

TOO EASY BY BRUCE DEITRICK PRICE / SIMON & SCHUSTER

Chapter 1

Robert walks toward the water fountain, frowning, wondering how he's going to handle this thing. Two of his best reporters want the bank story. The one who wants it most is least suited for it. They're yelling at each other in his office.

Why can't people be reasonable? But then, he thinks, they wouldn't be working for a newspaper, would they?

He's not wearing his jacket, the shirt sleeves are rolled up. He's a tall man, just turned thirty-six, maybe an athlete once but a little soft around the middle now. The brown hair is long. He walks with a big man's slow confidence, smiling absently to himself. Damned reporters, he thinks, if they're not a little crazy they're no good, isn't that the truth?

Robert snaps out a cup, fills it from the water fountain. So, what's it going to be, which maniac gets the story, and what does the loser get?

Robert drains the cup, puts it down, sees a woman he doesn't know. She smiles as though he does. Standing only a few feet in front of him. He makes an expression that says, Yes?

"Oh," she says, "I'm Kathy Becker. In marketing." She tilts her head, still smiling. "You must be Robert Saunders . . . the distinguished managing editor."

"You want," he gives her a quizzical smile, "what?"

She puts out her hand. "People always *want* something. Must be rough."

He shakes her hand. Warm, strong. He sees the dark hair, not too long, the good-looking face, perhaps midwestern. He glances down for a second. She's dressed in a subdued way, a little formal for the office, maybe for something after work. Still, it's a tailored outfit and he gets a sense of her as trim, in good shape. Actually, great shape.

"Sorry," he says. "Well, as a matter of fact, they usually do. That's my job, basically. Telling people what they can't have ." He almost laughs, thinking that's fairly witty.

"Well, you're home free," she says. "I don't want anything." She shrugs her shoulders. "I've been working here a month or so. Bound to run into you eventually. Uh, your picture's in the annual report."

"Oh, yeah Right."

"Of course, in person, you're.... "

His eyebrows go up. *Yes?*

She laughs. "Larger."

Maybe that's funny, he's not sure. It's cute. Anyway, she's cute. "Right," he says.

She's still looking at him the same way, smiling, tilting her head to the side. In a way he thinks of as flirtatious or close to it. He turns a little away from her, glancing back toward the large open office. Twenty people working at desks. Maybe, he thinks, she's trying to make somebody jealous. No, nobody's watching them. She can't be flirting with me, he thinks. She must have seen the thick gold ring on his left hand.

He leans to fill the cup again. Something to do. "Marketing? What's that mean?"

"Fancy word for advertising. We make people buy the paper. Or maybe an advertiser needs a little help, we can do that."

"Oh, creative," he says, as though it's a slightly risqué word. Sipping the water more slowly this time.

"On a good day," Kathy says brightly. "Oh, I heard some people talking about you."

"Good God—gossip!"

"No, quite harmless. Seems you went white-water rafting."

"Oh, well, that was in the fall. Yeah, made it down the Delaware in one piece."

"Sounds very adventurous." Again the warm smile. "Maybe dangerous."

"Only for the rocks," he says.

"Come again."

He waves vaguely. "We hit them a lot."

"Oh. No, really, it sounds very exciting. I've always wanted to do that. Any other adventures?"

Robert sighs. "No, I'm a flatliner."

She gets this, smiles appreciatively. "What a terrible thing to say about yourself. A young man in his prime."

"Well, if you want to stretch a point."

She puts her hand gently on his forearm. At once forward and grandmotherly. "In his prime," she insists.

She leaves the hand there a second, long enough for him to feel the warmth of it. And a little tremor in the groin. He still can't figure this. She's leaning at him, smiling at him, giving him more heat than he expects. But all in this really innocent way, right out in public. Anyone can look over and see them chatting. Like they're old friends. If she does want something, he almost admires her directness. If she doesn't, he wonders how she survives carrying on like this. But hell, what could she want? They're in different parts of the business, completely.

Robert glances at her hand as she draws it away. Then at the curve of her shoulder, then her chest.

"Well, Kathy, I've got domestic politics to sort out. By the way, I'm an associate managing editor. One of three, I'm afraid. Good to meet you."

"Likewise, Robert. We'll talk again."

She says this as if it's a simple fact. Not to be disputed. He almost says, *We will?* Just to test her. Instead he nods vaguely, says, "Bye."

He walks back toward his office. Of course, he has to do what's best for the paper. Give the story to the best reporter for the job, the hell with that they want. Jesus, they're almost children, always squabbling, posturing, parading their egos. He sees her in his mind. This Kathy-what'd she say? Becker. Yeah, Becker. What, she's the friendliest woman in Manhattan? She's on happy pills? She's in heat? What? Funny thing. The mood was all wrong for the office. Suppose they were at a bar. The next step is you start necking, then go home. Yeah, the good old days. I can remember. Man, suppose I'm not happily married. I'd be curious, that's for sure.

He can still see her smile, a few feet in front of him. Damn. The kind of smile that says, Come on over here, and we'll do anything you want. Really, he thinks, that's what it said, right? What the hell?

Robert goes in his office, stares at the two reporters. "You guys still here?"

"You said to wait," one says petulantly.

"It's a joke, Armstrong. Alright, I'll tell you what's going down. Then there won't be any further discussion. Are we clear on that?"

They're staring at him. Usually so soft, so laid back, the big den mother, that's his style. They sense some change. Robert realizes his chest is a little tense, his pulse hammering away so he can feel it. Kathy Becker, huh? What the hell was all that?

end Chapter 1