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THE C.E.O. & THE SECRET HEIRESS

Mary Anne Wilson



Just
for
Kids

Mary Wilson

The C.e.o. and The Secret Heiress

«HarperCollins»

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The C.e.o. and The Secret Heiress / M. A. Wilson —
«HarperCollins»,

The heiress has a secret... Out to prove she was more than just a pretty face and the daughter of a very wealthy man, Brittany Lewis eagerly agreed to take a job redecorating the Just For Kids day-care center—under an alias. But when she pulled the wool over the handsome C.E.O. Matt Terrell's eyes, she never expected the job would come with the fringe benefit of a steamy office romance. Now that she had snagged the job—and the man—how could she tell Matt he wasn't falling for simple "B. J. Smythe," but for an enigmatic heiress instead? Just for Kids: A corporate day-care center where love abound...and families are made!

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Brittany looked at the smile on Matt's lips, and she felt lost
Everything dissolved for her in that instant. She wanted to run, yet she wanted to stay forever. Nothing made sense, and she wasn't aware that she was crying until Matt dropped to his haunches in front of her and touched her cheek.

"Tears? What's this all about?" he whispered.

"I don't know," she choked. "This...I...I don't know anything anymore." She stood up and hurried away from Matt.

"Where are you going?" Matt asked.

She turned and saw that he was inches from her. All she wanted was to reach out, to touch him, to feel that connection. To be a part of someone. But she couldn't. She'd painted herself into a corner with her charade, and now she had fallen in love with this man.

"Please stay," she heard him say. "Let me prove how much I want you, more than I ever wanted anyone or anything in my entire life."

Dear Reader,

Every month Harlequin American Romance brings you four powerful men, and four admirable women who know what they want—and go all out to get it. Check out this month's sparkling selection of love stories, which you won't be able to resist.

First, our AMERICAN BABY promotion continues with Kara Lennox's *Baby by the Book*. In this heartwarming story, a sexy bachelor comes to the rescue when a pretty single mother goes into labor. The more time he spends with mother and child, the more he finds himself wanting the role of dad....

Also available this month is *Between Honor and Duty* by Charlotte Maclay, the latest installment in her MEN OF STATION SIX series. Will a firefighter's determination to care for his friend's widow and adorable brood spark a vow to love, honor and cherish? Next, JUST FOR KIDS, Mary Anne Wilson's miniseries continues with an office romance between *The C.E.O. & the Secret Heiress*. And in *Born of the Bluegrass* by Darlene Scalera, a woman is reunited with the man she never stopped loving—the father of her secret child.

Enjoy this month's offerings, and be sure to return each and every month to Harlequin American Romance!

Wishing you happy reading,

Melissa Jeglinski

Associate Senior Editor

Harlequin American Romance

The C.E.O. & The Secret Heiress

Mary Anne Wilson



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To Joanne Dedrick

The best niece ever, and my favorite clown!

Love you lots.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Anne Wilson is a Canadian transplanted to Southern California, where she lives with her husband, three children and an assortment of animals. She knew she wanted to write romances when she found herself “rewriting” the great stories in literature, such as *A Tale of Two Cities*, to give them “happy endings.” Over a ten-year career she’s published thirty romances, had her books on bestseller lists, been nominated for reviewer’s choice awards and received a Career Achievement Award in Romantic Suspense. She’s looking forward to her next thirty books.

Books by Mary Anne Wilson

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570—THE BRIDE WORE BLUE JEANS

589—HART’S DREAM

609—THE CHRISTMAS HUSBAND

637—NINE MONTHS LATER...

652—MISMATCHED MOMMY?

670—JUST ONE TOUCH

700—MR. WRONG!

714—VALENTINE FOR AN ANGEL

760—RICH, SINGLE & SEXY

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826—THAT NIGHT WE MADE BABY

891—REGARDING THE TYCOON’S TODDLER...*

895—THE C.E.O. & THE SECRET HEIRESS*

INTEROFFICE MEMO

To: All LynTech Corporation Staff

From: Matthew Terrell, C.E.O.

Re: New Hire B. J. Smythe

Please join me in welcoming artist B. J. Smythe to the LynTech staff. Ms. Smythe has clearly demonstrated her abilities to help redesign the newly located Just For Kids day-care center. But, as a concerned C.E.O., I will gladly keep a very close eye on Ms. Smythe to ensure she is working up to potential. Since I am the one who initially hired Ms. Smythe, I feel personally responsible for her success here at LynTech and, as such, will also hold weekly (or daily!) meetings with the beautiful auburn-hired artist over lunch, dinner...or breakfast. I am willing to do whatever it takes to show Ms. Smythe the ropes and help her feel more at home. If you have any questions for Ms. Smythe, please feel free to go through me, as I plan to be by her side every step of the way....

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Chapter One

France, December 9

“You are a work of art,” the groom-to-be said, and the words were definitely not a compliment for the bride-to-be. “You think the world revolves around you. Well, news flash, Brittany. It doesn’t!”

Brittany Lewis stared at Sean Briggs, the son of a top businessman in Paris, a man her father, Robert Lewis, had introduced her to six months ago. Sean—darkly handsome, gentle, fun, and the man she’d thought she loved until a few hours ago. Now, he looked like what he was, a stranger, a very angry stranger in a monochromatic gray suit and shirt, a stranger that she’d wish away in the blink of an eye if she had the power to do it.

Another wish would have been to go back in time and stop this fiasco before it began. But she couldn’t do that, anymore than she could cancel out any of her past mistakes. So she was doing the next best thing—canceling the engagement three weeks before the planned New Year’s Eve wedding in the old chapel on the grounds of the chateau just south of Paris.

“I can’t do this,” Brittany said, her tense voice echoing slightly in her father’s study on the ground floor of the chateau. It had been her favorite room until that moment. With its rich wood and leather, the scent of books all around, memories of sitting in here when she was little, reading while her father worked.

“What do you want me to do, go ahead and marry you, then destroy everyone’s life when it doesn’t work? Because it’s not going to work.”

Sean came closer to where she stood by the inlaid wood desk near the French doors. He was only two inches taller than her own five foot, ten inches, but she felt very small right then. He took a breath, making an obvious effort to talk rationally. “Can’t we rethink this and try to work it out some way?”

She knew the repercussions of her decision were going to explode all around her, and for a fleeting moment it was tempting to think of stopping it before it did. But she knew that things would only be worse if she let it go on. And it would hurt her father even more than this all would now. How could she have thought she loved Sean, that she loved him enough to marry him, to do the “forever” thing with him? “I don’t see how we can work this out,” she said, her voice sounding small and uncertain in her own ears.

But Sean wasn’t going to be put off. He came closer to her. “Brittany, love, this is a wedding. It’ll be fun, and we can deal with other things when they come up. It’s all in place, all arranged. And any arrangement can be worked out.”

Brittany felt fire stain her cheeks. An arrangement? And here she’d been worried about realizing that she loved Sean, but wasn’t “in” love with him, while he’d been looking at their wedding as an “arrangement?” Arrangement?

“Sweetheart, what did you think the prenup was all about? There’s a lot of money involved in this, the Lewis and the Briggs money. But just because we’re practical doesn’t mean that we can’t or won’t have fun, and a really good time.”

She stared at him. “Fun?”

He was even closer, his voice getting more and more intimate all the time. In his gray-on-gray shirt and suit, he looked even darker and even more like a stranger, a stranger she’d almost married. He didn’t touch her, but his gaze flicked provocatively over her, skimming over her loose cotton shirt, her jeans, all the way to her bare feet before it lifted to her face framed by her flaming hair drawn up into a simple ponytail. “You’re lovely to look at, even in these clothes. You’re intelligent, well connected, sexy as hell, and we can make this work.”

His words sank deeply into her. No wonder she didn’t love him. He didn’t even make a pretense of loving her. And she suddenly felt more bold, more justified in what she was doing. There wasn’t

anger, just relief, and all she wanted right then was to have him gone. Her first broken engagement had been wrenching, filled with tears and pain, easing only with a trip to Switzerland for almost six months to forget her foolishness. Her second engagement had been easier to walk away from, after a flashing moment when she'd realized what a mistake she'd been making. Her then-fiancé had been almost as relieved as she'd been with the cancellation, and she'd gone off to enroll in art school in Vienna. But this was horrendous. Number three was not the charm, and Sean wasn't giving up gracefully or any other way.

"We can't make this work," she said, trying very hard to keep her voice even.

"Tell you what, this is prenuptial nerves, and I think I know what to do. We'll go away for a few days, someplace remote and private, and you can let me show you how good things can be. If we're together, I know you'll feel better." His voice dropped. "Much, much better."

She swallowed sickness at the idea of being alone with Sean. "No," she said, shaking her head as she backed away and twisted the ring off her finger, a five-carat creation of diamonds and sapphires that felt like a millstone to her at that moment.

"Come on, Brit, everything's in place." His tone was starting to edge with exasperation now. He wasn't used to not being able to talk a woman into anything he wanted. "It's too late. Everything's in place. All the invitations have gone out, the parties have begun and my mother's got her gown on order from Dior."

"I'm sorry about your mother's gown, and everything else," she said as she held out the ring to him. "It's over. I'll explain everything to the others. I'll take care of it."

His expression hardened with each passing second. "I guess you have plenty of experience doing that very thing," he muttered.

"I said I'm sorry." She opened her hand, offering him the ring on her palm. "Just take this."

He reached for the ring, snatching it out of her hand, but he didn't keep it. Instead he stared at her, then very deliberately dropped it in a leather trash container by her father's desk. "That's where it belongs," he muttered, then turned on his heels, crossed the room and left, slamming the heavy wooden door behind him.

