



IN BED
WITH THE
BOSS

ALEXA BRAVO

Chapter 1

Trish Carter smartly adjusted her emerald green blouse to align with the perfectly pressed lapels of her tailored double-breasted black jacket. Her black skirt, sheer charcoal stockings and polished black mid-high shoes completed the power ensemble and, had she but noticed, enhanced a pair of shapely legs. Carrying her briefcase in one carefully manicured hand she gracefully exited the taxi and tried not to look surprised when a very efficient porter immediately offered his hand to assist her. The young man smiled encouragingly as he bent and lifted out her overnight bag from the back seat of the cab and led the way past the impressive portico and smoothly revolving doors of the Hotel Royale. Trish followed him onto a gracious marbled entryway flanked by huge white columns. Her heels heralded her progress through the high-ceilinged foyer with gold embossing on the floor tiles and tasteful palms leading neatly to the reception desk. Trish made a concerted effort to keep her nervousness off her expression and hoped vehemently that no one looking at her would guess this was her first executive conference. As the thought coalesced Trish felt the by-now-familiar fluttering in her stomach and swallowed past the temptation to take a shaky breath. She would be fine, she reiterated in her head for the hundredth time in the last twenty-four hours. She had already given this presentation several times over and her audience had been very appreciative. Ohhh-kay, so her audience had *not* included the full board of Donnelli-Smith nor its CEO and Principal Partner, Keith Donnelli. She had always thrived on challenges, right?

As Trish approached the huge reception desk, with its themed gold and burgundy colours and polished surface, she forced back another shaky breath and consciously straightened her shoulders back. She had worked very hard for this chance, she had earned it and she deserved it. Trish remembered all her positive self-talk, a legacy from her few sessions of marriage counselling that Matt had never bothered to attend, and although those sessions had not saved her marriage, they *had* served to teach her the power of positive thinking. Ironic, that now she knew her own worth, for perhaps the first time in her life, there was no one *in* her life to share this knowledge with. No, she ruthlessly pushed back all negative thoughts, today was a re-affirmation of everything she had achieved since Matt, with no help from anyone else. Today was her proof that she didn't need anyone else to confirm her value in her eyes.

Behind the front desk, Trish took note of the almost artistic perfection of blonde, statuesque good looks. Three women, all dressed in the same themed burgundy A-line skirts, crisp white shirts and fitted burgundy jackets with the gold embossed lion and crown insignia clearly visible on the left lapel, could have just stepped out of a high price fashion magazine. Trish wondered for an irreverent moment if "must be blonde" was on the hiring criteria and thought she'd never stand a chance at a job here with her dark hair and bronze colouring. She unconsciously lifted her chin a little higher and gathered her thoughts as one of the attendants made eye contact and flashed a perfect, Colgate smile.

'How may I help you ma'am?' Her voice was calm and cultured, with perfect diction. Trish was impressed despite herself. She had to repeat her inner monologue that she would not be intimidated and tried to return the clerk's smile.

'I'm here for the Donnelli-Smith conference,' she managed with a reasonable semblance of quiet authority. 'Trish Carter.'

‘Of course, Ms Carter, we’ve been expecting you.’ The clerk smiled again and Trish thought she detected a newer note of respect in the woman’s voice. ‘Your suite has been prepared and the porter will take up your luggage.’ With a precise wave of her hand a uniformed bus boy walked up to Trish at the counter and competently bent down to scoop up Trish’s vanity case, which she had not noticed had been deposited beside her feet. The attendant waited patiently until Trish realised with a guilty start that he was offering to take her briefcase as well, which she handed over quickly.

‘Here’s your key and a copy of the agenda,’ the reception clerk continued without pause, as efficient as a well-oiled cog in a constantly turning wheel. ‘The delegates will be meeting in the boardroom at nine a.m., you’ll find a full itinerary and conference notes in your suite. All presentation materials have been loaded so you’ll not need to take anything with you.’ The clerk handed Trish a swipe card and gold-embossed agenda, including a map of the hotel and facilities. Trish acknowledged her increased heart rate as her excitement mounted. Finally the weeks of preparation and rehearsals were going to pay off. She managed a much more natural smile this time as she nodded at the clerk and followed the porter to the lifts and her fifth floor suite.

