

A CATERED ROMANCE

CHAPTER ONE

“You offered our company to Sackett Industries? Gail, how could you? I'd rather go under than sell to them.” Mary Beth Kendrick smoothed an unsteady hand over her hair and scowled at her friend and business partner.

Gail O'Connell folded her arms across her chest and glared back. “Get your redhead's temper under control. We'll go under unless we do something fast. As equal partner, I can't sell without you, but I refuse to lie down and die. I thought you were more of a fighter too.”

Gail's retort brought quick tears to Mary Beth's eyes. Trying to hide her face, she turned toward the window. Pedestrians hurried by in the spring sunshine on the street outside their catering shop. How could they look so happy when her world was crumbling like a piece of stale cake?

A few hours ago their biggest client had cancelled. Now this. Tom Sackett. She'd heard he was back in town. Wasn't it enough that he'd hurt and humiliated her so badly years before?

“Mary Beth?”

She let out a deep sigh and turned at Gail's touch on her arm. Gail didn't know what Tom had once meant to her. She couldn't take her anger and frustration out on her friend. “I'm sorry. It's been a real bad day.”

Mary Beth patted Gail's arm, then walked to one of the large chintz chairs and sank into the thick cushions. She gripped the chair arms, finding no comfort in the satin smoothness of the fabric. Her gaze scanned the small reception area with its flowered drapes and chairs, pale greens and peaches. An English country garden, the decorator had said. More like an abandoned garden now. A new competitor had blown into town six months ago and plucked all the flowers, leaving her and Gail with the weeds...and lots of bills. Even the usually soothing lavender potpourri seemed to have lost its potency.

The kitchen in the back was state of the art -- all gleaming white and stainless steel. And rarely used now. They'd had such hopes when they'd moved into these new, upscale quarters and expanded their business. Now, a year later, they had few customers and almost no money.

Gail plopped into a chair facing her. “The financial officer from Sackett approached me while you were at your mother's yesterday. He said they wanted to invest in some small businesses and ours had potential.” Her dimples flashed in a fleeting smile. “You have to agree we have potential.”

Gail raked fingers through her curly blonde hair, her expression serious

again. “We're in hock to our eyeballs. I used up all of Pete's and my savings. You used all your money. None of the banks will give us a loan. We can declare bankruptcy and admit defeat. Is that what you want?”

“Of course it's not what I want.” Mary Beth rubbed her aching temples where the beginnings of a major headache pounded. “We've poured our blood and guts into this place. I don't mind the killer hours because it's our company, our dream.” She blew out a breath. “I have no appetite for going back to taking orders from chefs who just want to get the food out, assembly-line style. But I can't sell to Sackett. Anybody but them.”

Tight lines etched around Gail's mouth. “Why not? Sackett is one of the strongest companies in Delaware. They're offering us a chance to stay free, to make our dream come true.”

“I know,” Mary Beth said. “It's just...I went to high school with Tom Sackett.” Saying his name boiled the old feelings of love, hope, and betrayal into a stew of conflicting emotions, tightening her stomach.

“That's good, right?”

“We didn't part friends. I can't forget what Tom did. I don't trust him.”

“Suppose you tell me about it.”

Mary Beth shook her head. “I can't.” To dredge up the past would force her to relive the old pain she'd fought so hard to overcome.

Gail shot her a look filled with determination and quiet desperation. “Don't pull the stubborn act on me. Our future depends on this.”

Guilt stabbed at Mary Beth's gut. She owed Gail. A lot. Clasp ing her hands tightly together, she said, “Tom belonged to the rich, cool crowd at St. Anselm's Prep. I attended on a hardship grant. I fell in love with him when I tutored him in English junior year. We started dating the middle of senior year. It bothered me that we never went out with his friends. I wondered if they even knew about us, but I was so crazy for him, I shrugged off my doubts.

“When Tom asked me to the graduation formal, I was ecstatic. I figured he must care for me, too, and was ready to tell the world. Was I ever wrong.” She blinked away tears.