The sound cracked loudly in the study, followed by total silence for a long moment before the door opened again. Bracing herself, she looked at the door, afraid Sean was back for a second round, but her father was there. "I just passed Sean in the hallway."

"He's leaving."

He stepped inside, a tall, slender man with a shock of white hair, wearing a dark suit he'd put on for what was supposed to have been an engagement dinner. "I take it it's over?"

He'd always been able to read her mind, or maybe he just knew her too well. "Oh, Dad, I'm so sorry."

"What was it this time?" he asked, closing the door quietly behind him as he came into the study. "What was the sign that came to you that told you not to get married?"

She turned from him, moving to the French doors and staring out into the early evening, across the stone terrace to the rolling hills of the centuries-old vineyard on the property. "I had a dream last night, and I couldn't shake it. I knew this was all wrong."

"A dream," he said from behind her somewhere. "That's a new reason. I laughed at the first excuse, the 'he eats steak and animal products' one, considering you're a vegetarian and all. Not compatible at all, of course. Then the second time, there was the 'it came to me in a blinding flash when I was getting fitted for my bridal gown' reason. That was more dramatic, and who could ignore a blinding flash?"

"Dad," she muttered, staring hard at the distant hills. "Daniel not only thought I was ridiculous for being a vegetarian, he raised beef, for heaven's sake. At first I liked him too much to let it bother me, but then, well... And William, well, I just knew suddenly that it was wrong."

He was right behind her now. "What a mess," he said in a low voice.

“I wouldn’t exactly call this a mess,” she said quickly, but knew it was exactly that... a mess.

“Three broken engagements in four years,” he murmured. “A third wedding gown put in storage. I don’t know what you’d call it, but I’d say this is becoming a full-time job cleaning up the fallout, a real father-child thing, I guess.”

“I’m twenty-seven years old, and hardly a child,” she muttered.

“You could have fooled me.”

It had been just him and her for years, ever since she was nine and her mother had “gone away for the weekend.” The story of the small plane crashing in upstate New York, had made the news for days. He’d always been so supportive, so steadfast in being there for her no matter what she did. But this very real tone of disapproval shook her and she wasn’t all that steady to begin with at the moment. She turned, and he was sitting on the corner of the desk, his arms folded on his chest, his dark eyes studying her intently. “What did you want me to do, Dad, marry Sean and be miserable? To look at him in five years and wonder how I could have ever thought I loved him? I’m just thankful that I came to my senses before that happened.”

“What did you want to do?” he asked, answering her question with another question.

She bit her lip. “I wanted what you and Mom had, to be really in love, to know it and to have it forever.”

His expression tightened and, even after all these years, she could see a touch of pain in his eyes. “We were lucky, very lucky,” he said in a low voice. “The thing is, what are you going to do now? Another repeat of what just happened?”

“No, I’m no good at finding love. I know when to admit defeat.”

“Maybe that’s your problem. You’re looking for it. Maybe it has to find you.”

“Semantics,” she muttered.

“So what direction is your life going to take now that you’ve sworn off love?”

“Direction?” She had never thought about directions for life, just living it. “What do you mean?”

He raked his fingers through his thick hair. “Well, as you pointed out, you’re twenty-seven years old. Sane, at least in most things. Intelligent, or you should be after all your forays into higher education. Talented, if you applied yourself, and you’re my daughter. The genes have to be there somewhere.”

“Dad, I—”

“Shhh, just listen to me for a minute.” He stood and came closer to her. “I’ve made a decision. You either have to get direction for your life or I’m out of it. I probably should have done this before, but...” He sighed. “Better late than never, I guess.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Being an indulgent father, as if I could make up for your mother not being here for you. Giving you what you wanted, when you wanted it. Going along with everything you did or wanted. That’s over. I knew this thing with Sean wasn’t going to work. I could tell. So, I made some plans. You can take them or leave them. But know if you leave them, you’re going to have to make it on your own.”

“This is crazy. I’m just breaking an engagement, not doing drugs or embezzling from the company.”

“No, you’re just drifting. You’ve got a smattering of knowledge about a lot of things, but you don’t have any knowledge about accomplishment or challenges.”

She pulled out the high-backed leather chair at the desk and dropped down into it. She tugged her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, then rested her chin on her knees and looked up at her father. “Where’s this all going? You want me to get a degree in something? How about art? I could get a degree in that if you want. I can go to the university in the city, get into D’Angelo’s classes, take private lessons. I’ve got all the time in the world. How about three or four years? Is that what you want?”

“No.” He pressed his hands flat on the desk and leaned toward her. “Just six months, Brittany, six months to try it my way, and if it doesn’t work, you can take classes in art for years if you want.”

“Six months, to do what?”

“I’ve had a few phone conversations with Matthew Terrel at LynTech in Houston.”

They’d both accepted the fact ages ago that she was hopeless at business and wouldn’t step in to take over when he retired from the company he’d founded. That had been a great disappointment for him, but a truth. She didn’t have a business head. She didn’t care about business at all, but she cared about him, and LynTech had been very important to him ever since she’d been old enough to remember. “Terrel’s the guy that’s working with the other one, the one who was going to split up LynTech, then decided to stay on and develop the company?”

“Zane Holden and Matthew Terrel. Terrel is operating it at the moment, so he’s the one I contacted.”

“Why were you talking to him? Is there trouble at the company?”

“No, it’s transitional, but it’s doing fairly well,” he said. “I was talking to him about clearing it for you to go back to Houston.”

“What does this Terrel person have to do with me going back to Houston?”

“He’s going to set you up at LynTech to work. You are going to show up at nine and go home at five for six months. You’re going to make a difference. You are going to finally have more of a challenge than trying to figure out which art discipline is superior.”

She lowered her feet to the stone floor and looked right at her father. “Me, at LynTech?”

“Yes. You’re not going to run away this time. You’re going to work.”

“Dad, I know you’re upset, and I don’t blame you, but that’s crazy. I’ll destroy the company in a week.”

“You’re not that good,” he said with the shadow of a smile as he stood back. “And I’ve got a feeling that Mr. Terrel won’t let that happen.”

“So, you want me to head to Houston, and let this man, Terrel, babysit me?”

The smile was getting a bit larger. “I wouldn’t put it that way.”

“Dad, you’re in shock. I am, too. I mean, I know I’ve upset things. But to think that I should go and work at LynTech, well...” She almost shuddered. “That is not a good idea.”

“All I’m asking from you is six months of work and no engagements.”

She had always felt so independent, but she knew that she would never be independent of this man, of his good opinion of her, or the fact that she felt as if she’d failed him in so many ways. She knew she owed him so much. “Just go to LynTech?”

“And give yourself a break. Stay away from men, from situations. Give yourself a breather so you can really think about things. If you find out there isn’t a place for you there, then we’ll call it even, and you can go to any university you want and study anything you want to study.”

A break? Time to breathe and think? Even if this Terrel person was looking over her shoulder she could do six months. And for some reason she wanted to see Houston again. To see the house there. She hadn’t been back for over two years. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

She didn’t know what she expected. Him to smile, hug her, say he was happy? No matter what she thought, she didn’t expect him to hold out his hand to her. “We’ve got an agreement. Work, no complications. Agreed?”

She took his hand, and felt as if she was sealing her fate. “Agreed,” she whispered.

“Terrel is expecting you at two in the afternoon, Houston time, day after tomorrow.” He tapped her chin. “Don’t look so bothered. Just do your best. That’s all I ask.” He hugged her, and, as he stood back, he said, “We’ll talk in the morning and get things straight,” then he was gone.

Brittany slowly sank back in the chair again. Evening was coming, shadows creeping into the room, and in that moment, she felt very, very alone.

Houston, Texas, December 11

MATTHEW TERREL trusted very few people in his world. And he wasn't going to start by trusting the man he had hung up on in his offices at LynTech. Welsh thought he was going to buy into the company on borrowed money, but that wasn't going to happen. "Trust me," the man had said three minutes ago. "I can make this work." Matt had told him to rethink his offer, hung up and walked out of the office.

He went down the empty corridor on the executive level, went through his partner Zane Holden's darkened office and right to the executive elevator. He relished the silence all around him, thankful for the lack of voices and no ringing of the telephone. Since Zane had taken off on his honeymoon right in the middle of the transition with the company, there had been no peace at LynTech, not for him, that was for sure.

Matt hit the button, stepped into the small elevator car, then pressed the button for the parking garage and leaned back against the wall. He closed his eyes, shutting out his own image in the reflective doors in front of him. He shut out a large man dressed all in black, from the collarless shirt to the trim slacks, leather boots and black briefcase in one hand. He knew that his sandy-blond hair needed a trim, that the beginning of a new beard was starting to shadow his strong jaw, and that by all rights, his dark-blue eyes should be bloodshot from lack of sleep.

He exhaled, felt the car slide downwards and didn't open his eyes until the soft chime announced the doors were going to open. He stood straight, raked his fingers through his hair, then as the doors opened, he stepped out into the cavernous parking garage. The heels of his boots struck the cement, the sound echoing off the low ceiling and thick walls as he started over to his car, one of very few left in the structure.

Peace. God, he craved it sometimes.

As a kid he'd been alone a lot, and most people thought that was why he'd gotten in such trouble back then, because he was a loner. That was only partially true. The fact was, he stayed away from his father, avoided his mother and had no brothers or sisters. He made his own way and didn't want to change that. He didn't have much that was permanent in his life. He neared the car he'd finally bought when he'd agreed to stay in Houston for a while to help Zane get the business grounded. The large black Jeep gleamed in the low light, riding high on heavy tires and with tinted windows. He'd sell it when he left.

He got within ten feet of the car, but stopped when he glanced ahead to the left. A security door in the back wall was ajar. The door shouldn't have been open at all. There had been renovations going on, changing the original conference complex into an expanded day-care center, but that door was always locked. He reached in his pocket for his cell phone, punched in the number for security, and it was answered right away. No one was supposed to be in that area after five, and they'd send someone to check it out within ten minutes.

