about Max."

"Not just Max," she interrupted. "I dislike efficiency experts. Oh, all right, if you insist—management consultants – in general."

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“That’s why I’ve never asked you to work with him before, and I wouldn’t ask now if I didn’t have to. I’d love to go down there myself to see what he’s found, but I’m thoroughly stuck here for at least the next ten days. Whit, please.”

From the days of their childhood, whenever Ross said, *Whit, please*, in just that tone of voice, Whitney had melted.

“All right!” she said irritably. “I’ll see if I can get a flight first thing in the morning.”

“I’ve already arranged it,” Ross said. “There’s a direct flight to Kansas City leaving in less than an hour. You can pick up your ticket at—”

“Dammit, Ross! If I had any sense at all I’d hang up on you. If I hadn’t been so blasted tired I’d have ignored that page altogether.”

“I told you a long time ago to learn to sleep on airplanes.”

Whitney ignored him. “I should have known as soon as they called my name that you were up to no good.”

“There’s no hurry on the Tokyo report,” he added comfortably. “Let’s get Kansas City straightened out first. It’s only the middle of the afternoon now.”

“Ross,” she said, keeping her voice level with an effort, “it may be the middle of the afternoon here, but I’m still on Tokyo time. On top of that, I spent eight hours in Anchorage waiting for them to work on those damned engines.”

“They might have been changing the oil,” Ross said mildly. “Or do jets have oil?”

“I don’t care if they were putting in tomato juice! I’m trying to tell you that I’ve already been up since tomorrow!”

“Don’t you mean yesterday?”

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“No. Maybe. I never did understand the International Date Line. I don’t know what I mean, except that I will not go to Kansas City today.”

“Max wants to meet you first thing in the morning.”

“Max the Magnificent can wait!”

“Whitney, you’ve never even met the man. You didn’t see him work in Lake Forest—”

“I’ve heard plenty about him, and I’m not impressed. If you want somebody in Kansas City tomorrow morning, Ross, it will have to be you. Have a good time.” She put the phone down with a bang. But she didn’t leave the booth. She smoothed the uncrushable fabric of her suit and wished idly that the principles of polyester could be applied to people too.

Max Townsend was the only person she knew who could give Ross orders, she thought. Her parting jab had been closer to truth than she had planned; if Max wanted a company executive in Kansas City tomorrow morning, there would be one. If Whitney refused, Ross would go.

And he wouldn’t fuss about it. He was too good an executive to use personal pressure, even when the reluctant employee was his own sister. Ross could have reminded her—but he hadn’t—that the reason he didn’t want to leave Chicago just now was that his first child was due to be born any day.

*He didn’t have to remind me, she thought. He was smart enough to know that I’d remember it myself, and that I’d feel unbearably guilty if my brother had to leave his wife right now because I didn’t want to follow orders.*

Ross had been the best of brothers, she reminded herself. In the awful months after Whitney’s husband had died, when she had been trying to cope with the guilt, Ross had always been there, whenever she had needed his help or his

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reassuring presence or just his broad shoulder to cry on. Now, he needed her, and she owed him one.

Whitney picked up the telephone again and punched the number irritably, hurrying so that she couldn't think it over and change her mind. When Ross answered, she said wearily, "All right. You and Max win. Where do I pick up my ticket?"

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IT WAS RUSH-HOUR by the time her cab reached downtown Kansas City. Despite the fact that the freeways were bumper to bumper, traffic was moving at a frantic pace. She watched with detached interest as the driver cut into a space that was at least an inch longer than the cab itself. "Is traffic always this bad?" she asked.

"Not usually. There's a convention going on downtown, so there are lot more cars. Tourists!" he muttered, jamming on the brakes as the car in front slowed abruptly. The cab skidded into the next lane, and the cabbie smiled, at Whitney in the mirror. "And the highway work always slows everything down."

"This is slow?" She could see the speedometer.

"Dreadful. Which hotel did you say?"

"Henry the Eighth—near Country Club Plaza."

"Oh, yes. Isn't that the one with the funny slogan?"

" 'At Henry the Eighth, a man's hotel is really his castle'? That's the one."

The cabbie laughed appreciatively. "You here for the convention?"

"No. Business." She grabbed for a handhold as the cab swung off the freeway.

"Would you drive through Country Club Plaza on the way to the hotel?"

"Fine with me. Do you want the whole tour?"

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“No. Just drive past the Tyler-Royale department store.” At least she could see if Max Townsend had left the place standing.

“You work for them or something?”

“That’s right.”

“Oh.” There was sympathy in the cabby’s tone. He negotiated traffic in silence for a few minutes, and then added, “Too bad.”