“What happened?” Gail asked softly.

Mary Beth pressed her hands against her stomach and fought for control. “We had fun that night. At first, Tom and I danced and laughed. I ignored the snickers and sly looks from his friends. He took me out to the patio where we could be alone. We kissed.”

She touched her lips, remembering that kiss, remembering that night. Bittersweet sorrow spread through her. “A magical kiss filled with love, hope, and dreams. I told him I loved him and wanted to spend my life with him.” She chewed her lip. “To this day, I can't believe I said that. It makes me want to gag.”

“You were a teenager,” Gail said. “Young girls tend to be melodramatic. What did Tom say?”

“Nothing. He didn't have to. His friends said it for him.” Anger made bile rise in Mary Beth's throat.

Gail sat straighter. “What do you mean?”

“Tom set me up. We weren't alone. His friends stood watching. When I made my lovesick declaration, they clapped and laughed. Cash changed hands as bets were paid off. I've always wondered how much money Tom made off my torment.”

Mary Beth's stomach twisted with anger and sadness for the naïve young girl who'd been so in love, and so casually used.

Gail leaned over and placed one of her hands on Mary Beth's. “Honey, I'm so sorry. That was cruel. Did Tom ever apologize?”

Mary Beth shook her head. “I left for the beach with my mom the next day. We planned to stay with my aunt while I looked for a summer job.” She furrowed her brow as humiliation washed over her. “We got behind in the rent and were evicted. That's why we moved in with my aunt. Our utilities were disconnected too.” She swallowed. “I haven't seen Tom since that night.”

Gail's hand tightened over hers. “Maybe he tried to call you, but couldn't because your phone was disconnected. Maybe he came to your place looking for you, but you'd gone.”

“I stopped torturing myself with maybes long ago.”

Gail gave her a long, searching look. “Do you still love him?”

“No!” Mary Beth yanked her hand away.

Gail continued to study her. “They say living well is the best revenge. Show Tom the strong, independent woman you've become. Listen to what Sackett has to offer. If we refuse to even talk to them, Tom's cruelty twelve years ago will hurt you all over again. And he will still have power over you.”

Mary Beth tugged on her braid where it rested on her shoulder. Did she have the strength to face Tom again, to reopen the wounds that had bled her heart dry so many years before?

She straightened her shoulders. Her friend was right. They had to fight to keep their dream alive. She wasn't an insecure teenager anymore. Tom couldn't hurt her again.

Gail's gray gaze held hers. “Mary Beth, if we lose this place and you can't find a job right away, how will you support your mother and pay her medical bills?”

“I don't know. I doubt the hospital will give me another extension on my payment.”

A mischievous glint lit Gail's eyes. “If you can't afford your apartment,

you'll have to move in with your mother.”

“You play dirty.”

“I know which buttons to push.”

Mary Beth rose from her chair. “Okay, we'll talk to Sackett. Tom might not even be involved. He probably has others do the work for him.”

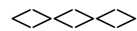
Gail's face flushed pink. “Oh.”

“Oh, what?”

“They want to meet with us tomorrow.”

“They?”

“That financial guy and Tom Sackett.”



“Nice place you have here.”

Mary Beth jumped at the sound of the deep male voice behind her. Water from the pot she was filling sloshed onto the floor. She dropped the pot into the sink and jerked the faucet shut, then gripped the counter edge.

His voice. Richer, mellowed, smooth as the finest wine. Warming her with old memories, old yearnings. She was eighteen again. In love. Dreaming of a life by his side. Until he betrayed her.

Anger, like boiling water spilled on her lap, jolted her. Biting on her lip, she turned slowly to face Tom Sackett.

He filled the doorway, his masculine power reaching out, drawing her in as it always had. Despite his aristocratic breeding and elegantly tailored suit, he still had the look of the renegade about him. His thick black hair curled around his ears and trailed down his neck, a trifle too long. The hot, deep blue of his eyes scorched her.

