

2 in 1 GREAT VALUE

MEET MR. PRINCE

PATRICIA KAY

ONCE A COWBOY...

PATRICIA THAYER

Cherish



Patricia Thayer

Meet Mr. Prince / Once a Cowboy...: Meet Mr. Prince

«HarperCollins»

Thayer P.

Meet Mr. Prince / Once a Cowboy...: Meet Mr. Prince / P. Thayer — «HarperCollins»,

Meet Mr. Prince Georgie Fairchild was finding her new boss, handsome Zachary Prince hard to resist! Last name notwithstanding, Zachary was too old to believe in fairy tales. But Georgie made him believe in things that he had no business believing in – like the possibility of happy endings. Once a Cowboy… Alisa Merrick's never forgotten the wonderful weekend she spent with Matt Rafferty, or the heartbreak she felt when he walked away.Now Matt's back and he seems a changed man, and Alisa can't ignore her old feelings. Deny it though she might, in her heart, Matt will always be the cowboy for her…

© Thayer P.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

Meet Mr. Prince	6
About the Author	7
Chapter One	8
Chapter Two	13
Chapter Three	19
Chapter Four	26
Chapter Five	33
Chapter Six	40
Chapter Seven	46
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	48


2 in 1
GREAT VALUE
MEET MR. PRINCE
PATRICIA KAY
ONCE A COWBOY...
PATRICIA THAYER
Cherish

Meet Mr. Prince
Patricia Kay
Once A Cowboy …
Patricia Thayer



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Dear Reader,

I love Cinderella stories, don't you? From the original story of Cinderella to all the ones that have come after it, they never fail to make me feel good and to put a smile on my face.

Meet Mr. Prince is a Cinderella story, even though Georgie Fairchild is the opposite of the unloved stepsister. Georgie has a fabulous family that includes three beloved sisters, a wonderful job that she loves and a life she considers perfect. She is not looking for Prince Charming. Yet when he comes along, all of Georgie's ideas are turned upside down and her life changes dramatically.

I had a wonderful time writing this book because I loved Georgie from page one. I loved that she's so stubborn and sure of herself, that she is so adamant about not wanting to get married or have children. Nothing is more fun than knowing a character is going to have to eat her words.

I hope you enjoy reading Georgie's story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Happy reading!

Patricia Kay

Meet Mr. Prince

About the Author

PATRICIA KAY is a *USA TODAY* bestselling author of more than forty-eight novels of contemporary romance and women's fiction. She lives in Houston, Texas. To learn more about her, visit her website at www.patriciakay.com.

This book is dedicated to fellow authors Lois Faye Dyer, Christine Flynn and Allison Leigh. I have loved working with the three of you on this series and look forward to our next adventure together.

Chapter One

Georgianna Hunt Fairchild glared at her mother. “I can’t believe you said that.”

Cornelia Fairchild, as always, remained unruffled. “Darling Georgie. What I can’t believe is that I’ve somehow managed to upset you.”

“I’m not upset. I’m just tired of people trying to interfere in my personal life.”

“People? I’m hardly *people*.”

Georgie rolled her eyes. “When you start trying to fix me up with every Tom, Dick and Rupert out there, you’ve joined the ranks of *people!* How many times do I have to tell you *and* my sisters *and* Uncle Harry *and* Alex *and* every other person who might know my name that *I am not interested in getting married*. Period. End of story.”

Completely frustrated, Georgie jumped up and began pacing around her mother’s living room. “Do you know that the other day *Joanna* invited me to dinner, and when I got there, it wasn’t just her and Chick the way I thought it would be, but she’d invited Chick’s *brother?*”

Joanna Spinelli was Georgie’s former college roommate and her BFF. She was currently having a torrid romance with Chick London, her boss—big mistake, Georgie thought, mixing her work life with her personal life, as nothing good could come of it—and now she seemed to want everyone else to enter the same besotted state.

“What was so wrong with that?” Cornelia asked.

“Look, Chick’s brother is nice enough, but it was obvious that Joanna was trying to fix me up with him! Dammit, I don’t *want* to be fixed up with anyone, and she *knows* that.”

“Please don’t swear, Georgie. It’s very unladylike.”