He told them to hurry, then shoved the phone back in his pocket, and started for the door himself. He knew what damage could be done in ten minutes, heaven knew he'd done enough damage in ten minutes when he was a kid. He approached the door, never a fan of confrontation, but more than able to take care of himself. He'd never developed a love for fighting, the way a lot of his old friends had, the friends who had ended up dead or in prison. But he could take care of himself.

He reached the door, pulled it farther back, hesitated as he looked into the broad hallway that lead to the center of the complex and saw nothing but shadows. He listened, then stepped inside. He knew the area by heart, a hallway with rooms off it, leading to a large central space with more private rooms off it, another hallway that led to the front of the building and the reception area. It was all being redone for the day-care center, with painting and restructuring. Right now it was in shadows. He felt for the wall switch, flicked it, but nothing happened.

He waited, then continued through the hallway, a faint glow coming from somewhere ahead. He went toward it. The smell of paint was heavy in the still air. He went farther, strange shapes materializing before him, something that looked for all the world like a tree of dark shadows. He was

about to step into the large central area, nearing the tree-looking thing, when he sensed movement to his left. He spun around, and the next thing he knew someone was running into him, hands striking his middle and he was being pitched backwards.

Things he'd never forgotten from his misspent youth came back in a rush, and he grabbed at his attacker, catching at flailing hands, jerking the person back with him. He twisted and as they hit the floor together, he was on top with his body weight pinning his attacker under him.

"Fire, fire!" someone was screaming at the same time he realized that the hands he'd captured were fine-boned, and the body under his was slight, although tall, and the scent of flowers and something else were infinitely female. Soft, warm, breathing as rapid as his, and a woman's voice still screaming over and over again, "Fire!"

The woman was twisting without stopping, and as his hold grew slack from shock, her hands were free and striking out at him. He let go completely, scrambling back to get out of reach of the stinging slaps on his face, arms and chest.

With a man it would have been different. He would have decked him. But a woman? He might have been a hoodlum when he was younger, but he'd never hit a woman and never would. So his only recourse was to try to grab at her hands again, to capture them to stop the blows. Despite the fact that he was battling a blurred shadow, he got the suggestion of wild curls, slenderness and real strength.

He grabbed for her hands, but before he could make contact, he was blindsided by someone on his left, the impact sending him reeling to his right, his head and shoulder striking an unyielding wall. He ignored the jarring impact, spun around, scrambling to his feet and took a punch to his middle.

As he lurched backward, he heard what sounded like a kid's voice screaming at him. "Hey, you jerk, you let her go!" And the owner of the voice was running at him again. "You stop hurting her!"

Kids and women, Matt thought at the same time he managed to catch the kid by his shoulders and hold on for dear life while he managed to evade most of the punches and kicks coming at him. Then the woman was there too, grabbing at him, jerking hard on his arm, still yelling, and the madness of the moment seemed to be suffocating him.

The screams echoed all around him until his own screams were mixed with them. "Stop it!" he yelled at the top of his lungs, then pushed the kid away from him. He felt the wall behind him, relieved that he wouldn't be attacked from the rear. "That's enough," he yelled, "That's enough! Stop. I give up."

There was a sudden silence as Matt managed to make out the shape of the child to his right, then the woman, not more than three feet in front of him. Even in the shadows, he could see her standing with both hands up, but not in surrender. She looked ready to deliver a karate chop as she spoke at a thankfully reasonable level in a husky, very female voice, "You'd better not move. Not one move."

"I'm not planning on it," Matt muttered.

The kid moved and Matt turned to protect himself, but instead of another blow being delivered, the kid turned on the overhead lights. The flash of brightness blinded Matt for a moment. Then he finally saw his attackers.

Chapter Two

Matt saw the kid first, maybe eight or nine years old wearing baggy jeans, a hooded sweatshirt and grabbing a faded Yankees baseball cap from the floor. He put it on backwards over thick black hair that curled at the ends, and he watched Matt carefully with dark-brown eyes in a tanned face. Both hands came up in front of him, and both were balled into fists.

Then Matt saw the woman.

His first impression was a tangle of wild auburn curls around a stunningly beautiful face dominated by eyes that he could have sworn were a deep green. She was tall and slender with improbably long legs defined by tight jeans worn with suede boots and topped by a loose navy sweater. If she hadn't looked so earnest and so unsettlingly beautiful, he would have laughed at her "karate" attack stance.

"Don't... don't you move at all," she said, both hands up, long fingers pressed tightly together, no doubt ready to "chop" if they had to. She never looked away from Matt as she spoke to the boy. "Go and get help. Get security at the front desk."

But the kid didn't go anywhere. Instead, he came a bit closer, his dark-brown eyes narrowed on Matt and his hands still in tight fists. "What you up to, mister?" he asked. "You're ripping the people off or what? You stealing stuff from this place, or you gonna hurt the lady?"

He had to be from the day care upstairs, but he didn't look like the kids that had been coming in and out since Matt had been here. "No, I'm not ripping people off," he said as he realized there was a tree in the room, right in the middle, an almost cartoon-like thing, with holes in it and branches that were chained to the ceiling with what looked like platforms on them. A real tree house, he thought as he looked back at the boy, then down at the floor and saw his briefcase.

"Sure," the kid said with heavy sarcasm.

His briefcase had landed upside down against the wall by his feet. "Well, I'm not, and I'm not stealing and I'm not going to hurt—" He reached for the briefcase as he talked, but the kid moved faster than he did, kicking at the case, and sending it flying ten feet across the floor. It ended up near the strange-looking tree. "No, you don't, mister!"

"Oh, come on. That's my briefcase...what's left of it," he said, eyeing the heavy scuff mark on the side of the case.

"Can you prove it?" the kid asked.

He looked at the boy, then the woman. They hardly looked like a gang, but they were ganging up on him. "I don't know what's going on here, but I'm supposed to be here. The question is," he said as the woman moved a bit closer and he could see that her eyes really were a deep, almost emerald green, "why are you two here?"

EVEN AS BRITTANY braced herself to do whatever it took to fend off this mountain of a man in front of her, she knew it wasn't right. With the bright lights on, there was no furtive criminal in front of her, but a large man, dressed all in black, wearing clothes that weren't cheap, and frowning at her and the kid as if they were aliens.

"We...we should get Security." She glanced at the boy she hadn't even known was in the complex until he joined in the attack. "Go and get help, please."

"Yes, get Security," the man said quickly in a deep voice.

"We don't need no police in here," the boy said as he glared at the man. "I can take care of him." He moved a bit closer, his fists raised. "No problem."

She would have laughed if the kid hadn't seemed so serious and the man hadn't seemed so angry. "No, you go and get help. I...I'll..." She stumbled over her bravado as she looked back at the man. He was huge.

Dark eyes were on her, angry eyes in a sharply chiseled face. Sandy-blond hair, worn longer than was fashionable, was mussed, only adding to a strangely edgy feeling that the man seemed to radiate. Big? Shoot, he was a mountain and probably outweighed her by eighty or a hundred pounds. She remembered the feel of him against her, over her, controlling her and she inched back a bit, aware of how impossible it would be to control him.

All she'd seen was a flash, someone there, then there was impact, her body tangling with his, strength everywhere, and she'd had a flash of terror that she was being attacked, or even kidnapped. Her father had told her often enough when she was growing up that she had to take precautions against some nutcase thinking he could make money by kidnapping her. And she'd been told when you are attacked never to stop fighting. But it all seemed foolish now.

If the man hadn't been off balance in the first place, she never would have been able to upset him, let alone keep him from doing whatever he wanted to do. But the longer she looked at him, she knew that nothing made sense. He was obviously color-challenged, but his clothes were expensive, as expensive as the black boots he wore with them. And the briefcase on the floor wouldn't be carried by a thug.

"Security can figure this out," she said, her voice lower now.

"No," the kid said immediately.

But the man just shrugged his massive shoulders, leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms on his chest. After one glance at his watch, another less-than-cheap thing about him, the dark eyes were on her. "That's fine by me."

She wished she was controlling this, but knew she wasn't. She knew she'd never controlled anything about this encounter. "Okay," she said, and turned to the boy, but he wasn't there. She looked back at the front doors, but there was no one in sight. He had gone to get help, and she hadn't even heard him move.

She exhaled with relief that help was coming, that the kid had done as she'd originally asked, but that was short-lived when the stranger murmured, "He took off."

"He's getting Security."

"Not in this lifetime," the man said in a deep voice as he narrowed his eyes on her.

"Where did he go?"

"I didn't see him go, but trust me, he's long gone."

"No," she said quickly, looking back over her shoulder at the empty area around them. "He's gone for help."

"He's your kid?"

"No. I don't even know him," she admitted as she looked back at the stranger. "But he'll get help."

"You trust that kid?"

She hadn't thought of it in those terms, but she'd never been cynical, either. "I think he'll come back."

"He could, but speaking from personal experience and not being the trusting sort, why would he come back if he'd just been caught where he shouldn't be and had attacked someone he shouldn't have attacked?" His eyes flicked over her, making her stomach tighten. "My guess is, it's just you and me now."

Brittany took a step back, and knew she didn't want it to be "just you and me," with any man, especially not with this giant of a man who was looking at her with an intensity that made her thought processes amazingly scrambled.

She knew she should get out of there. She should run like hell. She looked for her purse, and saw it, right behind the stranger, the heel of his boot either pressing it against the wall or stepping on it. She couldn't tell. And she wasn't going closer to get a better look, either.

"Hey, what's going on here?" someone yelled from behind them.

She turned and saw a security guard rushing into the conference area. “See, I told you he was getting help,” she said to the stranger.

