

## Strictly Business Book Excerpt

### Chapter One

"I don't want a woman I can fall in *love* with, Giavonni. I want *you*."

Was he propositioning her or trying to insult her? Or had she even heard him right?

Kia Giavonni fingered a piece of lint from her dark coveralls, and then suddenly flicked it away with her fingertip. She watched it slowly float to the floor, as though it were important to watch, as though he were unimportant to listen to.

Joseph Cunningham III's words reverberated through her head like a bullet, but she'd never let him know it. Nor would he see the slight tremble of her hands, for she quickly hid them in her pockets. Nor would he know the speed at which her heart was hammering. She controlled it, quickly. She hated herself for trembling. Cunningham had just taken their relationship a step further, and she wasn't prepared to deal with that step.

Okay, so she hadn't been paying attention to most of his little speech. *Heck*, she didn't have the slightest idea what he was talking about. She hadn't heard him except those last two sentences. That was enough. She knew an insult when she heard one. What was he trying to pull now?

She shot him a quick sneer. Just because he owned this godforsaken factory didn't mean he could dish out insults at his convenience. Without thinking, Kia stood up, glanced at him, then strode across the space between them and slapped him on his cheek.

Peppermint permeated the air. She needed to concentrate on his reactions. But the peppermint momentarily distracted her.

Her hand stung from the contact with his cheek, but she ignored it, focusing on his stunned reactions instead. Good. At least she shocked him. He couldn't maintain his facade.

Yet, he quickly recovered. Managing a certain amount of affability, only his glance narrowed on her.

"I've offended you? I'm sorry for that. I just didn't expect such a typical female reaction from you!" His voice was patronizing

As lame as it was, it was an apology and it shocked Kia to hear it from him.

He could take his apology and shove it. Whatever he was talking about, she didn't want to hear it. She headed straight for the door. Then she made a fatal mistake. She hesitated. She turned to look at him. Wrong decision! Looking at him had always been a mistake, because as mad as she might be, her body always reacted to his male potency. A fact she didn't like to admit.

"Please hear me out."

Cunningham rarely said 'please', and never said 'sorry'. So what was he up to?

She hadn't been paying attention. *Dammit*, she didn't want to pay attention! She didn't like the way this conversation was going. They'd always managed to keep their conversations on a strictly business level. She liked it that way. Something forewarned her that letting it drift any other way could be lethal.

Perhaps she had misunderstood. Surely, she had misunderstood.

"We always seem to raise sparks when we're around each other, don't we, Giavonni? I can't understand why. We both want what's best for the company," he said and continued raking a hand through his cropped brown hair, his action bringing her attention to him again. He had nice hair, combed high and back, making her hand itch to disrupt it. She wondered how it might feel sifting through her fingers.

"Yes, but with one big exception. I want what's best for the people, you want what's best for the Cunninghams." She kept her tone neutral, and shoved her hands into her pockets as she sat back down.

"Isn't that one and the same?"

His voice cajoled smoother than a glass of Kentucky bourbon. She didn't trust him. He was too darned smooth. She'd heard rumors he could be charming when he tried, although he'd never bothered pouring his charm on her. Why now, and why her?

She scanned the endless rows of books on the heavy bookshelf behind him; better than looking at him. He was too good looking. She needed to find fault with him. His nose was big, but accommodated the wide-set gray eyes, and the generous curve to his lips. Sensual lips that beckoned a woman's attention. Her mind scattered. As usual, her body totally reacted to the man. It always had. Her mind raced to squash the awareness.

Momentarily distracted by the mass of books, she stalled. Not that she thought they were that interesting but looking at him any longer would be a mistake. She wondered if he read them, or were they merely for looks. No, he would have

read them all, down to the last detail, she quickly decided. He could probably quote half of them by heart, as well educated as he was.

But there were plenty of things not to like about the man. Not only was he the closest thing to a playboy in Relief, Texas, he was quite possibly the smartest man within miles, too. When he finished college, his accomplishments were all over the front of the local papers. Kia had choked on them. Furthering her education had been a priority in her life, once. A dream she had to vacate when the realities of life set in.

"As far as I'm concerned you aren't making much sense." Her voice reeked with sarcasm.

All wasted, from the looks of it.

Just being in the same room with this man, sent a spark to the dry tinder in the air. It had always been like this, this friction between them. Though physically attracted to him, emotionally she ran from the sight of him. He was dangerous to her way of thinking, and much too much like her father.