It was just gone eight, plenty of time for her to settle in, go over her presentation and prepare herself for the conference. As the lift doors closed behind her Trish allowed her stiff posture to relax for a few moments, glancing casually at the mirrored surfaces of the chrome walls surrounding her and distractedly adjusting the fit of her blouse under her jacket as she contemplated the course of the next two days. This weekend represented a triumph of undreamed proportions for her. She had taken on the job of Rehabilitation Manager for the NSW branch of Donnelly-Smith after successive failures by previous recruits and no one had expected her tenure to be any different. Even Rowena, her direct boss, had warned her that the most she could hope for was to restore some confidence in the value of the rehab branch in the minds of the board members. Perhaps because expectations had been so low, Trish had felt no fear and had made some risky decisions which had paid off in spades. She had run the branch as if she’d had nothing to lose and the gamble had reaped phenomenal success. In less than twelve months her rehab division had become the most profitable rehabilitation division in the country, and her work methods were now the basis on which other divisions were being remodelled. While her triumph had been heralded by Rowena and the other State Managers, Trish knew she had made a lot of enemies amongst her fellow rehabilitation state managers, those who had been around for years and who felt that the new upstart was getting way too big for her shoes. At the thought of Trish’s old boss, Liz Hart, Trish visibly suppressed a shudder. No one did malice like Liz.

Trish recalled with painful clarity her very first executive meeting on the heels of her promotion. Liz had done nothing to hide her contempt, taking every opportunity to loudly question Trish’s right to be part of the group, and commenting with relish to anyone who would listen that Trish would inevitably fail as others had before her, and that would teach her to get ideas above her “betters”. Liz was old-school, had been with the company almost since its inception nine years ago, and refused to acknowledge that a younger, less tenured recruit had anything of value to add at such a senior level. Of course, the fact that Trish had started out reporting to Liz and had been promoted within five weeks had not given her much chance to build credibility with Liz’s contemporaries, whereas Liz, as Rehab Manager for Queensland, had

been in a management role for years and had firmly established relationships with all six rehab state managers across the country. Liz had not coped well with going from giving Trish orders to having to regard her as an equal and even now, almost a year into Trish's promotion and despite all of Trish's success, Liz still treated her like a wanna-be and never failed to find an opportunity to put her down. Despite Liz's never-ending diatribe, however, some of Trish's new colleagues had befriended her and offered their support, and that would make the proposed roll-out of her business plan across all states a little easier to achieve. Today was Trish's chance to convince the board that the roll-out was ready to go, and the next few weeks would involve "selling the message" nationally. Trish was not quite clear on how exactly that would work, however, she had already prepared herself for extensive travel to each state over the coming weeks.

Trish felt her nerves once again rush to the surface, intermingled with excitement at her key role in the proposed changes to the business. In Rowena's experience, no middle-level executive had ever had the opportunity to present in person to the CEO, Keith Donnelly, and the thought was enough to start all the butterflies rolling in her stomach. She clenched her jaw and brought her mind back to the present, planning out her presentation, going over her notes in her head. She would not stumble or hesitate. She knew this material backwards and could recite her notes with her eyes closed. She had spent the last few weeks preparing for this day and she knew she was ready. She would impress the board so much that they would approve the extra resources she needed to complete the roll-out on schedule.

Trish's resolve hardened as she stood straighter and taller in the lift. She glanced down at the agenda and saw her name as the first speaker clearly outlined in black bold print. The clerk's respect had been genuine, she thought. A combination of nerves and raw excitement increased her heart rate as she stepped off the lift and found the door to her suite. A whole suite! Trish swiped the access card over the cleverly concealed scanner and pushed the door open, only to pause on the threshold with her breath caught in her throat. The suite consisted of a main lounge area which was decorated in soft mauves and peach. The carpet was plush and luxurious under her feet, so thick she felt she would float rather than walk, once she found the courage to step on it. OMG! Heavenly. Her cushioned feet made no sound as she stepped into the luxurious room and eased the door closed behind the retreating bell-boy. The room included a three-piece leather lounge and a wall-mounted flat screen television which dominated one wall, while floor to ceiling glass doors opened at one end of the suite to what appeared to be a balcony large enough to accommodate twenty people easily. As Trish made her way slowly through the suite she noted the mahogany bar in the corner, fully stocked, and she felt herself inexorably drawn to the balcony where inviting views of Sydney Harbour beckoned. Off to the left was the master bedroom and bathroom with a smaller room to the right that was set up with a desk, laptop, fax and printer. Trish couldn't help but be awed by the splendour and magnificence of the rooms. She had never before enjoyed such luxury.