He looked past her. “Not unless he’s wearing overalls now.”

She turned back and saw the guard coming toward them, followed by a tiny, dark-haired woman in pink overalls, but no sign of the kid. The guard stopped when he saw the two of them, but the woman didn’t stop until she was right by them. She looked from Brittany to the stranger, then settled on the man. “I was in the security room when they said you called in. I came to see what was happening.”

“That’s what I was trying to figure out myself.” The man stood a bit straighter and Brittany was vaguely aware that her purse fell to one side.

“Where’s the boy?” Brittany asked as she turned back to the guard.

The middle-aged man in the gray uniform shrugged. “Boy? What boy?”

Brittany looked past him. “A boy, maybe eight or nine years old, in baggy clothes, a baseball cap?” She looked back at the guard. “He went to get you.”

“No, ma’am, never saw a kid.” He motioned to the stranger. “Mr. Terrel here called Security and Mrs. Blake was there when the call came, and then we heard the commotion.”

Mr. Terrel? Brittany turned to those dark eyes still holding steady on her. Matthew Terrel? A C.E.O.? He wasn’t like any C.E.O. she’d met in her life. No three-piece suit or pinstriped shirt. Shoot, and she’d attacked him, the man she was supposed to meet, the man who was going to “watch out for her” for her father. Shoot and double shoot.

“I thought there was a break-in, and I had visions of graffiti all over the place.” The pink-overalled woman looked around as she spoke. “I couldn’t bear it if this was spoiled. That tree’s perfect and everything’s going so well.”

“Amy, don’t worry. I think everything’s okay. I saw the back door was open, called Security then came in to check.” Matthew Terrel looked back at Brittany, and she was startled to see what might have been the shadow of a smile in his dark eyes. He couldn’t be starting to enjoy this. “I barely got inside before I was attacked. Some kid who must have been staying late at the day care got me, right after she did.” He motioned toward Brittany and she barely hid a flinch when his hand almost struck her shoulder. “She came out of the shadows screaming something about a fire.”

“You hit me first,” she said, then realized how truly ridiculous that sounded. Matthew Terrel attacking someone? That was the wrong road to go down, and she knew that it was time to stop the madness. “I’d tried to turn on the lights and couldn’t find a switch that worked, then I ran into someone and he...he grabbed me, and it scared me, and I was just protecting myself.”

“But screaming fire?” he asked, and, yes, she knew that he was on the verge of smiling now.

“I was told to yell fire, because people ignore other things or don’t want to get involved, but if they think they’re going up in smoke, they pay attention.”

The smile came to light then, a lifting of his lips and crinkling of lines at the corners of his dark eyes. “Well, I have to say, you got my attention, Miss...?”

She opened her mouth to say who she was, that she was here to meet with him, that she’d been delayed and maybe even apologize for hitting him. But before she could get anything out, the security guard who had gone to look around was back. “Nothing bothered, Mrs. Blake. Everything looks just fine.”

“Thank goodness,” Amy sighed. “Today has been so crazy, what with the kids and fabric swatches and toy designers.”

“Is there anything else, sir?” the guard asked. He eyed Brittany, then said, “How about her?”

“I’ll take care of this. Just keep an eye on the doors.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard said, then left.

Brittany watched the man, swearing she could catch a hint of the scents that had surrounded her when they’d fallen to the floor together. A mellow aftershave, heat and something else that oddly

reminded her of when she was a kid and went to the office with her dad. That was weird. “Are you okay, Matt?” Amy asked.

“I’m fine. I was just trying to get out of here. I had an appointment that never showed, and just destroyed whatever time line I was trying to keep intact.”

“Yeah, I heard about that meeting. She never showed?”

He moved as Amy spoke, lightly brushing Brittany’s arm as he passed her. She moved back a step and watched him cross to the tree base to get his briefcase. He picked it up, then brushed at the expensive leather. “No. Not even a call.” He came back, stopping near Amy. “Not that I expected one. Mr. Lewis said she wasn’t thrilled with having to actually work, but he was sure she’d be here on time. He thought they had an understanding. But he’s the father and probably wants to think the best of his only child.”

Her heart sank. They were talking about her. She saw Amy grin at him, a sense of familiarity between the big man and the tiny woman. They seemed so easy together, so connected as they spoke, and a part of Brittany felt a crazy jealousy that a man and woman could be so comfortable together. Then she remembered that the guard had called her Mrs. Blake. Were they just friends, friends close enough to have an inside joke running about her? She cursed the fact that her face felt hot and she brushed at her cheek as they kept talking.

“Her idea of work is getting engaged,” Amy said. “I doubt that she’ll show up here.”

“I hope she doesn’t. The only reason I agreed to hire her on was that her father’s been so decent about things. And I could tell it meant a lot to him. He’s got the idea that if she just sits behind a desk, that something will kick in and she’ll show what she’s made of.” He laughed then, a rough sound that jarred Brittany. “Poor guy, hope springs eternal, I guess. She’s got to be in her twenties and he’s watching out for her as if she’s a teenager getting summer work.”

“She acts like some spoiled teenager,” Amy said.

“You’ve got that right, and just what I need. Babysitting a recalcitrant brat. If she shows I’ll have Rita put her in an office as far away from me as she can and lock the door.”

Brittany wanted nothing more than to go up to him, slap him across the face and walk out. But that would only feed into what he was saying. How she wished she had her father’s way with words, knowing just the right thing to say to bring grown men to their knees. That was another trait of his that had eluded her.

“He’s her father,” Amy said. “Parents always hope for the best. And maybe she’ll find someone else, get engaged again and this time make it to the altar, then she’ll be another man’s problem, and get her father off the hook.”

“Sure, and pigs fly,” Matt muttered, taking one last swipe at a huge scuff mark on his briefcase.

She’d had enough of their condescending ridicule and she was ready to leave. No agreement with her father was going to make her stay anywhere near this man. She moved quickly, made a grab for her purse, and would have just walked out if Matt hadn’t spoken to her.

“I’m sorry. I got sidetracked.”

She turned and saw thankfully that there was a buffer of space between them. “I guess so,” she muttered.

“I’m Matt Terrel. Now, why were you here?”

“I came to see about a job.”

“In here?”

Before she could say that she’d always thought this was the conference complex and not some crazy area with a fake tree in the middle of it where she’d been told to meet him, a smiling Amy came closer to her.

“Oh gosh, I know who you are.”

But there was no embarrassment for what she’d been saying about her. “You do?”

“Of course I do.” She held out her hand. “I’m Amy Blake, the person you were supposed to meet with. But I left a message for you that I had to cancel and would call and reschedule.”

She glanced at Matt, who was watching her. “I thought you were doing the interview? And I never heard anything about canceling.”

“Me? No, I have a totally hands-off policy when it comes to the day-care center. And I never heard about any of this.”

None of this was making any more sense than their attack scene moments ago. “A day-care center?”

“Well, anyway, you’re here, although I thought you’d come up to see me at the old center.” Amy motioned around the room. “But this is great. You can see the new place. There’s much more space, and the play tree. Lindsey’s idea, actually, for the kids. There’s a real kitchen, two of them and we’re going to have an outside play area when we figure out the best place for it.” The woman was in rapture over the place. “It used to be a conference complex, but Mr. Holden rethought his plans and decided that the conference rooms would be better on the sixth floor and the day-care center could be put down here. They’ve almost got the transition finished. We hope by the new year that we’ll be on track for the switch.”

All of that was of no interest to Brittany. Kids weren’t part of her world, and she certainly wasn’t going to allow Terrel to assign her to do some babysitting chores. “That’s all very nice, but—”

“Oh, of course, this is where you come in,” Amy said, walking to the closest plain white wall. “It’s here.” She motioned to the wall, then the ceiling. “Maybe even the ceilings. The woman who actually started the center wants this place to be magical, to be nourishing for the kids. And to be nearly indestructible.” She came over to Brittany again. “So, what do you think? Tell me it’s doable. It was my idea to hire a graphic designer for this, to get it into professional hands for the murals. Tell me you can make this all happen.”

Brittany pieced together what she thought was going on, that this woman thought she was someone looking for a job doing some graphic art on the walls of this place. She loved art, always had, and in her meandering path through higher education, had had a lot of classes in both traditional art and graphics. The thought was intriguing. It was too bad she wasn’t here for that job instead of a desk job under this man’s eagle eye.

“It’s got real possibilities,” she said, turning slowly in a circle to look at the space.

“You’ve got ideas already?” Amy asked.

As Brittany looked around at the partially domed ceiling over the tree, and the way the branches were suspended toward both side walls, she knew she did have ideas. Ideas that tumbled over each other. “It’s a babysitting thing, like preschool?” she asked.

“Day care. Both all day, and before and after school, so the kids range from babies to preteen.”

It could be great. She looked back at Amy, trying to ignore the man watching her so intently. “You want art on the walls and ceiling?”

“Both, or just the walls, whatever you think would be the most stunning and appropriate. It’s for the kids. Period. It doesn’t have to please adults.”

Pleasing adults. That phrase brought her dad into the picture. She could do this. She knew she could, and her father hadn’t said just what she had to do here. But as she glanced back and caught Matt’s eye, she knew that he’d never let her do this. He’d never turn her loose with paint and bare walls. Never. She looked away from him, glancing at a short hallway that she knew led out to the reception area.

“I could do this,” she said, as much for herself as for them. “I’d like to try.” And as she spoke, she knew this was the only way she’d get a chance without her father stepping in and calling in more favors. “I really would like to try,” she said, looking back at Amy and trying to ignore the man in black. “I’ve got some ideas.”

“Okay, but the last person who came in wanted to do wild animals all over the walls, and...” She motioned to the ceiling. “He wanted to do panthers on the ceiling as if they were coming out of the trees. I don’t mind telling you it gave me the chills. Can you imagine what it would do to a child trying to nap and seeing that?”