They'd fought many battles out on the floor, where she felt equal. She wasn't afraid of him, only her reaction to him physically.

Yet, somehow being alone in the same room with him seemed different. It felt as though all the air had swooshed out of the room, leaving her breathless, as though she were at risk of losing something--her sanity--her heart. Nah, she couldn't lose her heart to a man like him. Impossible!

Still, she had to admit she didn't like what being around Cunningham did to her senses. She wanted to ignore the female reactions and concentrate on not liking him. That was easier, safer.

Better to focus her attention on her surroundings again. Funny, as old as this factory was, the air should have been musty in here, too, or at the very least stuffy. But it was neither. In fact, it smelled clean and polished.

He continued to study her for a long moment with a look that unglued. Why did he have to make her feel so feminine--so aware of being a woman? Dressed in coveralls, dirty and sweaty from a hard day's work, she felt at a disadvantage. It was a constant reminder of their differences.

She knew what he stood for, too; the same things her father stood for; power, ambition, and a touch of greed. She'd survived it once. She wanted no part of it now.

"Look, I need your co-operation, Kia. I'm not getting into a fight with you. Those days are over. And you're not going to like what I'm about to say. So, brace yourself."

"Cut the dramatics. I've never liked much of what you've had to say. Just spit it out. I'd like to go home today."

"Try to be open-minded about what I am going to say, okay?"

Kia wanted to get out of here. The air was stifling and it was hot. "Look, you wanna fire me for protesting the overtime for the third time this week? For the bathrooms last week, the unfair and unequal pay raises around here? You want me to shut my mouth? Well, go ahead--say it. I figured you'd get around to it sooner or later. I wondered what took you so long. But don't play games with me."

He moved from around the desk toward her. "If only it were that simple, Kia. Going a round or two with you might be stimulating, but not practical. No, I'm not about to fire you. And I'm not playing. You're a damned good employee. I'd have to be blind not to know that."

"Well, *damn*, boss, shut my mouth."

"*Dammit*, Kia, I'm serious." He moved closer, dangerously closer. "Let's get back to why you're here. As I'm sure you know, my great-grandfather started this company."

She rolled her eyes. Here we go again, another history lesson about Cunningham factories! She, like everyone else in the factory, was well aware of the Cunningham history. Four generations had run this place, and the building itself was living proof. Cunningham Manufacturing practically supported the small town of Relief, Texas. There wasn't a soul in town who didn't know its history.

She nodded woodenly.

"Naturally when my father died, it came to me. But, unfortunately, there is a stipulation in my grandfather's trust fund that has stymied progress here at Cunningham's. The same progress, I might add, that you have complained about for the past five years. I can't get around it. I should know. I've tried everything. It controls the outcome of my future, the company's future. What all this amounts to is--in order to keep controlling interest in Cunningham Hats, I have to be married by the time I'm 30--which is next month. And I have to stay married for at least a year."

Kia shrugged, rolling her eyes again, gathering what was left of her patience. She didn't care about his birthday, or social life. She didn't care if he kept controlling interest in the company, either. As far as she could see, it might do better in someone else's hands. What she wanted was to get out of here. That, and she wanted to know why he insisted she stay after hours. She wanted to know why he wasted her time. "So how does this concern me?"

He moved closer to the edge of the mahogany desk, his long leg going over the edge, lightly brushing against her knee,

jolting her into awareness again. His eyes no longer met hers, but his smile was big and wide and friendly.

"I want you--to marry me."

"You want what?" Stunned, and unprepared, she fidgeted with her car keys in her coveralls pocket...jingling them. Damn! She hadn't expected that!

"Surely even you've received a proposal or two in your lifetime." His voice was slightly sarcastic, but firm. His lips melded together tightly. The smile was gone. She could tell he was barely holding his temper at bay. It couldn't be easy for a man of his stature to ask such a thing of a lowly employee. *But why ask at all? And most importantly, why her?*

"You're crazy. Of all the asinine things I've heard you say and do, this takes the cake." She stood up and placed her hands directly on the desk. "Do you know how much sense that makes? You aren't stupid--so what are you up to?" She frowned up into his handsome face, not afraid to meet him eye to eye. When she was riled she felt she could face down a tiger.

"Hardly, and if you think of it in my terms you might understand what I'm getting at."

Kia flopped into the chair again, shaking her head. "I seriously doubt it, but go on. I'm enjoying you making a fool of yourself."

