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By Rachel Bailey

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Rachel Bailey developed a serious book addiction at a young age and has never recovered. She went on to earn degrees in psychology and social work, but is now living her dream—writing romance for a living. She lives on a piece of paradise on Australia's Sunshine Coast with her hero and four dogs. Rachel can be contacted through her website, www.rachelbailey.com.

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Dylan Hawke had done a few things he regretted in his life, but he had a feeling this one might top the list.

The spotlight shone in his eyes, but he smiled as he'd been instructed and gave a sweeping bow before making his way down the stairs and onto the stage. Applause—and a few cheers that he suspected were from his family—greeted him.

"We'll start the bidding at two hundred dollars," the emcee said from the front of the stage.

Dylan sucked in a breath. *And so it begins.* Step one of rehabilitating his image—donate his time to charity. Now that his brother was marrying a princess, Dylan's own mentions in the media had skyrocketed, and he'd quickly realized his playboy reputation could be a disadvantage for his future sister-in-law and the things she wanted to achieve for homeless children in LA.

"What do I hear for Dylan?" the emcee, a sitcom actor, called out. "Dylan Hawke is the man behind the chain of Hawke's Blooms florists, so we can guarantee he knows about romancing his dates."

A murmur went around the crowded room as several white paddles with black numbers shot into the air. He couldn't see too much detail past the spotlight that shone down on him, but it seemed that the place was full, and that the waiters were keeping the guests' drinks topped off as they moved through the crowd.

"Two fifty, three hundred," the emcee called.

Dylan spotted his brother Liam sitting with his fiancée, Princess Jensine of Larsland. Jenna—who had been hiding incognito as Dylan's housekeeper before she met Liam—gave him a thumbs-up. This was the first fund-raising event of the new charity, the Hawke Brothers Trust, which Jenna had established to raise money for homeless children. Now that she and Liam were to be married, they planned to split their family's time between her homeland and LA, and the trust would utilize the skills she'd gained growing up in a royal family. It would be the perfect project for her—she'd said it was something she could sink her teeth into.

Dylan believed in the cause and believed in Jenna, so his job tonight was to help raise as much money as he could. He just wished he'd been able to do it in a less humiliating way. Like, say, writing a check.

But that method wouldn't help rehabilitate his image.

Which had led him to this moment. On stage in front of hundreds of people. Being sold.

"Five hundred and fifty," the emcee said, pointing at a redhead near the side of the room, whose paddle said sixty-three.

Dylan threw Sixty-Three a wink, and then crossed to where a blonde woman held up her paddle. The emcee called, "Six hundred."

Dylan squinted against the lights. There was something familiar about the blonde… Then it hit him and his gut clenched tight. It was Brittany Oliver, a local network weather girl. They'd been out two or three times a few years ago, but she'd been cloying. When he found out that she was already planning a future and children for them, he'd broken it off. He swallowed hard and sent up a prayer that someone outbid her. Maybe the cute redhead with paddle sixty-three.

He dug one hand in his pocket and flashed a charming smile at the audience—a smile he'd been using to effect since he was fourteen. He was rewarded when a stunning woman with long dark hair and coffee-colored skin raised her paddle. He was starting not to mind being on stage after all.

"Six fifty," the emcee called. "Seven hundred dollars. Seven fifty."

He knew Jenna was hoping for a big amount from this auction to get their charity started with a bang, so he took the rosebud from his buttonhole and threw it into the crowd. It was a cheesy move, but then the bidding happened so quickly that all of a sudden it hit two thousand.

Dylan steeled himself and looked over at Brittany, and sure enough, she was still in the running. He had no idea whether she'd want to chew his ear off for breaking things off or try to convince him they should get back together. Either way, it would be an uncomfortable evening. He should have had a backup plan—a signal to tell Jenna to bid whatever it took if things went awry. He could have reimbursed her later.

"Three thousand four hundred."