Ideas were coming to her fast and furious. “I wasn’t thinking of wild animals.”

“What do you see this all becoming?” Amy asked.

She told her with growing enthusiasm the images she was getting. “If it’s for the kids, I see the kids on the walls, circles of them, dancing, playing. The real kids. You know, the ones who are regulars here. They’d be in the art, part of it, and ringing the walls, as if playing ‘Ring Around the Rosey’ in a play yard.” She looked up. “And the ceiling, it’s the sky, just a simple sky, a pale blue, maybe a rainbow on the far side, and clouds, puffy balls of white cotton suspended by fishing line from the ceiling. All about the kids. As if it was their world.”

She knew she’d gotten carried away, talking quickly, trying to make them see what she could see in her mind, and she was high on excitement. And pleasure that she could do this. That was the best part of all. She saw it, and she could make it happen. She’d never experienced anything like that before. She looked at Amy who was staring overhead.

“Oh, my, that’s wonderful,” Amy said softly, then glanced at Brittany. “I can see it, too. And it’s perfect. The center’s called Just for Kids and it truly would be. I love it.”

“You’ve done a lot of this sort of work?” Matt asked, cutting into her euphoria, and drawing her attention to where he stood with his arms folded on his chest. He wouldn’t let her do anything. As soon as he knew she was Brittany Lewis, he’d laugh her right out of here, and it would be over. And, when he found out who she was, that was the nicest outcome she could imagine.

“No, I haven’t, not really,” she said honestly.

Amy touched her on the arm. “If you’ve got the talent to make it happen, I don’t see what lack of experience has to do with anything. Maybe you’re just finding your gift in art. This could be it.”

It could be it. She wanted it to be it. “I can do it.”

“Maybe we could see your portfolio, Miss—” Amy smiled at her. “I still don’t know your name.”

She stared at Amy, but sensed Matt moving, coming closer to her, stirring the air, and she never said the words, “I’m Brittany Lewis, the spoiled-rotten daughter of Robert Lewis.”

No, she wasn’t going to admit that, not here, not now, and she wasn’t going to let this go, either. She could do it, please her father in the long run, and best of all, if it worked the way she thought it could, she’d prove that she was a viable, worthwhile person, instead of the brat Matt and Amy expected to appear with that name.

She felt an odd fluttering in her middle, and avoided the name thing. “My portfolio, it...” She couldn’t say it was at a chateau south of Paris. “I’m sorry, I forgot to bring it.”

“If you can do what you say you can do, I’d love to have you give us a proposal and I can look at your portfolio then. I need something to send to my boss. Something she can see so she knows where this is going. As far as I’m concerned, you’re the only one in the running for the job at this moment.”

“That’s great,” she said, feeling as if she’d just jumped over an incredible hurdle in her life. She’d been told she had art talent, but qualifications had always gone with the praise: if she could learn to apply herself...if she bothered to use it...if she ever decided what she wanted to do with it. Right then, she knew what she wanted to do. “When do you need it all?”

“As soon as possible. We’re in a bit of a time crunch, but if it’s a problem for you—”

“No, I’ll have something for you by tomorrow. Do I bring it here?”

“No, the workmen will be all over the place. Bring it up to the sixth floor. You’ll see colored doors with Just for Kids written on them. I’ll be in there.” There was a beeping sound, then Amy took a pager out of the pocket of her overalls. She glanced down at it to read the printout on the small LED screen. “Taylor’s awake.” She looked at Brittany. “My daughter. I need to get upstairs or she’ll pitch a fit.”

“Amy?” Matt said to get Amy’s attention before she took off. “I know how much this center means to Lindsey and Zane, but we’re still doing business here.”

“Of course. And we’re within budget, aren’t we?”

“That’s not it. It’s about that kid who was in here. You can’t let them run around without supervision. That little hoodlum that attacked me was probably the one who opened the door, and he was looking for trouble. He needs to be kept under lock and key.”

Amy shook her head. “He can’t be one of our kids. First of all, they’re always supervised, and secondly, the after-school kids are long gone. But I’ll check and if he’s one of ours, it won’t happen again.”

Matt nodded, then Amy turned to Brittany. “I can’t wait for tomorrow.” That smile came again. “And I still don’t know who you are.”

Brittany stared at Amy, and was startled when Matt spoke up. “You do have a name, don’t you?”

Brittany looked at Matt. “Of course I have a name,” she said and remembered something her father had told her many times over the years. “If you want something, you use whatever you need to make it happen.” She wanted this to happen, and she would do whatever it took to prove she wasn’t a spoiled brat. She’d do it and he wouldn’t have to know who she was for now.

“B. J. Smythe,” she said, putting together an old nickname with her mother’s maiden name. “And it’s Smythe, S-M-Y-T-H-E. Not Smith,” she added for good measure.

Chapter Three

“B. J. Smythe not Smith,” Matt said, and she blushed slightly, high color touching her delicate cheekbones. “I’ll remember that,” he murmured, and knew that he wouldn’t have any trouble remembering this woman on any level.

“Great to meet you, B.J.,” Amy said, then hurried toward the doors. She called, “Tomorrow,” over her shoulder, and was gone to get to her daughter.

“Shoot, that’s just great,” Matt heard B.J. mutter as she watched Amy leave.

“Excuse me?”

She shook her head and turned back to him. “Sorry. I just needed to talk to her some more, to get details.”

“Well, she’s long gone. When the children are involved, she’s single-minded, and when it’s her daughter, well...” It was his turn to shrug. “She’s got tunnel vision.”

“She sounds dedicated.”

“She really is. Actually, I hope that kid is one of hers so she can reign him in.”

“You don’t like kids?”

He shrugged at a question that came out of nowhere as far as he was concerned. “I don’t even think about them, until something like this happens.”

“I can’t say I’ve thought much about them, either, but I think you’re hardly being fair to that boy.”

That really came out of nowhere. “What?”

The suggestion of a frown tugged a fine line between her eyes. “You’re calling him a hoodlum, but you don’t know why that door was open or why he was here. You also know that he thought you were the hoodlum, and he thought he was protecting me from...” Those green eyes skimmed over him. “...a huge man dressed all in black sneaking around in the dark.”

“The light switch didn’t work, and I wasn’t sneaking anywhere.” He stopped, wondering why he was the one justifying his actions in this situation. “The boy’s the problem, a problem waiting to happen and we probably won’t have to wait much longer.”

“There you go again. You don’t even know him.”

He had to admit that she was good at keeping him on the defensive. “Well, he didn’t come back, no matter how much you trusted he would. And I’ve seen that type before, the way I’ve seen too many Brittany Lewis types.”

Those green eyes narrowed. “Oh, so you know Brittany Lewis that well, do you?”

“No, and I don’t want to,” he admitted with a grimace. “But I know the type.”

She shook her head as if she was exasperated with him. “That’s a really bad habit you have there, Mr. Terrel.”

“It’s Matt, and what are you talking about?”

“Okay, Matt. You’re forming opinions, no, making judgments, without knowing all the facts.”

They’d started as adversaries when she’d attacked him, and it just kept going. “That’s what you’re doing, isn’t it?” he asked, moving a bit closer to her.

He was used to people reacting to his size and presence. It was a given that he was intimidating, but she didn’t back down as he got closer. “What are you talking about?”

“You don’t know me. You don’t know how I do things, how I form opinions. But you’ve got your opinion of me and you’re passing judgment on me. So, answer me this, who’s worse, you or me?”

“The question is, who’s wrong, you or me?” she countered without missing a beat.

“You, definitely you. You’re wrong, dead wrong about me.”

“So, you can’t admit to being wrong, either.”

He had always liked a skirmish, and this was starting to intrigue him. The first time she'd ended up under him. Not a bad start, and he wondered how this would end. "Oh, and you can admit to being wrong?" he asked, not bothering to stop the smile that was starting to grow at this exchange.

She stared at him hard, then turned away. For a moment he felt disappointed that she was going to give up after all, that he'd read her wrong. But she made a pretext of looking at the ridiculous tree and spoke in a low voice. "Of course I can admit I'm wrong, if or when I'm wrong," she said in an even voice. Then she turned and there was something in her expression, and it had nothing to do with humor. She thought she was going in for the kill. "Which, of course, isn't that often."

He shook his head slowly as he went close enough to her to see that her lashes were incredibly lush, and her lips were their natural color, owing nothing to any lipstick. Damn it, this was getting to be fun. That was something he hadn't even considered with a woman before. Sex, conversation, even possibly mutual interests. But fun? That was a new thing for him, and he found it very endearing. "Oh, I get it. This is an aberration, you being wrong?"

"No, it's not, because I'm not. And that being said, I've only got until tomorrow to get my ideas down for Mrs. Blake and nail this job. I just wish..."

Her voice trailed off, and he found himself interested in what she would wish for. "So, you're a person who wishes? The next thing I know, you'll say you believe in Santa Claus."

"And you don't." It was a statement, not a question. "That's too bad."

"It's not smart to sit around waiting for someone to drop presents in your lap," he muttered, annoyed that her words had made him sound like Scrooge. "So, what were you wishing for?"

"More time with Mrs. Blake. I have such a vague idea of this place, and I want to get this job."

"Amy's easy, don't worry. And it has to go by me, anyway."

She tilted her head slightly to one side and those lashes lowered a fraction of an inch as she studied him for a long moment. "And you must have a full working knowledge of this place, what it's going to be, what the vision is for it?"

He didn't know where she was going, but he went along willingly. "I don't know if I'd get visionary. Imagination isn't my strong suit, but I've seen all the projections, the ideas and their budget."

