

Mason stared at the pair of long legs crossed in front of him. The color was pleasing, like warm maple syrup. He'd always appreciated a good-looking set of legs. Portia's legs were long too but not as shapely and not as dark. In fact, her skin was practically beige. She wouldn't be caught dead in the sun unless she'd slathered herself with a vat of sunblock. But as much as he appreciated the vision of beauty in front of him, he didn't trust her as far as he could throw her. He didn't trust any of Portia's image consultants. He referred to them as "do-over" men – 'cause they wanted to re-do him and make him into something he wasn't. Yeah, do-over men. Only this one wasn't a man. Occupying his living room as if she owned the place; her prim and proper posture was a strange contrast against the calf hair chair she sat in.

"What can I do for you Ms. Davenport?"

"I think you know why I'm here, Mr. Kincaid. Your fiancée hired me. The question is, are you going to make my job hard or easy?"

"You get straight to the point. At least Barron spoke to me nicely."

"And look where that got him."

Mason's lips twitched toward a smile, but stopped just short of the target. He was both surprised and intrigued by her directness. Most females ran for cover if he barely raised his voice. Jewell Davenport had balls. Okay, she might be worthy of his respect. But that still didn't mean he could trust her. He sat across from her and propped his Stetson boots on a nearby table that was designed from a tree stump. "So Portia hired you to get me in line?"

"It's not polite to put your feet on the furniture, Mr. Kincaid."

He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "Is this lesson number one?"

"Actually, the first lesson I'd planned to cover was communication etiquette. I'll review subjects like communication in business and social settings. We'll also touch on conversation

skills, telephone etiquette, email etiquette, thank you notes, making introductions, and other aspects of interpersonal communication.”

“Whatever she’s paying you, I’ll double it if you leave now.”

Her pretty mouth dropped open and she stared at him like he’d grown steer horns. “What is your problem with learning something new?”

“This ain’t nothing new. Good manners have been around since the beginning of time. I just choose not to adhere to them. And as far as my communication skills, in my world, the people who want to do business with me don’t have no problems with my etiquette. They like makin’ money, just like me.”

“Money’s not everything.”

“Then why’d you take this job? Apparently, you must need it.”

She looked him squarely in the eyes. “Let’s just say I enjoy a challenge.”

Mason saw a glimmer of determination flicker in her chestnut colored irises. He believed her. There was something driving this woman. Maybe it was raw ambition. Maybe it was the lure of a challenge. Maybe it was the fact that she wanted to prove something to herself – or to someone else. Who knew what fueled the minds of women? They were fickle creatures.

He stood. “Well, you’re a lot prettier than the last three fools. I wouldn’t mind indulging you, but I’m too busy. I have a company to run.”

“What’s the point of making all this money if you don’t make time to enjoy it?”

“Oh, I enjoy it plenty,” he assured her. “It might not be your idea of a good time. I work hard so I can play hard. When I’m not working, I’m hunting or fishing or reading a good book.”

“Oh?” One of her dainty eyebrows shot up. “What authors do you read?”

“It damn sure ain’t Shakespeare.”

She smiled. "I don't read Shakespeare either. I prefer Tennessee Williams."

"My point is I don't need to have tea and crumpets to be educated."

"I never for one moment thought you were uneducated. Any man who owns a conglomerate of companies, manages a thirty-five hundred acre ranch, and raises ten thousand head of cattle can't be a dummy."

He snorted. "So, I'm smart, but ill-mannered?"

"You said it, not me."

"But you believe it."

"Based on what I've seen in the last twenty minutes, I do."

"No one enjoys being told how crude other folks think they are." He walked toward a small humidor that sat on a heavy desk in the corner of the room and he pulled out a cigar.

She gasped. "You're not going to smoke that are you?"

He snorted. "The thought had crossed my mind."

"Ever heard of second-hand smoke?" She stood and approached him and plucked the cigar from his fingers. The scent of her flowery perfume teased his nostrils. "In case you weren't aware, puffing plumes of smoke from your mouth is socially undesirable – not to mention unhealthy. Oh, and it's definitely not smart. Don't make me revoke my previous assumption of your intelligence."

"You may not realize it, but God already gave me a mama. I don't need another." He pulled a second cigar from the box. He had plenty more where this one came from.

"What made you start this disgusting habit?"

"I had to do something after I gave up chewing tobacco."