It was the redhead. Dylan looked her over. Bright copper hair scraped into a curly ponytail on top of her head, cobalt blue halter top, dark eyes that were wide as she watched the other bidders, and a bottom lip caught between her teeth in concentration. She looked adorable. In his pocket where the audience couldn't see, he crossed his fingers that she won. He could spend an enjoyable evening with her, a nice meal, maybe a drive to a moonlit lookout, maybe a movie.

"Four thousand six hundred."

A flash bulb went off and he smiled, but he needed to get the bidding higher for the trust. He ambled over to the emcee and indicated with a tilt of his head that he had something to say. She covered the mic with her hand and lowered it.

"Make it three dates," he said, his voice low.

Her eyebrows shot up, and then she nodded and raised the mic again. "I've just received information that the package up for auction now consists of three dates."

Over the next few minutes, there was another flurry of raised paddles before the emcee finally said, "Going once, going twice, sold for eight thousand two hundred dollars."

Dylan realized he'd stopped following the bidding and had no idea who'd won.

"Number sixty-three, you can meet Mr. Hawke at the side of the stage to make arrangements. Next we have a

sports star who will need no introduction." The emcee's voice faded into the background as Dylan realized the cute redhead had made the top bid. He grinned.

Maybe turning his reputation around and doing his bit for charity wouldn't be so bad after all.

Faith Crawford stood, adjusted the hem of her halter top over her black pants and slipped between the tables to where Dylan Hawke was waiting for her by the side of the stage.

Her belly fluttered like crazy but she steeled herself and, when she reached him, stuck out her hand.

"Hi, I'm Faith," she said.

Dylan took her hand, but instead of shaking it, he lifted it to his lips and pressed a kiss on the back. "I'm Dylan, and, on behalf of my family, I appreciate your donation to the Hawke Brothers Trust."

He gave her a slow smile and her insides melted, but she tried to ignore her body's reaction. Her body didn't realize that Dylan Hawke was a notorious charmer who had probably used that exact smile on countless women. Which was why her brain was in charge. *Well,* she thought as she looked into his twinkling green eyes, *mostly in charge.*

Dylan released her hand and straightened. "I have a few ideas about places we could go on our first date—"

Faith shook her head. "I know where I want to go."

He arched an eyebrow. "Okay, then. I like a woman who knows what she wants."

Oh, she knew exactly what she wanted. And it wasn't Dylan Hawke, despite how good he looked in that tuxedo. It was what he could do for her career. She'd just made a large investment in her future—having bid most of her savings—and she wouldn't let it go to waste.

He slid a pen out of an inside pocket of his jacket and grabbed a napkin from a nearby table. "Write down your address and I'll pick you up. How does tomorrow night sound?"

The sooner the better. "Tomorrow is good. But instead of picking me up, I'd rather meet you. Let's say in front of your Santa Monica store at seven?"

He grinned, but this time it wasn't a charmer's smile. It was genuine. She liked this one more—she could imagine getting into all sorts of mischief with the man wearing that grin.

"A woman of mystery," he said, rocking back on his heels. "Nice. Okay, Faith Sixty-Three, I'll meet you in front of the Santa Monica Hawke's Blooms store at seven o'clock tomorrow night."

"I'll be there," she said and then turned and walked along the edge of the room to the door, aware that several curious gazes followed her exit. Including Dylan Hawke's. Which was just how she needed him—with his full attention focused on her.

Now all she had to do was keep her own attention soundly focused on her career, and not on getting into mischief with her date and his grin.

Dylan pulled his Porsche into the small parking lot in front of his Santa Monica store. He tried to get around to all thirty-two stores fairly regularly, but given that they were spread from San Francisco to San Diego, it didn't happen as often as it used to, and he couldn't remember exactly when he was last at this one. It looked good, though, and he knew the sales figures were in the top quarter of all the Hawke's Blooms stores.

Movement near the door caught his attention. It was Faith. Her red hair gleamed in the window lights and bounced about her shoulders. She wore a halter-neck summer dress that was fitted in all the right places and flared out over her hips, down to her knees, showing shapely calves atop stylish heels. His pulse picked up speed as he stepped out of his car.