Feeling intimidated despite all her positive self-talk, Trish made her way into the bedroom and stood facing the full length glass doors of the massive dressing cabinet. She checked her appearance critically and tried to control her breathing and steady her heart rate. It would not do to appear nervous. The reflection that stared back at her was not displeasing. A small but shapely figure, Trish knew she had slim hips, long legs and a generous bust which made her overly self-conscious about ensuring her shirt's v-neck was positioned just right under

her jacket. She checked and corrected again, remembering her hesitation this morning about choosing this shirt to wear on such an important day. The vibrant bottle green suited her cream complexion and hazel eyes, but the fabric was soft and silky and moved a little too easily to make her feel confident it would stay in place properly. Despite her best efforts Trish noted there was perhaps a little too much cleavage showing. She wanted to come across as corporate and efficient, not feminine and sexy. She fussed again with the v-neck and debated changing before the conference started, then glanced at her make-up and was distracted again. She powdered her nose and tried to tame the shine that even at this early hour was beginning to form around her forehead and chin. She had always hated her oily skin and remembered her mother assuring her that she would not wrinkle as much as her friends with dry skin. Trish had always felt this was not any kind of advantage, for after all, who wanted to look good when they were old? She'd rather look good now, though having just celebrated her fortieth birthday she supposed old was now relative.

Sighing, Trish tidied her thick black hair, pulled back into a smart coil at the base of her neck, ensuring no loose strands. She checked her face for wrinkles, a routine since her birthday a month ago. Her face was clear of lines other than the laugh lines that crinkled at the corner of her warm, almond-shaped eyes. Trish was resigned to those, Matt had always told her they made her approachable and therefore a better manager and she held onto that piece of advice, despite her divorce. There were a lot of things Matt had said that hadn't turned out to be true, such as the "for better or worse" bit, but she had to hold onto something from nearly ten years of marriage so she didn't feel as if it had been a total waste. Trish felt her mouth tighten in automatic reaction at the thought of her biggest failure, then deliberately shook out her shoulders and forced the bitterness back behind her mental shields. Although she had been divorced for over three years now, Trish still felt angry about her inability to overcome the odds and stay married for life. Her parents had done it, why couldn't she? God knows she had tried, had persevered, but in the end not even her legendary stubbornness had been enough to keep her and Matt together. Maybe if they'd had a child...Trish's heart constricted at the familiar, stabbing pain in her chest. More than anything, she had wanted a baby. Now, at forty, she knew her chances of being a wife and mother were next to nil and she had accepted that her career was where she was most likely to get the sense of purpose and satisfaction she had thought her marriage would bring. But sixty-hour weeks at the office did not make up for the loneliness of her single bed at night.

Shrugging her shoulders to stop what was sure to be a tiresome and familiar inner monologue at the thought of her non-existent love-life, Trish checked her watch and decided to head to the conference room early to prepare for her presentation with plenty of time. There were still thirty minutes to go but she thought she would prefer to arrive early and go over her notes, perhaps greet people as they came in. She might even be lucky enough to have a chance of meeting Keith Donnelly before the conference officially started, which would make her feel more comfortable during the presentation. She had always found that being able to exchange a few words with individuals before they became a collective audience made them more human, less intimidating and therefore less threatening when one had to deal with the usual nerves associated with public speaking. Trish checked her clothes one last time, adjusting her thigh-high stockings and ensuring they were straight, smoothing down her skirt and jacket and grabbing the agenda and map. She noted that the conference room was on the top floor, level

32, and as she closed the suite door behind her she was determined to enjoy a leisurely lift ride up to the executive suite while rehearsing all her positive self-talk.

With her mind on her presentation, Trish was caught by surprise when the sound of the elevator light switching off alerted her to the lift doors opening, and she felt wide-eyed and distracted as she turned to face the lift and take a step forward. All at once her breath caught in her throat and for a few seconds that felt like an eternity she could not have moved for the world. A shiver of awareness rippled throughout her body like a zing of electricity and an intense heat flooded her face, quickly seeping down her chest to settle in her stomach, starting another chorus of nervous, hungry butterflies. Only this time, it wasn't nerves that had her body trembling and her breath stuck in her throat. Her eyes had been caught by the most incredible dark blue gaze, freezing her thoughts and stopping all movement. Despite the fact he was standing at the back of the lift, behind several other passengers, the man's eyes drew Trish's undivided attention, like a magnetic pull she could no more resist than the increasing pull of her lungs for her next breath. She forced herself to suck in air like a fish out of water but could not have broken eye contact in that moment if her life had depended on it. She did manage to notice with a vague sense of peripheral vision that he was leaning casually against the mirrored wall of the lift, however, as his eyes locked with hers she noted a hint of surprised humour reflected in his glance and one side of his delectable mouth half lifted in a roguish smile that actually caused a small gasp to escape her open lips before she could stop it.