"It's simple." He began rolling up the sleeves of his shirt to elbow length. "Not flattering, but simple. I need a wife. I don't want one. I need one. Therein lies the difference. I intend to collect what's mine, one way or another. So...the way I see it--I need someone who won't fall in love with me, who won't get hurt. Like I said before. And that--my dear little *Giavonni* is you!" He smiled at last as though he were the cat with the mouse dangling between his teeth.

Kia opened her mouth to object then quickly shut it. What could she say? It was brilliant. It made perfect sense. It bordered on pure genius. And she hated the fact that he came up with it.

Her eyes went from the finely polished desk to the spotless, equally shiny floor. This must have been the cleanest room in the whole darn building. For some reason it irritated her that his office sparkled.

His frown narrowed on her. Obviously he was studying her reaction.

"It means *that* much to you?"

"It does. So, what do you think?"

"What's in it for me?"

He moved back behind the desk again, and something in his mannerisms told her he was disappointed in that question. Although he didn't voice his disapproval, it was almost as though he expected her to ask it. And yet, by his visible shudder, he hadn't really wanted her to ask. As he turned she saw the muscles bunch in his shoulders; she could actually see them growing and tensing against his shirt. Her heart betrayed her again, fluttering. She'd touched a tender spot, and she knew it.

She twirled the end of her long dark ponytail, her mind running through their entire conversation for a hint of what this might be about.

"*Giavonni*, you've never minced words on what you want. A better place to work, cleaner, safer, with a bathroom marked 'female' on it. You've got it and more. Once I'm in control of my money, I'll make those improvements. Until I'm in control I can't do a thing. That's how it stands."

"You don't have control?" Her eyes widened with shock.

His jaw clenched and she knew she had touched another nerve.

"Not to the extent that I could do any good. No. I haven't for some time. That's one of the reasons there have been no improvements. There can be no improvements till this is settled. But that's about to change, one way or another."

That had to be hard to admit. It was even harder to face the fact that he wasn't totally responsible for the building's conditions. She might have to rethink her opinion of him. But if he wasn't in control, who was?

"This isn't some kind of a trick?"

"No tricks. I'll put it in writing. If you want."

"Oh, I'd want everything in writing. If I was stupid enough to go along with something like this." She nodded, feeling like a full cat with an extra plate of milk. She flopped back in the chair again, then she bolted forward as something occurred to her. "Wait a minute."

"There's something else?"

"Yes, there's something else." She leaned over the desk at him. He glanced at her hand, and she realized she'd left prints all over the wax job. She didn't move. "Exactly what am I expected to do in return?"

"I was wondering when you'd ask." He chuckled softly, his gaze going over her thoroughly. "This might be the hardest part to pull off."

"What might be?"

"I'd expect you to act like a bride. My bride. No snipes, no barbs. You might even on occasion have to kiss me; in public, of course."

"Kiss you! Now wait a minute. That's taking it too far. Especially since I don't like you in the first place." So why was even the suggestion of a kiss burning a hole in her stomach? Why had her throat gone so dry?

"Exactly. That's why you're so perfect." He came closer; she backed up. "Look, you're smart enough to pull this off, cunning enough. Especially if you get what you want in the end. Put on an act. Wouldn't it be worth it?"

"Maybe, but--that'd be a tall order." She jingled her keys again until his glance landed on her pockets.

"Must you do that?"

"What?"

"Jingle those damned keys."

"Sorry."

"So, what do you think?"

"I couldn't act that well."

"Try, for your own good."

"How long?"

"A year."

"You're out of your mind." She dared to move closer. She'd get right in his face if she had to. "It'd never work. I've got family to support. I can't just run away from responsibilities."

"Your mother and a brother, I believe. You support them?"

Her hooded gaze fastened on him with confusion. "Mostly, my mother takes in boarders from time-to-time and my brother works evenings."

"And your father?"

"You tell me, you seem to have all the facts."

"I did have some background research done."

"He's dead."

"I'm sorry. At least that explains why I found nothing on him. He wasn't mentioned at all in your file."

"I didn't think it was any of your business."

"Fair enough. Okay, I'll see your mother and young brother are provided for."

"You'd do that?"

"Of course. I'm taking your time and employment away from you. You will not work on the floor after we are married. Only, they'd remain where they are."

"But come on, Cunningham, we wouldn't last six hours in the same room, let alone a year. No one would believe it anyway. Everyone here knows how we feel about each other."

"True, but it's not the factory workers we're going to be fooling, is it? No, we have to fool a Board of Directors, and Gene Walsh."