Lifting her chin, she willed starch into her spine. “You're early,” she said, glancing at the clock. “The meeting isn't for another half hour. My partner's not here yet.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Hello to you too. That's not much of a greeting after twelve years.”

She placed a hand on her hip. “As I recall, our last meeting was less than cordial.”

His jaw tightened. “People change, Mary Beth.”

“Do they?”

“Believe it.” The determined set of his rugged features stopped any further argument. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” She tugged on her braid, trying to gain control of her emotions. For the sake of her company, she wouldn't let her feelings interfere. “We have a business deal to negotiate. Nothing more.”

Tom's harsh features softened. He scanned her face, making her wonder if

her tension showed. "You're more beautiful than I remember."

Awareness and a flash of anger shot through her. She dug her nails into her palms. "Saving my company is my primary concern."

"Mine too," he said. "A businessman expects a return on his investment." He strode into the kitchen with the confidence born of inherited wealth and family standing.

Squaring her shoulders, Mary Beth fought the onslaught of old hurts. She'd grown up in the years since he'd humiliated her. Her family might not have his social connections, but her poverty-stricken upbringing had made her strong. Strong enough to fight for her professional life and keep her pride -- and her heart - - intact.

"Coffee smells good. May I have a cup?" Tom straddled one of the high stools surrounding the white-tiled center counter.

Glad to do something to distract her from past memories and Tom's disturbing presence, she grabbed a heavy white mug from the cabinet and poured a steaming cup of vanilla almond coffee. "Just cream, right?"

"You remembered," he said.

"A lucky guess." She handed him the mug. His fingers grazed hers as he took it, sending heat racing up her arm.

She escaped to the opposite side of the kitchen and leaned against the counter edge. The citrus scent of his cologne lingered in her nostrils, stirring up the unwanted memory of their kiss at the formal. But the sweet kiss that had promised love and dreams fulfilled had been tainted with betrayal.

A new dread suddenly filled her. "I won't take charity, Tom. If this is about payback, there will be no deal."

She wanted to wince at her overly dramatic words. Seeing Tom again peeled away the years, bringing out the teenager in her. She had to get a grip.

He stared at her over the rim of his mug, then banged the cup on the counter. Coffee spilled over the sides onto the clean white tile.

"I'm a lawyer and a businessman. I don't gamble with my firm's money." The intensity in his sapphire eyes held her. "I've checked your company out," he continued. "Talked to people. You have the potential to be big, but you're over-extended. That's where Sackett comes in. We'll help you get on your feet. You have to look successful to be successful."

Mary Beth angled her chin, still not ready to believe him. "Sackett Industries doesn't invest in small businesses like ours."

He shrugged and swallowed a sip of coffee. "Sackett owns a diverse portfolio of companies. Catering will mesh well with our other holdings. We do a lot of corporate entertaining. We could use an in-house caterer."

She studied him to assess the truth of his words. The confident set of his jaw

spoke of a strength and maturity eighteen-year-old Tom had lacked. Maybe he'd changed after all.

Stop it her brain shouted. Dreams of Tom had only caused her pain in the past. She wouldn't go down that path again.

She pulled another mug from the cabinet and grabbed the coffeepot to pour some coffee for herself. Hot liquid splashed on her hand, scalding her. She jumped.

"Are you okay?" The stool scraped the floor as Tom stood up and started toward her.

"I'm fine," she rasped, waving him away. She didn't want him close to her, not while she felt so vulnerable...and angry. Angry at him and at the circumstances that had brought him into her life again. She yanked on the faucet and held her hand under cold water.

"This kitchen is great," he said. "I'm planning to renovate mine. Maybe you could come over sometime and give me your professional opinion."

"I don't think so." She wiped her hands on a towel and faced him. "If we work out a deal -- and I'm not at all sure about that -- I will not be at your beck and call to help decorate your house, or perform any other duties."

"You always did have too much pride for your own good," he said quietly.