Feeling dizzy and disoriented, Trish shocked herself even further with the sudden, unbidden thought that she would give a great deal to kiss that smile right off those luscious lips. Dragging her eyes away from his face, driven by an illogical curiosity to know this man, to discover his secrets, she ran her clinging glance over his striking features, taking note of rich, dark hair framing deep set, brilliant blue eyes, holding the depth of an ocean behind them. She could not help but delight in a long, almost too perfect nose, well-defined jaw, and strong chin, slightly clefted. She also noted, with a crazy sense of relief, a jagged scar running from his left eye into his hairline which marred the perfection of his features. It made him seem more human, less like some mythical Greek God. Her eyes were drawn once again irresistibly to his mouth. Surely it was the most kissable mouth she had ever seen. The thought of tasting him was like an irritating insect buzzing in her head, getting louder and more distracting with every second that passed. With another almost audible gasp at the effort it took to tear her gaze from his lush lips, Trish's glance slid slowly down the rest of him. She was completely oblivious of the other passengers, of the lift doors about to close, of all her careful planning before her eyes had lit upon this vision. For the present, time seemed suspended, and all that existed was this man and this moment.

He wore an exquisitely tailored dark grey suit, crisp white shirt and silver tie, perfectly knotted at his throat. He seemed to tower over the others in the lift and Trish estimated he was well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders whose muscled terrain was not completely disguised by the obviously tailored jacket that fit perfectly across a wide chest and narrow waist. The man had to work out, there was no way that width of shoulder was padded on. On that thought, Trish felt a flicker of reality seep into her stupor and she just managed to avoid shaking her head to clear the haze of heat and awareness surrounding her, stealing her thoughts and her breath and her sanity. She was conscious of being flushed and shaken, and

fought a desperate panic to control her features as she slowly became aware that there were at least five other people in the lift, all of them looking at her expectantly and starting to shift uncomfortably at the unusual pause in proceedings.

Trish took a deep breath and fought against the strange reaction that had her almost comatose, shocked and almost frightened at how strongly she wanted this man, this stranger, when for years she could have sworn she had lost her libido somewhere around year five of not-so-happily-ever-after. She felt herself slowly turning away from him, even though the action seemed to cause her physical pain like a tearing in her belly, and with zombie-like movements she stepped into the lift and forced herself to face the gently closing chrome doors. Trish felt disoriented and swayed slightly as the lift moved upward, too aware of the rapid rise and fall of her breasts and the feel of the soft material caressing her suddenly ultra-sensitised skin as she struggled to bring her breathing back under control. She gave herself a severe mental shake. What *was* this? She had never responded so strongly to anyone before in her life, and she had never laid eyes on this man before!

Her body seemed to vibrate with his presence like a steady, thrumming heartbeat in her ears and she could sense every breath he took, how close he was to her, how his eyes rested on her back as if willing her to turn around and look at him again. It felt as if he were touching her, and she shivered uncontrollably as an unbidden image of strong fingers burning through her clothes, melting her from the outside in, delving into her most intimate places unnerved her to the point where she had to fight to control a moan from escaping her tightly clenched mouth. Despite the fact she was no longer looking into the stranger's eyes her body was totally attuned to him, like a radar honed to his particular frequency. She could feel the heat his body was generating and it only seemed to inflame her own body's response.

Trying desperately to bring her erratic heartbeat back down to a normal beat, Trish realised almost with a start that the lift doors were opening again and she automatically side-stepped to allow a few passengers to exit. As the lift doors whooshed closed Trish's eyes seemed to travel of their own volition across the floor of the lift and back to the corner where she knew the man continued to stand, although by the position of his legs it appeared he was no longer leaning casually against the mirrored back wall. She knew it would be impossible to feign casualness with her face still flushed and her breathing still erratic but she seemed to have no will power to resist the urge to look at him once more.

Without conscious thought, Trish's lowered gaze took in polished black leather shoes fringed by neat, pressed cuffs which floated graciously from tailored grey slacks that climbed to fit snugly around muscled thighs. Trish felt her gaze lingering unbelievably at the juncture between his legs and blushed even more as she realised she needed little imagination to picture what was obviously an impressive bulge. The man was aroused! Just the thought caused the inevitable reaction in her own body and Trish felt the wet warmth pooling between her legs. She fought against another moan as her blush deepened, the heat seeming to eat right into the core of her. She felt both incredibly eager to continue her perusal and petrified of how her journey would end. How could she possibly meet his gaze after ogling him like a piece of prime cut at a meat market? Almost against her will, her gaze swept inexorably upward and her breathing quickened even further as she anticipated with both dread and an incredible fascination what she would read in the man's face. Even if she could keep her thoughts from her eyes she could not disguise her body's obvious, flushed response to him. Feeling chagrined

as she acknowledged how overly intimate her stare had been, Trish reluctantly raised her gaze back up to his and prepared herself for what she anticipated might at best be a repeat of his initial wry humour or at worst, a scowl of contempt for her overtly sexual response to him. When Trish's gaze finally reached his face, however, she knew immediately that no amount of preparation could have minimised her shock at his expression.