"Walsh? You mean the Vice President? Why him?" She knew very little about Walsh; he rarely put in an appearance at the factory. What she did know, she didn't like. Walsh was another power player.

"Because I lose to him if I can't pull this off. He was my father's confidant, for reasons I can't fathom. He knows all about my grandfather's restrictions and is counting on it. If I lose, he can take over the company. And believe me, he's counting on it. Walsh is from the north. I'm afraid his sentiments don't lie with small town factory workers, especially, a non-union factory. If he couldn't vote the union in, he'd shut this place down for good. And, I don't know if you know it, but he wants to--"

"Sell the plant and make a shopping center out of it. Put hundreds of people out of work, without a backward glance. We heard the rumor. God, even I can't let that happen. Only, to be honest, we thought it was you who was going to do that."

She watched his face pale. He really wasn't in touch with his people. "You thought this through, didn't you? Down to the last detail."

"I had to. Look, I'll level--we've lost the oldest and biggest account just last week. An account we depended on to keep Cunningham's going full blast. If I'm married I might impress the older gentlemen of the company to reconsider. They like stability, loyalty. But I can't wait too long. I've got to make my move fast. Otherwise, half the town will be out of work. Yes, I've given it a lot of consideration. It means everything to m--to us--to the town."

"But why me? I mean you could find any number of women to be your wife. As I recall there was that blonde last month, hanging on your every word as she toured your factory. She was shapely, from a good family so I've heard. What's wrong with her? What's wrong with half the women you've brought here over the past five years?"

Cunningham liked blondes from what she could tell. Every woman he had brought into the plant had been blonde or redheaded, ultra thin, with delicate features. So why had he chosen her as the sacrificial lamb? She had hair almost the color of a raven, so her mother declared, eyes to match. Her skin was a light olive, her bones big, and fleshed out. Voluptuous was the word she had heard most of her twenty-four years.

"Alisha; would expect hearts and flowers," she heard him say, breaking her reverie. "Too young, too inexperienced. She'd want to make it permanent. She's an old friend of the family. And I'm not ready for that. I know lots of women--beautiful women, rich women. And they'd take me for all I have, even though they wouldn't need to. They're the kind of people I deal with every day. You, on the other hand, are entirely different. Besides, in the end I wouldn't accomplish anything."

His sudden loud sigh said everything. He was on the level. He was actually proposing to her. And the air in the room just got two inches thicker. He seemed he had taken his problem and laid it squarely on her shoulders.

"No, I may not get along with you, agree with you, even like you, Giavonni, but I've come closer to trusting you. I've learned that. You're honest, hard working, and you stick up for what you believe in. I know this much by working with you for the past few years. You've admitted to every prank you've pulled around here even though it's kept you from getting a few deserved raises. Your boss speaks highly of your work. Says you pull your weight like a man."

"I've had to. Pulling hats isn't easy."

"I know. My grandfather put me out there when I started working here. I know exactly what you do, and I respect it. It's hard, hot work in the summer and miserably cold in the winter. And no one seems to notice out there in the warehouse exactly what you do. But I know. I also know you'd have to pull your weight out there or Leroy would fire you."

"I do an honest day's work, and I'm not ashamed of what I do."

"I know that, too. That's another reason I picked you. I need someone who's gonna fight just as hard as I'm willing to, to keep this place running. You are a fighter, Giavonni."

He paused, seeming to gauge her responses. Obviously he could tell he hadn't swayed her better judgment so he went on.

"Look, we've had our differences. I'm not saying this would be an easy task for either of us. Especially since we don't particularly like each other--as you say. But I do respect you," he added, obviously hoping to win her favor.

"You sure know how to charm a girl. I guess I should appreciate that much from you. You're being honest. Had you flattered me personally, I'd already be out the door."

"I figured as much."

She firmed her lips, hardened her heart, and nodded.

"That's what I mean," he nodded. "We don't have to use pretense, and believe it or not, that means a lot."

Kia studied him, studied the room. She'd only been here once, when she was first hired. Then it rang cold and impersonal, and nothing had changed. There were no family pictures on his pristine desk. No great grandfathers adorned the walls. Instead, it was almost bare of decorations. It held necessities and that was all.

"So--would I--have to live with you?"

"Of course."

"And all I'd have to do is act like I cared for you--in public. The rest of the time, would be mine?"

"Of course. As long as you didn't create scenes in public, your life is your own. And other men would have to wait till we got an annulment or a divorce. An--I'd never force myself on you, Kia, but if you wanted to . . . I mean I have nothing against having sex with you. But that's all it would be Kia, sex. I'm not going to lie about that either. Strictly sex."