She met his gaze and held it, refusing to look away despite the small seed of awareness growing in her. "Pride got me through school and it will get me through this. I won't be dependent on you, or anyone, for long."

His lips quirked in a crooked grin. "A little bit of overreaction, Mary Beth?"

She tugged on her braid. The man had a way of making her lose her cool.

He studied her. "You always tugged on your braid when you were nervous. Do I make you nervous?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

Before he had a chance to respond, Gail bounded into the room, her blonde curls dancing around her delicate face. She looked from Tom to Mary Beth. "Hi. I'm not late, am I?"

"You're not late. He's early." Mary Beth nodded toward Tom.

"Tom Sackett," he said, holding out his hand.

"Gail O'Connell. I'm the 'and Company' in Kendrick and Company Caterers and Party Planners."

He laughed. "Glad to meet you." His quick smile made Gail dimple with pleasure.

Resentment knifed through Mary Beth. Tom could charm the apples out of a fresh-baked pie.

"How's Joey?" Mary Beth blurted.

"His fever broke now that the antibiotics have kicked in." Gail pulled her hand from Tom's. "Joey is my five-year-old," she explained. "My husband is out of

town and I had trouble finding a sitter. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“No problem. My financial officer's not here yet.” Tom settled back on the stool. “I got here early to check out the place and talk over old times with Mary Beth.”

Mary Beth narrowed her eyes. *Old times?* Hardly times she'd want to reminisce about. The future, her company's future, was all that mattered now.

Gail threw her a knowing look. She ignored it. “We should get ready for the meeting.” Mary Beth opened one of the cabinets and pulled out a teak serving tray and several more mugs.

“Coffee smells good,” Gail said. “I'll get the petit fours.”

Gail took the plate of dainty cakes from the refrigerator and set them on the counter in front of Tom. “I'm the pastry chef. Mary Beth couldn't bake her way out of a burning oven, but the girl sure can cook.”

“Mary Beth always did everything well,” Tom said. “Her intelligence scared the hell out of me in school. So did her beauty.” His gaze, hot as a blue flame, locked with Mary Beth's.

Uncomfortable under his scrutiny, she looked away. “There will be four of us at the meeting, right?” Trying to get her mind off Tom and the heat that swirled between them, she set mugs and a carafe on the tray. Keeping busy would also distract her from the overwhelming sadness and frustration that the business she had struggled to conceive and build might owe its survival to the man who'd mortally wounded her young heart.

She groaned inwardly. She was thinking like an over-dramatic teen again. Maybe Tom hadn't mortally wounded her, but his betrayal had kept her from completely trusting any man despite the two serious relationships she'd had since him. No, she had to be honest -- her father's actions had peeled away her trust. Tom had merely pulverized what was left.

“How long have you two been partners?” Tom asked in a cool voice. Mary Beth glanced at him. The rigid set of his chiseled features gave no hint of the longing that had softened them a minute ago.

She let out her breath, convinced tension had her imagination working overtime. Tom didn't care for her, had never cared for her.

She poured coffee into the carafe, concentrating on the steady stream of hot liquid and trying to ignore the small drips of hurt that seemed to burn her heart.

“To answer your question,” Gail said, “as my usually vocal partner seems to have lost her voice, we've been friends since college and attended the Culinary Institute together. Mary Beth opened the business two years ago and I bought in six months later.” She pushed the plate of pastries toward Tom. “Here, try one of these.”

Tom popped a small cake into his mouth. The surprised pleasure on his face

made the women exchange grins.

“Wow!” He licked his lips.

His tongue gliding over his full lips made Mary Beth's knees wobble like half-set gelatin. She gripped the counter for support and stared at Tom's mouth. What would it be like to kiss him again?

Their eyes met. Awareness sizzled and crackled between them, charging the atmosphere liked downed power lines after a storm.

“Cakes are good, huh?” Gail said.

Mary Beth blinked, breaking the connection with Tom.