Whitney gave him a quizzical look, but before she could ask what he meant, her attention was distracted by the sight of the store itself. The Tyler-Royale store was small by the chain’s standards, three stories of sand-colored brick, trimmed with the bright mosaic tile borders that accented the entire small shopping district. The store looked the same as it had at the Grand Opening ceremonies last spring, Whitney thought. From the outside, it certainly didn’t appear to be a store in trouble. There were shoppers going in, coming out, walking past.

She turned her attention back to the cabbie as the vehicle negotiated a sharp turn.

“What did you mean, too bad?”

“That store’s a loser. Darn shame, too.” The cab screeched to a halt under the canopy at the hotel entrance. “Here you go, Your Majesty—Henry the Eighth!” He was laughing at his own joke.

Whitney would have liked to ask him why he had assessed the new store as a failure. Then she chided herself. What did a cabbie know about retail merchandising, anyway?

She paid him and went thoughtfully on into the lobby of the hotel, all stone and timbers and heavy beams like the great hall of a castle. It was well done, Whitney thought; in looking at it, one could almost forget that the beams were plastic reproductions and the stone had been artistically molded on the spot.

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The registration desk was busy. She waited patiently, glad that Tyler-Royale had made arrangements even before the store opened for a suite to be permanently kept available for visiting executives and dignitaries.

People like Max Townsend. Why hadn't she thought of that earlier, Whitney wondered in exhausted irritation. If Max was staying in the suite, then where on earth—in a town crowded with conventioners—would she find a place to sleep?

Before she had a chance to think about this startling bit of conjecture, the desk clerk looked up with a smile. "Do you have a reservation?" she asked.

"Not exactly. I'm Whitney Lattimer of Tyler-Royale."

"Oh, yes. I'll still need you to sign in, though, so the desk can get your phone calls straight."

*I hope there aren't any*, Whitney thought. She signed the card and asked, hesitantly, "There isn't anyone else staying there already, is there?"

"In the suite? No, ma'am. All the keys are here." The clerk looked a little blank.

Thank heaven, Whitney thought. "Our staff comes in and out all the time," she said lightly. "I never quite know who I might run into."

The clerk said, "Yes, ma'am," but it was obvious that she was already more concerned about the next person in line.

The bellboy showed her up in the crowded elevator. He checked the small living-room, the kitchenette, the bedroom, the bath. He turned on the lights, arranged her luggage, pulled the curtains wide. Then he pocketed the tip and cheerfully vanished.

Whitney kicked off her shoes and ran her fingers through her hair, smiling at herself. "Maybe you should have made him look in the cupboards," she jeered aloud. "After all, Max might be hiding there, waiting to jump out at you."

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Max, she thought, had probably demanded accommodation more to his liking. The Henry the Eighth was not the most elegant hotel in town, but it was conveniently close to the store. Of course, Max probably didn't care a rap about convenience, and he was no doubt on an expense account.

*Oh, stop thinking about Max, she told herself irritably. Tomorrow morning will be plenty of time to deal with him. Why waste a pleasant evening on him, too?*

She stood in the bedroom door and looked around. Yet another anonymous hotel room. Yet another room-service meal. Yet another unfamiliar bed, and a shower that took a mechanical engineer to operate, when all she had wanted tonight was her own small apartment and the peace and quiet her soul longed for. She sighed and started to strip off the uncrushable suit.

She took a long shower, wrapped her wet hair in a towel, and picked at a meal served on a tray at the small table in the living-room, with the television news as her only companion. After two weeks out of the country, she felt a little like a foreigner herself. She pushed her plate aside finally, and, too tired to care about drying her hair, slid between cool, anonymous white sheets.

*If we're going to rent this suite for ever, she thought, we ought at least to decorate it to Tyler-Royale standards. It's embarrassing this way, with the industrial-grade green carpet and the plastic furniture...*

But that was the last thought that slid through her weary mind. By eight o'clock that evening, central daylight time, Whitney Lattimer had slipped peacefully into sleep. She was too tired even to dream.

In any case, what happened some hours later was more nightmarish than dreamlike. She came awake abruptly as the bedroom lights glared, and sat up in the centre of the huge bed, blinking, scared to death.

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The man with his hand on the light switch seemed just as shocked as Whitney was, but he recovered sooner. “Well,” he said, and though his voice was quiet it seemed to fill the room with its vibrancy. “Ross promised me all the comforts of home if I’d take on this job, but I must admit I didn’t realize he was this good a friend!” His eyes were roving appreciatively over her tumbled hair, her almost-bare shoulders, her breasts under the delicate lace gown.

Whitney abruptly realized that he was staring. She pulled the sheet up to her chin. So this was Max Townsend, she thought. Well, she couldn’t say she was surprised. He certainly was good looking, she decided, if a woman liked the dark and arrogant self-assured type. And that voice—yes, it would be possible to drown in that voice. She pulled herself together.

“I assure you, Mr. Townsend, that I was not sent to Kansas City to be a—a playmate for you!”