She fell silent, contemplating. *Damn his honesty!* She'd been ready to turn him down flat, but he had to go and act like some kind of hero. He certainly hadn't wasted his time with flattery, but she respected that. Even though, for some strange reason, it did hurt her pride a little, he'd never know it.

But this, this was crazy. It was crazy, ludicrous, way off the beaten track, and also exciting and stimulating. Kia never contemplated marriage after her father went to prison. The shame and degradation her father had put her and her family through made her leery of men, especially rich and powerful men.

Once a prominent political figure back in New York, her father had quickly let the power go to his head. He committed fraud, a federal offense, and was sentenced to ten years in prison. He unknowingly put his family into complete peril. Bankruptcy, foreclosure, and immense embarrassment sent Kia and her family far away. They had moved to a small town in Northeast Texas where no one would ever know about the scandal. He wasn't dead, but he might as well have been to Kia. Her father and his deeds were a secret she decided to live with. Besides, as far as she was concerned, her father was dead.

"There is one thing, though. You'd need to clean up your act a little." He hesitated, his brow furrowing.

"Clean up my act?" She was half listening again. He almost had her convinced he was on the level till now.

"Those coveralls would have to go. You'd have to wear make-up, fix your hair. Dress like a lady of means. I'd furnish you a wardrobe. You'd have your own car."

"I have my own car now."

"That piece of junk?"

So that was it. She was just a greasy coverall, with a sassy mouth, a Plain-Jane appearance, who drove a piece of junk. That's how he saw her. So where'd he get off being judge and jury and asking her to do him favors? She owed him nothing. She didn't want lies, but she hadn't expected insults, either.

Putting aside her personal feelings, she blinked slowly as she spoke, not even trying to keep the acid from her words. "So, you think I might clean up well?"

"Don't be sarcastic. You should be flattered that I picked you out of all the other possibilities." He loosened his tie as though it suddenly bothered him.

"And why did you?"

"Believe me, I've asked myself that, too. I guess you stand to win or lose as much as I do."

She moved about the room nervously now. "And what about you. Would you change?"

"Change?" He glanced at her again as though surprised by her question. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't think anyone would think you were a newlywed, especially the way you talk to me. You're the one who wouldn't be convincing. What makes you think you can act that well?" She liked throwing him a curve or two, watching him squirm.

He came around the desk, big and powerful, like a stalking cat who had found his prey. Suddenly, his arms were on either side of her, trapping her against the desk. Long arms that never seemed to end. His dark-eyed gaze narrowed on her mouth as he leaned into her. Were his eyes blue or brown or gray like she'd first thought? It was hard to tell, they were so dark.

He seemed to be enjoying her discomfort, too.

"Why don't we give it a dry run now," he murmured, as his lips hovered just above hers.

Panic gripped her, pride held her still. Everything inside her turned to mush; her knees quivered. This was a challenge, and that's all it was. It was on the tip of her tongue to protest, but stunned by his sudden entrapment, her mouth no longer worked.

His warm breath feathered her cheek, and her legs began to shake. She could handle this, she told herself, even as his head lowered. She'd show him sophistication.

He smelled like peppermint. *Peppermint!* Damn him! How unfair. She loved peppermint, and her taste buds suddenly hungered for it. His exotic cologne tickled her nostrils, sending her thoughts to nicer places than a factory office could supply. And when his head dipped even lower to caress the corner of her mouth she was jolted by his velvety touch. He was gentle, tender, unexpectedly so. Heat radiated between them, like a furnace blowing beneath their feet.

When she gasped, he took advantage and covered her mouth with his own. The gentle persuasion of his lips sent sparks everywhere.

*Peppermint, peppermint,* her mind kept repeating, as she began to slowly devour the taste of him.

Heady sensations overcame her rational thinking. The tender probe of his tongue stroked her lower lip; teasing, tempting little thrusts.

The Italian in her wanted to slowly savor the flavor, the Irish part of her wanted to resist. Because of her complex make-up, her emotions usually won out over good thinking. She tried to force herself to remember that this was merely some

point he was trying to make. But it was hard to remember, because no peppermint had ever tasted this good.

Only the slight groan, like an echo from deep within, as he pulled away made her open her eyes again. Had it come from her or him? She couldn't be sure.

And there, in the depths of those indigo eyes, she saw a spark of desire that could only match her own, and she knew she was in big trouble.