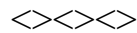
Seeming oblivious to the charged interplay between Tom and Mary Beth, Gail rearranged the cakes on the plate and continued talking. “My husband, Pete, gained ten pounds the first couple of months after I bought into the business. He was our official taster. He gave up the job and joined the gym.”

Bless Gail for rambling. Trying to get control over her emotions, Mary Beth fingered the gold chain at her neck, her last gift from her father, and her reminder to always guard her heart.

“Can I apply for the position of official taster?” Tom's words teased, but his voice was husky and his gaze lingered on Mary Beth.

“We wouldn't want you to ruin your manly physique,” Gail said.

Mary Beth's gaze seemed to have a will of its own, attaching itself to Tom's broad shoulders. The designer cut of his expensive suit couldn't disguise the width of his chest or the barely leashed power of his muscles under the finely woven wool jacket and brushed cotton shirt. She swallowed as if she could somehow dilute the attraction she felt for him.



“Well, that's done.” Mary Beth put her feet on the oak coffee table in the reception area. With the pleated shades drawn, the only light came from the small lamp on the side table. The room reflected her mood, somber and shadowed. “I feel like I've signed away my firstborn.”

Gail sighed. “You're the one who gave birth to this baby. Even though I'm just the foster mother, I feel bad.”

“When you bought in, you became an equal partner,” Mary Beth said. “You love this business as much as I do.”

“And it's just as heart-wrenching to lose it.” Gail tucked a blonde curl behind her ear.

Mary Beth leaned her head back on the cushioned chair and closed her eyes. “At least we still own a small portion and we've got creative license.”

“Sackett Industries was surprisingly fair,” Gail said.

“They know better than to change a winning recipe.” Mary Beth sat up and looked at Gail, sitting opposite her. “A year ago we were the new darlings on the

block, with more business than we could handle, and now we don't even have controlling interest in our own company. How did we let this happen?"

"Maybe we got too sure of ourselves," Gail said. "We ignored those 'flash and dash' caterers when they breezed in with their glitzy Philadelphia style and edge."

"Their food is terrible," Mary Beth said. "Remember the roast beef at the Larson wedding? Ugh. And they use canned mushrooms. Here, so close to where they grow the best mushrooms in the country. But people don't seem to notice."

"Because they're fooled by the pretty wrappings. Some people would rave over cardboard if it were wrapped fancy. Now with Sackett's money and influence, we can give them glitter too. Only we have substance behind our packaging."

"Sackett," Mary Beth said in a low voice. Tom. Appealing. Dangerous. Her boss.

She tightened her jaw. "This is only a temporary situation. As soon as we can, we'll buy back our business. I will not be dependent on any man, especially Tom Sackett."

Gail put up a hand. "Don't bite off my head. Since I've known you, you've had this thing about making your own way. You've scared off a lot of good men with your stubborn self-reliance. Maybe you should loosen up a little."

"Never. Besides, I wouldn't want a man I could intimidate."

Gail's mouth quirked into a grin. "Maybe you've met your match."

"What do you mean?"

"Tom. He impressed me in the meeting. He's strong, forceful, a take-charge kind of guy. And he's fair. I like him."

Mary Beth narrowed her eyes at Gail. "I told you what he did to me. He's not the paragon of virtue you think."

"He was eighteen. People grow up."

"What would Pete say if he knew how outrageously you flirted with Tom?"

"Pete knows I love him. And I wasn't flirting. I was just responding to a delicious hunk with a killer smile."

A small kernel of jealousy opened in Mary Beth. So what if Gail found Tom attractive? She didn't care what other women thought of him. She didn't care about him in any way, except what he could do for her business.

"And you, my dear, sprouted green horns," Gail said with a laugh.

"What?" Mary Beth bolted upright.

"Don't act the innocent with me." Gail's eyes crinkled with amusement. "I wasn't in the room two minutes when you asked about Joey. You wanted to be sure Tom knew I was married, and therefore unavailable." With a smug look on her face, she crossed her arms.