“No? But you’re supremely well qualified.” He started towards the bed, slowly.

So this was Ross’s precious consultant, she thought resentfully. This was the man whose judgment Ross trusted above all others! Wait till she told her brother about this development; Max Townsend would look a proper fool, then.

“No wonder the bellboy grinned and winked when I said I didn’t have any luggage,” he said thoughtfully.

This, Whitney decided, had gone far enough. She shook her head, trying to clear her foggy brain. “You requested the presence of a Tyler-Royale executive,” she reminded, ‘so you could explain your findings. I am it. So why don’t you go back to wherever you’ve been staying for the past two weeks, and I’ll see you in the morning. At the store. Goodnight, Mr. Townsend.”

He didn’t pause in his slow progress towards the bed, and Whitney had to fight down a shiver. Hadn’t the man heard a word she said? For the first time she began

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to realize that she was in a precarious position, and she wondered if she could reach the bedside telephone in time to call for help.

“But you see,” he said genially, “it is already morning.” He reached the windows and pulled the curtain back. Full sunshine drenched the dark green carpeting. “And it’s rather late morning at that.”

“Oh, no.” It was a mere breath. “What time?”

“Nearly ten.”

She had slept straight through, for fourteen hours? *That’s impossible*, Whitney thought. It had still to be the middle of the night. She wasn’t ready for it to be morning! But there was no arguing with the sunshine. Max Townsend was right.

“This isn’t usual for me,” she began, a little breathlessly.

Max Townsend merely lifted a disbelieving dark eyebrow. He came back to the bed and sat down on the edge of it, leaning against a pile of pillows. “You certainly do a good imitation of it.”

If he wanted to be that way, she thought, let him! She had tried to apologize.

“And your name?” he asked.

“Accept it as a challenge,” Whitney said acidly, sliding away from him. “I’ll introduce myself at the store, in an hour. In the meantime—”

Max took his jacket off, draped it across the foot of the bed, and reached for the telephone. “While you get dressed, I’ll order up some breakfast,” he said mildly. “Bacon and eggs all right with you?”

Whitney’s stomach lurched at the idea. “If you’re hungry, why don’t you go down to the restaurant?”

“Because then you would just go back to sleep. If you can’t get up in the morning, how do you manage to hold down a job, Miss—?”

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She ignored the question. She wasn't about to try explaining it to this arrogant snob. He probably thought that jet-lag was all in the imagination!

But he obviously wasn't going to go away. How, she wondered, could she get out of bed and to the chair where her robe was lying with the least possible exposure? Then she decided it didn't matter. What difference did it make if Max Townsend got an eyeful? After all, she had been married. She would just pretend that it was Charles sitting there on the edge of the bed.

That thought was scarcely reassuring, she told herself crossly. She had to keep her wits about her. The last thing she needed was to start thinking about Charles. Dredging up memories of her brief and nightmarish marriage certainly wouldn't do her any good now.

A sudden shiver racked her at the thought of Charles. She tried to hide it and pushed the blankets back.

"Very nice," Max murmured. "No wonder Ross keeps you around."

She glared at him and retreated to the bathroom. By the time she had showered and dressed, dragged a brush through her tangled black hair and put it into some semblance of order and applied her make-up, she felt a little better. She was at least prepared to meet Max Townsend again.

He was waiting for her in the living-room, reading the Kansas City Times. He glanced up as she emerged, ran an appraising eye over her pale blue suit, and turned back to the newspaper.

"Don't bother to stand up," Whitney said acidly.

He smiled. "Sorry. Most of the women I have breakfast with don't care about that sort of thing. They seem to feel that we've gone beyond formality by that time."

Definitely the self-assured and arrogant type, she fumed.

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“Have a cup of coffee,” he advised. “It will probably make you feel a bit more human. I know it’s difficult, being made to get up so early, but—”

“This is not early.”

“You can say that again. Breakfast?” He folded the newspaper and laid it aside.

She shuddered at the idea of food. “Just coffee for me, thanks.”

“Oh, but I insist.” He piled scrambled eggs and bacon on a plate, added toast, and pushed it across the table towards her.

“I never eat breakfast.”

“You’re probably never up early enough. What is your job at Tyler-Royale, anyway, Miss—?”

“The name is Lattimer. And don’t worry about it; I assure you that I’m qualified to judge your report. Where is it, by the way?”

“Still in my head. I prefer to give my preliminary conclusions orally.”

“Well, I don’t choose to receive them that way. Put everything in writing. I’ll consider it and act as I see fit.”

“When you hear my conclusions, you may not want to have a written record, Miss Lattimer.”

“I can’t imagine why not. And it’s Mrs. Lattimer.” The bacon did smell good, she had to admit. She picked up a crisp piece and broke it into bits.