All he knew about this woman was that she liked halter tops, her hair could stop traffic, she was wealthy enough to have spare cash lying around to help out a new charity and her lips could set his blood humming. But damn if he didn't want to know more.

"Evening, Faith," he said, walking around and opening his passenger side door.

She didn't take a step closer, just stood at the shop door looking adorable and said, "We won't be needing your car tonight."

He glanced around—the parking lot was empty. "You have a magic carpet tucked away somewhere?"

"No need," she said brightly. "We're already here."

She dug into her bag and came out with a handful of keys looped together on what looked like plaited ribbons. As he watched in surprise, she stuck a key into the front door, and he heard a click. She stepped in, efficiently disabled the alarm and turned back to him. "Come on in."

Dylan narrowed his eyes, half expecting one of his brothers to jump out and yell "gotcha" because he'd fallen for the prank. But Faith was busy putting her bag behind the counter and switching on lights. Shaking his head, he set the keyless lock on his car, followed her into the store and closed the door behind them. He had no idea what she had planned or what she really wanted out of this date, but for some reason that didn't bother him. This woman was piquing his interest on more than one level—something he hadn't experienced in a long while—and he realized he was enjoying the sensation.

"Who *are* you, Faith Sixty-Three?" he asked, leaning back against the counter and appreciating the way her dress hugged her lush curves.

She faced him then, her cheeks flushed and her warm brown eyes sparkling. "I'm a florist. My name is Faith Crawford and I work for you in this store."

Faith Crawford? That name rang a bell, but he couldn't remember any specifics. He narrowed his eyes. "Mary O'Donnell is the manager here, isn't she?"

"Yep, she's my manager," Faith said over her shoulder as she turned the light on in the storeroom in the back of the shop.

He wrapped a hand around the back of his neck. This had gone past Woman of Mystery and was fast becoming ridiculous. Why would an employee want to spend a purseful of money on a night or three with the boss? Could she have an axe to grind? Was she hoping to sleep her way to a promotion?

He blew out a breath. "How long have you worked for me?"

She turned to face him, standing a little taller. "Six months, Mr. Hawke."

"So you know Hawke's Blooms has a no fraternization policy." A policy he wholeheartedly believed in. "Managers can't be involved with anyone who works for them."

She didn't seem fazed. "I'm aware of that, yes."

"Yet," he pressed, taking a step closer and catching a whiff of her exotic perfume, "you still paid good money for a date—well, three dates—with me."

A small frown line appeared between her brows.

"Nowhere was it specified that they were supposed to be romantic *dates* with the bachelors."

Dylan was about to reply, then realized he was losing control of the conversation. "Then what do you want from me?" he asked warily.

She grabbed a clip from her handbag and pulled her hair back. "I want you to spend the evening here with me."

"Doing what, exactly?" he asked as he watched her clip her red curls, which burst out the top of the clasp in copper-colored chaos.

"Watching."

He felt his eyebrows lift. "I have to warn you, kinky propositions still fall under the no fraternization policy."

Faith rolled her eyes, but he saw the corners of her mouth twitch. "I'll be making a floral arrangement."

Right. As if he didn't get enough of that in his average day. And yet, he thought, glancing at her pale, long fingers, there was something appealing about the idea of watching Faith at work. Her fingers looked as if they'd be gentle yet firm. He could almost feel them on his jaw, then stroking across his shoulders. His skin tingled…and he realized he was getting carried away. This was not a path he could take with an employee—which he'd only just explained to her.

Besides, his attraction was probably a result of being in the store at night, alone, cocooned in the area illuminated by the lights. It couldn't be more.

He rubbed a hand down his face. "Let me get this straight. I know what you're earning, so unless you have a trust fund, your bid was a decent amount of money to you. Yet you paid it to have me sit and watch you do the job that we normally pay you to do."

She beamed at him. "That's it."

"I've missed something," he said, tilting his head to the side. She was becoming more intriguing by the minute.

She opened the fridge door and pulled out buckets of peonies, lilacs and magnolias. "Have you ever had a dream, Mr. Hawke? Something that was all yours and made you smile when you thought about it?"

Users Review

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