"Joey is my godson. I'm concerned about him. And you brought up the

subject of your husband.”

“I know you care about Joey,” Gail said. “But the way you blurted it out was a little obvious, although I don't think Tom noticed. Men are clueless about those things.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.” Mary Beth shifted uncomfortably, wishing she could ignore the inner voice that screamed her friend was right.

Unable to sit still, Mary Beth jumped from the chair and stalked to the window. The truth of Gail's words was hard to digest.

She rubbed her forehead as if she could erase the confusion tumbling around her mind. Tom meant nothing to her, nothing at all.

Pulling up one of the shades, she stared out. The street lamps cast a pale glow on the dusk-filled sidewalk. Like her life now -- pale shadows with no clear definition.

Sirens cut the quiet, adding an edge and danger to the air. Tom was like the sirens. Dangerous. Ready to wreak havoc on her heart.

She was older and wiser now. She would never let him get close enough to hurt her again.

“Mary Beth?” Gail stood behind her. “I was just teasing. I didn't realize Tom still meant something to you.”

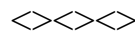
She whirled around. “He means nothing more than a business arrangement. Tom Sackett may have supplied the ingredients to get our careers cooking again, but he has no other place in my life.”

“Okay.” Gail shrugged and a grin split her face. “Why are we acting like gloom and doom? We're back in business. Give me a high five!”

Forcing a lighter mood, Mary Beth exchanged high fives with Gail. “Let's toast with that champagne we've been saving. Those upstart caterers from Philadelphia may have stolen our customers, but we're taking ours back, and theirs too. We'll show this town what real cooks are made of.”

“Way to go,” Gail said. “With Sackett's financing, we'll be the toast of Wilmington and beyond. And we'll make tons of money.”

Mary Beth followed her to the kitchen. “And we'll buy our company back.” She would take care of herself. She wouldn't end up like her mother.



The traffic from Delaware into Pennsylvania was heavy for a Thursday evening. Tom rubbed his hand on the back of his neck to relieve his tense muscles.

He should have bought a house in Wilmington near the family. But after years of living in New York City, he wanted peace, solitude, country. The rolling hills of nearby Chadds Ford suited him perfectly.

How much peace would he have now that he'd seen Mary Beth Kendrick again? Cat Eyes. What would she do if she knew his secret name for her? He

smiled. Probably slash his face.

She'd always been a spitfire. A red-haired dynamo with flashing green eyes and full, soft lips that begged him to kiss her.

Memories of kissing Mary Beth burned him. He tightened his grip on the steering wheel. Their kiss at the formal had been something else. Special. Hot with longing. Her passion, sweetness and wide-eyed trust had filled him with pride and a need to protect her and hold her close forever. He'd known before she said the words that she loved him.

And then the others ruined it. He hadn't realized they were there, watching. He should have gone after her. But anger and disbelief had stunned him. Despite how hard he'd tried to overcome the barriers between them, she was so ready to believe the worst of him, and she'd fled before he'd had a chance to explain. The accusation and hurt in her eyes that night still haunted him.

Selfish fears had frozen him and he'd let her run away, out of his life. And then there was the accident. By the time his dad was out of danger, Mary Beth had disappeared.

He'd spent the past twelve years proving his worth to the world, to himself and to his family, making amends for the spoiled, arrogant, wild kid he'd once been.

But only one person's opinion mattered now. He hadn't realized Mary Beth still harbored such resentment. The fight would be harder than he'd anticipated, but he'd earn her respect and forgiveness.

Tom slammed on his brakes, almost colliding with the car in front. The other driver made a rude gesture. Tom frowned. He needed to concentrate on the road and not let thoughts of Mary Beth distract him.

He twisted his mouth in a wry smile. Hell, she'd been distracting him since the first time he saw her in the school hall when he was fourteen. He'd bumped into a door, mesmerized by her green cat eyes and her thick red braid, and that sexy body.

Long ago he'd thrown away any chance with her. He owned her company, but he'd never own her heart.