Max Townsend leaned back in his chair, toying with his coffee spoon. His brown eyes had sharpened, and Whitney could almost see his brain clicking.

Then, abruptly, he relaxed. “Now I have it,” he said comfortably. “You’re Ross’s sister, the Merry Widow.”

“What difference that could possibly make to you is beyond my comprehension.”

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“Oh, it matters a great deal,” he assured her. “I was wondering if Ross had cracked, you see, to have put someone like you in top management. But the fact that you’re his sister explains it all.”

It was perfectly bland, and it was the rankest insult Whitney had ever had to absorb. She bit her lip and then said, quietly, “I’m glad to know that we agree on one thing at least—we share an opinion of each other. But since we do have to work together, Mr. Townsend...”

“Make it Max. The staff would be suspicious at the formality, and we will need to have a united front if we’re to work the miracles it will take to keep this store afloat.”

Whitney set her coffee cup down with a bang. “I don’t know where you got the idea that you are going to revamp this store, Mr. Townsend. Your job is to make your report, and then it is up to the management to decide what to do about it. We have a very effective manager here, and he is quite capable of taking any action that is necessary.”

Max wasn’t looking at her. He was, with careful precision, reassembling the sections of the newspaper into their original order. Then he stood up. “Thanks for breakfast, Mrs. Lattimer,” he said cheerfully.

“What do you mean, thanks for breakfast?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I charged it to your room account. I’ll tell Ross what a—” He paused, and then went on with an ironic twist “—what a pleasure it was to meet you.”

“Where are you going?”

He stopped at the door. “I should have thought it was obvious,” he pointed out. “I’m going back to my office, where I’m going to call Ross and ask him to send someone down who wants to talk.”

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“You haven’t even given me your report yet.”

“Why waste my time? You’ve already decided to do nothing about it.”

Whitney shrugged. “I admit that I can’t take it too seriously. If your conclusions aren’t important enough to write down—”

“I never said they weren’t. I said that I wanted to show you the conditions first. Until you’ve seen them for yourself, the report will be useless. Once I’ve shown you what is going on down there, even you might decide I know what I’m talking about.” His voice was heavy with sarcasm.

“Just what conditions are you referring to?”

He stared at her for a moment, as if trying to make up his mind. “Come on,” he said. “I’ll show you what I mean.”

*This whole episode is a waste of time, Whitney told herself, and as soon as I can talk to Ross, I’ll tell him that.*

But, since she was here, she supposed she might as well see what Max Townsend considered evidence. Then she could cut him to ribbons when she made her report to Ross. So she picked up her handbag and followed him.

“If these conditions you speak of are really there,” Whitney said, pulling the suite door shut behind her, “I assume that you have told the store manager about them?”

“Apparently Ross didn’t fill you in completely. I’ve been working undercover.”

“Behind the manager’s back? Do you mean to tell me that Pete Ward doesn’t even know you’ve been studying the store?”

“That’s right. The fewer people who know, the less chance the news will slip out. Then I can see the store as it really is, and not when it’s on its best behavior.”

“A Tyler-Royale store is always at its best.”

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Max gave her a pitying glance as he opened the door of a small black sports car, but didn't answer.

"Where did you get the financial information?" Whitney asked suddenly. "Or don't you have any of that, yet?"

"From Ross, of course. He sent me the latest balance sheets."

"I can't believe that he went behind Pete's back to plant a spy."

"I am not a spy. And it wasn't Ross's idea. It was my condition for taking on the job."

"Now that I can believe." She maintained a haughty silence until they reached the bustling Country Club Plaza, the blocks-square shopping-area which had been the first planned development of its kind in the country. "Pete Ward is one of our best managers," she said. "I cannot go along with him not knowing about this investigation."

Max gave her a sideways glance. "Are you always this inflexible?" he asked pleasantly. "I suppose you're going to run right in and tell him that he's being used."

Whitney frowned. She didn't like the way Max made it sound. "Not exactly," she said. "But I will tell him why I'm here."

"Well, before you do that," Max said, pulling the sports car into a parking-spot across from the Tyler-Royale store, "why don't you give me another few minutes of your precious time?"

"Doing what?" Whitney asked suspiciously.

"Nothing that you couldn't write home to Mother about, that's sure." Max's voice was dry. "How about a sporting proposition, Mrs. Lattimer? Give me your full attention for ten minutes. If I can't convince you in that time that this store is

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dying, then you can go and talk to Pete Ward, and I'll call Ross and tell him that I've flipped."

The words were jesting, but the tone wasn't. "Dying?" Whitney said quietly. "Do you really think the problem is that severe?"

"I'm not trying to keep you here because of your charm, that's sure."

She ignored the sharpness of his tone. After all, she reminded herself, she was here for the good of Tyler-Royale, and she couldn't leave just because Max Townsend was an arrogant idiot. "All right," she said, "you have ten minutes. Convince me."