“Oh God!” Her pretty brown eyes pulsed with astonishment. “Wait a minute. You’re just saying that on purpose to appall me.”

Secretly, Mason enjoyed the look of disbelief on her face. Portia was shocked by a lot of the things he did, but she usually crawled back into her fur-lined shell and hid until the crisis was over. Jewell called his bluff. “Somehow, I get the feelin’ that no matter what I do, you’ll be shocked. But I admit I was pullin’ your leg.”

She visibly breathed a sigh of relief and wagged her slender, manicured forefinger at him. “All leg-pulling aside, I need thirty minutes of your time for today’s lesson. Going forward, I’ll work around your busy schedule. But I’ll warn you, each session needs to be at least one hour in duration if we hope to see any real results.”

“We? Isn’t this your project?”

She pursed her lips. “If you want to please your fiancée, this has to be a joint effort.”

He quietly regarded her for a moment. The spaghetti strapped yellow dress she wore warmed up the room like a ray of sunshine. The modest hemline brushed the tops of her knees; it was the perfect length for showcasing her shapely legs. It fit her curvy figure in all the right places and it showed off her nice rack. Racks were his second favorite attribute on a woman. The gold choker resting seductively in the hollow of her neck was the only thing that pulled his eyes from her generous cleavage.

“Let’s start with business etiquette,” she said, interrupting his thoughts. “Pretend I’m a business associate you’ve just met. How would you greet me?”

*Fine, I’ll indulge her just this once.* He reached forward and vigorously pumped her tiny hand. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am.”

“Ouch!” She winced in pain as she pulled her right hand away and cradled it in her left palm. “I’m a human being, not a gas pump! You can’t just go manhandling me.”

He tried again, this time with a softer touch.

“Now your hand feels like a limp noodle,” Jewell complained. “When you shake a woman’s hand, respect her like a man, only apply less pressure.”

“I never had any complaints before,” he growled.

“Of course not. No one’s going to complain. They’ll just talk about you behind your back and then quietly go the emergency room to get their broken bones tended to.” She used both of her hands to shake one of his. “Our palms should firmly touch,” she directed. “Your fingers should wrap around mine and squeeze lightly for a brief second. If the contact is too quick, a woman will think you don’t like her. Conversely, if your fingers linger too long, the woman will think you’re trying to hit on her. Let’s try it again.”

This time Mason shook her hand as instructed. Her skin felt soft and warm in his big callused hand. “Better?”

“Much. Your handshake speaks volumes about you. It tells people what kind of man you are even before you open your mouth. Which brings us to the next lesson. Don’t say, ‘Please to meet you, ma’am.’ The word *ma’am* makes women feel old. Not to mention it makes you sound like a hick.”

He scowled. “I’ve been talkin’ like this for years and I’ve gotten along just fine.”

“*Fine* isn’t good enough when you’re marrying into the Rothchild family. You need to be exemplary. Please practice these tips I’ve just shown you on any brave females you may know.”

Mason glared at her. “Is that all?”

“For now.” She retrieved her handbag from a nearby chair. “We don’t have much time before the wedding. I’ll need to see you at least three times a week. Let’s meet again tomorrow. What time works best for you?”

“No time. I’m busy at the auction tomorrow. Bidding on heifers all day.”

Jewell was unmoved. “Which auction house?”

*As if she actually knew where it was.*

“C&E Land and Cattle.”

“Near Baytown?”

He couldn’t hide his surprise. “You heard of it?”

She smiled. “Of course. My office is only twenty minutes from there. Just take 10 West toward downtown and exit Main Street.” She held her business card out. “The address is printed at the bottom.”

*Damn.* Just like that she’d roped him in. “I’ll be there around four,” he begrudged her.

“Make it five,” she ordered. “And bring a coat and tie.”

“Now, look here lady –”

“I know, I know,” she said walking toward the door. “You’re just excited as me. See you soon.”

Mason watched Jewell Davenport sashay from the room. He assumed she would let herself out and climb back into that fancy black BMW she had parked out front. All his life he’d prided himself on being a good judge of character. He could size somebody up in less than ten minutes. She was different. He couldn’t quite get a read on her. But he did know a few things: She was sexy, she was mean, and she was downright bossy. He figured in about ten seconds, her

ears would be burning. But right now she was too far away to hear the curse words he muttered under his breath.