She came a bit closer, and he could feel whatever control he'd thought he'd had in this encounter evaporating. She was less than two feet from him, bringing with her a soft fragrance that he remembered from their collision, a subtly seductive fragrance that he could almost name. Almost. But not quite. "Okay, you have this knowledge about the day-care center, and I don't know much, except it's for the kids."

He waited, feeling something coming, knowing it was coming, but not about to ask her for a map. He knew on some level that if he asked her directly, she'd gain even more control. So, he just waited.

Finally she spoke and upset his balance again. "Do you have a car here?"

He nodded, waiting.

"Do you drive?"

"Since I was twelve."

At least that took her back a bit, her green eyes widening slightly. "What?"

"I took a car for a joyride when I was twelve, went ten miles before I was stopped. That was the beginning of my life of crime."

He had no idea why he'd just said what he said. It was the truth, but it wasn't something he ever told anyone about. Not even Zane. But before he could backtrack, he was faced with her smile, an expression that quite literally lit up the world at that moment. It was all he could do to concentrate on what she was saying now. "Oh, sure, and I just bet you did time in Sing-Sing, too."

God, she was beautiful when she smiled, and that angered him just a bit. He was very happy for women to exist on the fringes of his world. That was comfortable for him, and nonintrusive. He'd never welcomed distractions, especially not with a possible employee, and he really did have a lot of

work to do. He still had control. And that control was the fact that he could walk away whenever he wanted. He spoke quickly, looking at his watch as an excuse not to look at B.J. for a moment. “No, I missed Sing-Sing on the tour, but I really am running late. My timetable’s shot to hell.”

“The car?”

He looked back at her, the smile was gone, but its shadow lingered in her eyes. “Excuse me?”

“The car. Your car?”

“I told you I have a car, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, I don’t have a car. I took a taxi to get here, and I’m short on time, and I need to know more about this place.” She hesitated. “So, simply put, the solution is for you to give me a ride, and we can talk on the way.”

He knew that if he drove away from here with her, nothing would be simple. “I don’t know.” He hesitated. “I don’t even know where you live.”

“Where do you live?” she countered.

“Do you ever answer a question directly?”

“I like to get all the facts before I speak,” she said, that smile playing around her lips again.

“Okay,” he murmured. “I live in a loft in a converted warehouse near the industrial district. I’ve barely moved in, but it’s got lots of space.”

“Well, that was more information than I needed,” she said. “I just wanted to know what area of the city you lived in. South, north, in the middle, east or west?”

“Okay, to be exact, west of the middle of the city in the area that they’re trying to redevelop. Now, where do you live?”

“Around that area.”

“Where exactly?”

She hesitated, the first time he’d seen her stop to think of an answer before she answered him. “A town house complex—yes, the Fortress—no, the Forestry. No, shoot, the Forest Lane complex.” She almost seemed flustered and color brushed her cheeks. “I’m sorry, I haven’t lived there very long. Do you know where that is?”

He knew. He passed by there most days. A park-like area of town houses being refurbished for upscale tenants. And it was close enough to his place to be “on the way,” if he took a slightly circuitous route. “Yes, I know where it is.”

“Then can I have a ride?”

He looked at her, his response as strong as it had been at first. It wasn’t diminishing. It had to be hormones, or maybe the fact that he’d been alone for quite a while now, he reasoned. Or lust. Maybe that was what this was all about. This woman was made to be lusted after, that was for sure. He could deal with that. Lust was a fiery explosion that faded almost as quickly as it came. He knew that from his own experiences in the past. Gone and forgotten. And he could deal with it easily.

“Okay, I’m parked in the parking garage.”

“Great,” she murmured and headed into the back hallway. When he got to the door, she was there, pushing it open and stepping out of the building.

He reached for the nearest light switch, flipped it, but it didn’t do anything. He’d have to go back to find a switch that worked, and he wasn’t going to take the time. Leaving the lights on, he went out after her, letting the door slam tightly behind him.

She’d stopped a few feet from the exit, looking back at him questioningly, and his whole body tightened. Yes, lust. Pure and simple. “Over there,” he said, pointing to his car. “The black Jeep.”

Brittany turned and walked quickly toward the car he’d pointed out before she lost her nerve or came to her senses. Her first lie about her name had come with amazing ease, but lying about where she lived was unsettling. She’d had to think fast, to remember where an old friend had lived in that area. Thank goodness, the complex was still there. But she still didn’t have a clue what she’d do when they got there. Fooling Matthew Terrel wasn’t a simple process.

She'd take his ride, learn whatever she could about the center. When he'd asked her about liking kids, she could have easily said she was totally ignorant of them. She'd never even thought about having any. There hadn't even been a center the last time she'd been at LynTech. But with Matt's information and her imagination, she knew she could do this. She approached his car; it fitted its owner perfectly. It was a huge sports utility vehicle with a perfect shine, chrome rims on huge tires, and darkly tinted windows. Strong and mysterious looking.

Matt hit the remote, the door locks clicked open, then he was reaching past her to grip the handle and open the door. Despite being fairly tall, Brittany had to step up and pull on a leather strap to get into the gray leather of the passenger seat. While she settled, she watched Matt stride around the front to get in behind the wheel, and she found herself looking at him, blocking out that response he immediately brought. She wasn't going to look at him as a man. He was a means to an end. Pure and simple.

She looked away from him as he started the car, and she remembered what he'd said about Brittany Lewis just minutes ago. She let his snide remarks settle in her mind, and grabbed at the anger that had come with them. She stared hard out the window at the almost empty structure. The car moved and Matt spoke as they approached the exit ramp.

“Do you want to get started?” he asked.

“Excuse me?” she said as they left the garage.

“I thought you wanted to talk?”

“Yes, of course. I was wondering about that tree.” She said the first thing that came to her mind. “What's the idea behind it?”

“Sort of a jungle gym, I guess. Tunnels in the trunk to climb in, and the platforms for play and napping. Part of the fantasy theme that Lindsey, the director, wanted. Personally, it would scare me to death if I was four years old waking from a nap and finding myself in there.”

She made the mistake of turning to look at him. If she'd thought he was disturbing before, in the close confines of the car he was downright dangerous. The low lights from the dash cut angles and planes of shadows on his face, and the sexiness was magnified. She turned back quickly, staring straight ahead. She would not make the mistake she'd made so many times in her life. That way she had of meeting someone, seeing something in him that blinded her, then, somewhere down the road, realizing that he was simply a stranger. Matt Terrel was a stranger.

“With the right backdrop, the tree could be magical,” she murmured.

“And that's where you come in, turning a nightmare into a...” He paused. “What would you call it?”

“Just what you did, a fantasy, and one that revolves around the children. Or the children around it.” She braced herself, then looked back at Matt. She was thankful that he was turned away from her, looking to his left up the street at the stream of traffic. “The children dancing around it, laughing, enjoying the magic.”

He exhaled, still staring to his left. “Sounds good to me. Lots of kids' stuff that reeks of make-believe.”

She could see the way his jaw was working, and she had no idea where that cynicism came from, any more than she had any idea why he had seemed so negative about the boy involved in their “incident.” “That sounds cynical to me.”

He turned to her as they waited for an opening in the traffic that filled the street done up in Christmas finery. “Cynical? No, just realistic,” he murmured.

“There's a big difference between cynical and realistic.”

“Oh?” His eyes flicked to hers, narrowed in the softness of the lights. “And you're going to enlighten me? Go ahead.”

“Well, a realist looks at that tree and figures it’s a toy, a plaything and isn’t expected to look like a real tree and accepts that. A cynic looks at the tree and figures it would scare any four-year-old and wants to tear it down.”

“I never said I wanted to tear it down,” he said as he managed to finally merge into traffic.

“Would you?”

“That’s not an option. It cost an arm and a leg, so it’s staying.”

“Money’s the bottom line?”

“Isn’t it always?”

“Cynical, cynical, cynical,” she murmured.

A Santa clone walked right in front of the Jeep to weave his way across the street, and Matt braked to a stop. “No, if I was that cynical, I would have taken out Santa Claus,” he muttered.

“No one would take out Santa,” she said. “Not even a world-class cynic.”

Matt laughed then, a sound that both startled and disturbed Brittany. It was soft and rich, wrapping itself around her in the close confines of the black car, an enticing pleasure that she wanted to push away. “I guess I’m not world-class,” he said, starting to drive again, but so slowly that they could have walked faster. “Just cynic enough to look at LynTech realistically and try to make it viable.

“There’s viable and there’s viable. Right now LynTech has more money leaks than a sieve, and it has subsidiaries that aren’t exactly stable.” He eased into the next lane behind a car decorated with flashing Christmas lights around its rear window. “If we can get some cash flow from new investors, we might survive. If not, it’s a lost cause.”

She knew LynTech hadn’t been in top form when it changed hands. It had been a source of real pain for her father. After he’d spent years building the company, it had started to fail and he didn’t have the time or the energy left to pull it back up. And she hadn’t been there to help. Her sense of business would have sunk the company completely. “Can I ask you something?”

“I have no idea how many years it’s going to take to get out of this traffic,” Matt said.

The traffic was incredible, people out shopping or going off to dinner. “Why did you and what’s-his-name, Holden, walk into Lyntech and take it over, if it was on the brink of corporate suicide?”

He finally made it to the corner and turned onto the main street in front of LynTech. “Corporate suicide? What did you do, take a class to learn sound bites for the business world?”

“I’m just asking a question.”

He shrugged as he fingered the leather-covered steering wheel. “We got involved because we figured if someone was at the helm who wasn’t attached to the company, someone who could make solid, unemotional decisions, it could be viable.”

She’d heard enough about Matt and Zane Holden during the change of power. Her father’s reluctance to hand the corporation over to them had been there, but he hadn’t had a choice. He’d had to get out, otherwise there would have been an ugly takeover from some other sources. “Slice and dice” her dad had called the two of them, “but bright.” He’d chosen the ones to take it, and Matt and Zane Holden had been that choice.

“Didn’t you acquire LynTech with the intent to disassemble it, sell off the parts, pocket the money and get out of town?”

The traffic had stopped again, and horns were being sounded when Matt looked at her. “You claim to be an artist, and talk about magic and fantasy, then in the next breath, you’re talking like some corporate shark. What are you, an artistic business person?”

He was so far off the mark that she could have almost laughed. “I’m just an artist.”

“And I’m just impressed. Most people at LynTech thought we were horrible, especially after kindly Mr. Lewis and the way he coddled them. They couldn’t understand our actions, still can’t, in some measure. But you do.”

She’d absorbed it, but had had little interest in it until she saw how it had affected her father. Now she knew the slice-and-dice concept forward and backward, along with her father’s hopes for

the company after he'd learned that Matt and Holden were staying on. His relief had been immense when he'd found out they weren't disassembling it at all.

"I understand what you're doing," she admitted as they moved slowly toward the front doors of the company. Familiar doors to her, doors that she'd actually seen put up when the building had been redesigned ten years earlier. "The question is, what are you and Mr. Holden doing with LynTech now?"

"Trying to fix it."

"And is it working?"

"Well, cynic that I am, I wouldn't be sticking around to throw money down a black hole, would I?"

"And money is the name of the game."

That brought that laugh, sudden and deep, a rich sound that felt as if it was slipping around her. "You got it," he said as the traffic inched down the street.

She had never met anyone who could laugh and make her feel like laughing, too. She looked away from him again, and out at the city streets. "So, you're in it for the long haul?"

"Zane is, but I'm just here until everything's in place."

"Then what?" she asked.

"Another challenge," he said. "There are millions of them out there, it's just a matter of finding them. But first, I need to get past this, and that means I've got a night of work ahead of me, if we ever get out of here."

"Do you want to park and walk?" she asked.

He laughed again, soft and sensual. She stared very hard up the street, concentrating on the way the Christmas lights danced on the polished finishes of the cars ahead. "Just lock the car and walk away?"

"Why not? It's like a parking lot out here."

He motioned ahead. "Once we get past the bus stop, it should move better."

She glanced up farther and saw the bus stop with a single bench and an overhead protection roof decorated with Christmas garlands. Two people were on the wooden bench, and as they got a bit closer, she recognized one of them as the boy who had come to her rescue in the center. "That's him," she said, sitting forward to get a better look at the boy, slouched down on the bench, staring at the ground, his hat on backwards.

"That's who?"

"The boy from tonight," she said pointing to him.

The woman sitting by him was thin and dark, with a deep scowl on her face as she spoke to the boy. "I guess that's his mother with him." Not a loving mother, that was for sure.

"Poor woman," Matt muttered.

As they passed by, Brittany was shocked to see the woman slap the boy on his shoulder, and he moved to get away from the blow. He looked at her, his face twisted with anger, but he didn't move again. "She hit him," Brittany said. "Stop the car!"

"Stay out of it," he said as he kept going. She reached for the door handle, but Matt caught her other arm. "No. Don't do it. You don't know what's going on." He looked back over his shoulder. "And he's okay. He probably did something that got her crazy."

They were past him now, and she sank back in the seat, jerking her arm away from Matt's touch. "How could you just let her do that?"

He slowed the car, pulled out of traffic and stopped. He turned to her, one hand on the steering wheel and one resting on the console. "Okay, what do you suggest we do to stop her?"

She sank back in the seat, resting one arm on the door frame and pressing her other hand to her eyes. "I don't know. Call the police."

“And they’d come, take a report, then send them home together where she could really do some damage. She’d be angry and embarrassed and take it out on him.”

She lowered her hand and looked at Matt and hated him for his perfect logic. “Do you think so?”

“I know so. I grew up around that kind of stuff, and you wouldn’t help him if you stepped in right now.”

He moved a bit closer to her as people rushed by outside, carrying bright Christmas parcels and going to their homes. “B.J., the kid is in a situation you can’t change. No one can change it. Leave it alone.”

She swallowed hard. “Just like that?”

He moved slightly, his hand lifting, and this time he touched her cheek, the contact of his fingers lighter than a feather’s kiss, but riveting. “Just like that,” he said in a low voice. “Walk away. You’ll never see him again.”

“You can do that?” she asked.

“I’ve done it all my life, and I’ve survived.” He smiled slightly, a shadow at his lips, and it made her heart lurch. “I’d like you to survive, B. J. Smythe not Smith.”

She’d known him an hour tops, and as he repeated her lie back to her with that smile, she felt her heart sink. It was no secret that he’d like to do away with Brittany Lewis.

Chapter Four

Matt didn't know why he was doing this, touching her, and experiencing this overwhelming need to fix whatever was "broken." He wasn't a rescuer of people. Companies, yes. People, no. He gave them a wide berth, and that's what he should have been doing with B.J. right then. This whole thing felt awkward and alien to him. And when she moved quickly, turning away from him and breaking that contact, he let her do it.

"I'll survive," she said, pushing toward the car door. "I just hope that kid can."

"He will. He's tough," he said, turning from her to look over his left shoulder at the traffic. It had thinned some and he slipped easily out into the road.

"You sound so damn sure," she said.

He didn't look back at her. He didn't want to start that craziness all over again. "I am. He's a survivor." He negotiated a lane change and sped up to a normal speed finally. "Now, ask me whatever it is you need to know about the center."

"If he isn't going to the center, could he?"

"I meant a change of subjects," he said.

"I want to know."

He gripped the steering wheel, smoothing the leather with his hands and wondered why he could still almost feel the silky heat of her skin on his fingertips. "If someone in his family works for LynTech, he can."

"And if no one in his family works there?"

"Then he can't, at least until it opens in the new facility where we were. Then it's going to go public and be available to people working in the neighborhood."

"For a price?"

"It needs to get some capital to help keep it going. That's a given."

"I know, money is the bottom line, even with the kids."

"If it was up to Lindsey, she'd let all kids in for free, even a kid like that."

"There you go again. He might be a good kid, just impulsive. A lot of people are impulsive. He's not about to hot-wire some car and go for a joyride."

"Give him time."

"What is it with you pigeon-holing people you don't even know?"

He glanced at her and was a bit taken back to see a real degree of anger in her face, even with the lights of Christmas touching the sweep of her throat as her chin lifted a bit. This was crazy. He was tired of defending himself to her. "All things being equal, I should be at my place working, and if I hadn't been kept late waiting for..." His words trailed off and he looked back at the evening streets. "I'm not going down that road."

"You can say it. If Brittany Lewis hadn't kept you waiting you'd be doing something exciting like balancing figures."

He narrowed his eyes on the road, thinking that after meeting B.J. anything would be anticlimactic. "Now I have to figure out how to tell her father she never showed. He's not going to be a happy camper."

"Maybe she got held up somewhere?"

"You're probably right," he conceded, rerouting his thoughts to something less complicated. Something very simple. "She probably got held up trying to figure out which color lipstick looks best with wedding gowns," he said, turning toward the middle of the city.

"Why did you bring up wedding gowns?"

"I guess it's not big news when she dumps another fiancé," he murmured. "But being a no-show for a job that her father knocked himself out to set up for her seems pretty self-absorbed and

petty. She's probably never worked a day in her life, then her dad gives her a chance to do something productive, and she bolts. She's probably on her way to some exotic place to lie around in the sun until the urge to work goes away. And her father's going to feel betrayed and angry and—"

"Her father told you all of this?" she asked, cutting off his rambling dissertation.

"Not verbatim, but it's obvious. He's just trying to do something to salvage the situation. He's her father, for heaven's sake. How's he supposed to feel? She's put him through the wringer, and the poor guy just wants things to be okay."

She was silent for a moment before saying, "You...you never know. Maybe she just got delayed."

"Doing what?"

"I don't know, but I can't imagine she'd come all this way and not be busy doing something. Paris isn't just a 'hop over the pond,' no matter what Europeans say about it."

She glanced at him and found him studying her with a tight frown. "How did you know she was in Paris?"

She shrugged, looking away from him. "I must have read it somewhere, or you probably mentioned something about Paris. And...and, it just figures that she'd be on her way. I mean, what would be the point of her making her father even angrier? She has to care about him."

"That's up for grabs, but no matter what's going on, she isn't here, and with any luck she won't show up. That would make things simpler all the way around," he said as they drove on. "There's so much going on, and I don't have time to babysit."

"And you, with your take on kids, you'd be some babysitter," she muttered.

He shot her a look, but she was still staring out the windows, her hands pressed flat to the purse on her lap. "It wouldn't be my idea of fun," he said, turning away from her to look out at the early-evening streets. Then he heard himself admitting a truth he hadn't expected to say to her. "You have this knack for getting me way off the topic and I'm not sure how you do it."

"My father never figured it out, either," she said. "He gets so annoyed when I—" She cut off her own words, then said, "Sorry, I'm doing it again."

"I wasn't complaining," he murmured, and meant it. She kept him on his toes.

"I think it's because I was brought up to be 'seen and not heard.' Look pretty and be quiet. Make a good impression, but don't ask questions."

He glanced at her. "You're an only child?"

"An only child brought up by my dad."

"And you never gave him any trouble?"

"I wouldn't say that. I'm no saint."

"Well, join the crowd," he murmured.

"You weren't kidding about joyriding at twelve?"

"I did it from time to time." Matt concentrated on his driving, instead of on words that were there, words that he'd never said to anyone before. Not even Zane. Yet he was on the verge of telling a woman who was almost a perfect stranger about himself as a twelve-year-old. He stopped himself before he went down that path. Enough was enough. "And we're off the subject again."

Gratefully, she let the subject of saints and sinners go. "You're right. Let's see," she murmured as if trying to think of something to ask him. "So, the center, yes. Are you committed to making it work or are you in a wait-and-see position, and you'll cut your losses if it fails to perform?"

He was taken aback again to hear words of "corporate speak" coming from this woman. "I guess that about sums it up."

"I should have gone up to take a look at the original center to see how it's decorated."

He drove off when the light changed. "It's done in Mother Goose sort of stuff." He tried to think, but was having a bit of a hard time focusing when she shifted, sighing softly, and he knew she was looking right at him now. He grasped for what he could remember about the center. "The Big

Bad Wolf, Three Little Kittens. Lindsey did most of the decorating herself. She did everything with the original program. And Mr. Lewis was behind her a hundred percent. I think it might have been his idea to begin with, maybe a way of making up for the shortcomings of his own parenting.”

This time there wasn't a sigh, but a rush of air, and he knew what she was going to say before a word was uttered. So he cut her off at the pass. “Okay, okay,” he said with a chuckle. “I'm sorry. I'm jumping to conclusions.”

“Amen,” she breathed.

He flashed her a look, half expecting a smile, but there wasn't any humor there. The soft light exposed the cut of her high cheekbones, the fullness of her bottom lip and the anger in her expression. Despite that, her image stirred him. And he realized that he actually owed Brittany Lewis for not showing up, for making him late, for setting up the circumstance for him to meet B.J. But that didn't mean he had to like the woman.

They were getting close to where B.J. lived, and he turned to concentrate on where he was going. “I suppose you want me to give Brittany Lewis the benefit of the doubt?”

“It wouldn't hurt.”

“Even if she never shows up?”

“I'd even bet that she'll show up.”

“Oh, you do, do you?”

“Yes, and I'll even bet that she'll be sincere and willing to work.”

“Now, that's a sucker bet,” he said. “She'll never show up and even if she does, she'll be more worried about color coordinating her wardrobe with her office than doing any work.”

“Do you want to make a bet?” she asked.

“How long do I have to wait tomorrow for her to show?”

“What time do you go into the office?”

“Usually around seven, but I've got some off-site meetings and won't be in until ten.”

“Okay, ten it is.”

“Why are you so sure of this?” he asked, his fleeting glance finding her looking at him intently.

“Is it a bet?” she asked, matching a question for a question.

“That depends. What's at stake?”

She shifted again, and the air stirred slightly in the car, carrying that flowery scent with it to brush his skin. Then she spoke and shocked him, something she'd seemed able to do with ease ever since they'd collided in the empty rooms of the center. “For you, an apology to Brittany Lewis.”

He slowed, but for no other reason than shock as he looked at her. “What?”

“An apology, as in, ‘I'm sorry I thought what I did of you,’ or something like that. You can write your own lines.”

“Thanks for that,” he murmured, and saw the street ahead of them where the town house complex was.

“Agreed?”

He had no idea how this whole conversation had ended in a bet that he knew he'd win. “First, tell me what do I get if I'm right and she never shows up?”

“What do you want? You name it.”

He knew what he wanted from her, but how could he tell this woman that he'd like her? “You admitting I was right, but this can't just be her walking through the door.” He upped the stakes. “She has to actually do something productive at LynTech.”

“Then the ten o'clock deadline doesn't work, does it?”

“Okay, why don't we extend it for...oh...let's see...December 23rd at—” He glanced at the dash clock, shocked that it had only been an hour and a half since this had all started. “Seven-thirty,” he said. “Give her—and you—plenty of time.”

“You’ve got a deal,” she said without hesitating. Then sat forward. “Let me out here,” she said abruptly, motioning to a small shopping center.

“The complex is just around the corner, isn’t it?”

“I need to shop,” she said as she motioned to a small market at one end of the complex.

He pulled into the parking lot and stopped by the grocery store. “I’ll wait,” he offered.

“No, thanks, I’m fine. I can walk. Thanks for the ride.” She opened the door, scrambling out, then she was looking back in at him. “I think Brittany Lewis will surprise you.”

He shrugged. “Maybe,” he said, and thought B. J. Smythe was the one who was surprising him. All he wanted right then was to figure out how to prolong this contact, but he didn’t have a chance. B.J. flashed him a smile, a stunning expression that literally made his breath catch in his chest.

“See you tomorrow,” she said, then the door closed and she was walking away.

He was tempted to watch her, just to watch her move, the way her hips swayed, her long legs, the way her hair brushed her shoulders. But he didn’t. He put the car in reverse and drove back out onto the street. Odd how the night seemed interminable now. Not long ago it had been packed with things for him to do, mostly work. But right then he couldn’t think of any of the things he had to do. Just the things he wished he could do.

BRITTANY MOVED into the store, going as far away from Matt Terrel and her stupidity as quickly as she could. A bet? What in the world had possessed her to do that? Probably the same thing that possessed her when she asked him for a ride. How could Brittany Lewis show up tomorrow, and not jeopardize the job she really wanted? She knew if she told him the truth, he’d put her in that office his secretary would find for her and banish her to the farthest regions of the place. As far away from him as he could get her.

But Brittany Lewis had to show up. Her father had to know she was there doing what she’d promised she’d do. And Matthew Terrel had to know she was there. Then she realized something. She never had to see Matt as Brittany. He’d said his secretary was taking care of everything. He wouldn’t be in until ten the next morning.

She turned, looked out the glass door at the fading tail-lights of Matt’s car and waited until it disappeared to the south. If he wouldn’t be there before ten, Brittany Lewis would be there at nine. She’d meet with the assistant, then leave again. With a good excuse. Maybe Brittany Lewis would need a new wardrobe to match her new office after all. She didn’t realize that she’d laughed out loud until someone spoke behind her.

“Can I help you, Miss?”

She turned to see a bulky gray-haired man behind a long glass counter. He was staring at her, and her laughter died. “Is there a local cab company?”

“Diamond.” He motioned over his left shoulder at a small ad board, one of many that lined the walls of the store. “That’s them.”

She saw the ad for Diamond Cabs, read the number, then looked back at the man. “Thanks,” she said and went back outside.

There was no sign of Matt, and she paused for a moment, a bit shocked when she realized how her life had shifted in the past hour. Crazy. She felt a bit insane at the speed of the changes in it, but there was an exhilaration, too, partly due to her desire to get this job on her own, with her own talent and work, and partly because she knew that she was going to face Matthew Terrel as Brittany Lewis in one week, and get an apology from him.

She called the cab company on her cell phone to get a ride to her family home south of the city. While she waited for it to arrive, she put in a call to her father. It rang four times before it went to his service. She left a quick message, just saying she had arrived in Houston safely, and she’d call him tomorrow evening with details about her job with LynTech.

As she hung up, she realized how relieved she was that she hadn't had to talk to him directly. It had been hard enough twisting the truth with Matt, but she'd never get away with it with her father. So, the less he knew, the better.

December 12

BY THE TIME BRITTANY returned to LynTech the next morning at nine o'clock, she'd slept sporadically, finished a rough idea for the wall murals for the center and dressed to look like Brittany Lewis. A beige silk shirt, perfectly tailored slacks in taupe linen, leather sandals and her curls swept back with diamond combs and falling to her shoulders. She looked somewhat like a "spoiled brat" she thought, with gold added at her wrist and ears. It would be perfect for her meeting with Matt's assistant.

She parked her sports car down the street in a public garage, gathered up her small leather tote bag, her purse and her portfolio, then walked up the block along the Christmasy street. The drive had taken forever last night with Matt, but now she seemed to get to LynTech in the blink of an eye. She took a breath, then stepped into LynTech, crossed the lobby filled with the scent of pine from a towering Christmas tree, to head for the elevators near the back. She first went up to the executive level and was thankful that she'd remembered there was a ladies' restroom immediately to her right in the corridor.

She stepped inside the sitting area done in lavenders and pale turquoise, spotted a small couch and crossed to it. She slipped her tote and the envelope behind the overstuffed pillows, stood back, glanced at herself in the mirrors that lined the walls, then with a flip of her curls, slipped back out into the corridor.

A gray-haired man in a navy uniform was coming down the hall and stopped when he saw her. "Can I help you, Miss?"

"I'm Brittany Lewis. I have an appointment with Mr. Terrel," she said quickly, then motioned to the offices her father had used for so many years. "Is that his office?"

"No, ma'am, that's Mr. Holden's office," he said, then motioned in the opposite direction. "Mr. Terrel's down there, the third door on the right."

"Thanks," she murmured, then passed him to head to Matt's office. The thick carpet in the monotoned corridor muffled her footsteps. She stopped by the double doors labeled simply M. Terrel. She pushed back one of the doors, and, as she stepped into the reception area, her heart started to pound.

"Please let him not be here," she prayed as she looked around the large space, starkly modern in design, with glass and black marble in sleek lines and very little of it. There were a few shelves, a couple of plants, a tiny Christmas tree, all silver and blue, sitting in front of low windows and a huge reception desk. A woman sat behind it, working at a computer, and she looked up as Brittany went farther into the room.

"May I help you?" she asked as she turned toward Brittany.

"Miss Lewis to see Mr. Terrel."

The woman looked at her for just a fraction of a second too long, before she fell into her "professional" face with a nice smile. "Oh, Miss Lewis, I'm sorry. Mr. Terrel isn't in yet."

Brittany was surprised at the degree of relief she felt at not having to face Matt. She smiled, hoping that the expression didn't look too forced. "Oh, I'm the one who's sorry," she said with determined politeness. "I was supposed to be here yesterday, but got held up in London. The Season's in full swing and the parties and shopping..." She rolled her eyes expressively. "Well, you know how it can be." She waved her free hand. "But I made it, finally."

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