“Sorry. But honestly, Joanna of all people should know better. And then *Bobbie* called and got on my case.” Bobbie was the youngest of the four Fairchild sisters, and she was practically still on her honeymoon and wild about her new husband. In fact, all of Georgie’s sisters seemed to be wildly in love … or lust, although they would say they had found their soul mates. Georgie had yet to be convinced that such a thing existed.

“Your sisters love you, Georgie,” her mother said softly. “And so does Joanna.”

“I know they do, Mom, but doesn’t that mean they should listen to me once in a while? I listen to them.” Georgie ignored the little voice of her conscience that said she didn’t *always* listen to them.

Cornelia shook her head sadly. “Oh, all right, Georgie, have it your own way. But just wait. One of these days you’ll be a forty-something woman with no husband, no children and no prospects. *Then* let’s see how you feel!

“Besides, I was not trying to fix you up,” she added. “Trust me, I’ve learned my lesson in that area. All I said was Josie Wilcox’s nephew is staying with her while he’s in Seattle on business and he’s at loose ends, and from what she’s said about him, he sounds as if you two might have a lot in common.”

“You know, Mom, first of all—no offense against you, but I barely know Josie Wilcox and from what I do know of her, I have no desire to meet her nephew. Second of all, I have a long way to go until I’m forty-something, considering I’ve just barely turned thirty. And last of all, don’t you remember what that survey showed? The one where they interviewed married men, single men, married women and single women?”

Her mother said nothing, simply picked up her mug of tea and sipped. Her thoughtful eyes studied Georgie over the rim of the cup.

“Well, I do,” Georgie said. “That survey found—and I believe it—that the happiest people are, number one, married men, and, number two, single *women*. And the *un*happiest people are married women!”

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Georgie. Anyone can prove anything with a survey. Everyone knows that surveys are skewed by all kinds of things. Why, I know any number of happily married women."

Georgie sighed. "I don't want to argue with you. Try to understand, okay? I'm happy the way I am. Unlike your other daughters, I really don't want to get married. I mean, what's the point if you don't want children? I know that just goes against everything you believe, but I'm being honest with myself, and I don't think I'm cut out to be a mother. Can't you respect that?"

Her mother glanced out the windows of her recently renovated porch, which was now a sunroom and extension of the living room. Georgie's gaze followed. The view of Puget Sound from the family's hilltop home in Queen Anne—one of Georgie's favorite areas of Seattle—was a sight she had never tired of. Today could have been a day in high summer instead of January: The sun was shining and the water sparkled as if dusted by thousands of diamonds. Maybe one day she, too, would have a home like this, but Georgie intended to pay for every last brick with money *she* earned. Instead of sublimating her goals for a husband's. Instead of spending her days ferrying spoiled and overindulged kids to soccer games and skating lessons. Instead of her giving up her independence and freedom. She was sorry if her decisions had made her mother unhappy, but this was *her* life, not her mother's!

Cornelia took her time before answering. "If I thought you wouldn't deeply regret this decision one day, I *would* respect it, Georgie. But darling, I just don't think you understand how you'll feel when you're older and your childbearing days are over." Turning back to Georgie, her green eyes —the same color as Georgie's—were filled with love. "I've seen it all too often. Think about your cousin Sophie."

Sophie Fairchild Jamison was the only daughter of Georgie's father's older brother Franklin. Sophie had married late and had desperately been trying to have a child the past few years, with no success.

"I'm not Sophie. I have a demanding job I love, a wonderful family and tons of friends, and if I ever feel the need for a child of my own, I'll adopt. God knows there are millions of children all over the world who desperately need someone to love them." Georgie had seen too many of them in her work for the Hunt Foundation. Many nights her dreams were haunted by their sad eyes.

"Yes, I know. But you could do that, too, you know." Now it was Cornelia's turn to sigh. "All right, Georgie. I'll quit 'bugging' you, as you've so inelegantly expressed it. And I'll just pray you won't regret this decision some day."

"Thank you, Mother." Now that she'd won her point, Georgie could afford to be magnanimous. She walked to her mother's chair and knelt before her. "You know I love you, don't you? And that I'm grateful for everything you've sacrificed for us? We can agree to disagree about this one thing, can't we?"

Her mother smiled. "Yes, but that doesn't mean I won't continue to worry about you."

Georgie raised herself up and kissed her mother's still-smooth cheek. "I know. I guess I can't ask for miracles." Then she grinned. "Although if anyone can accomplish miracles, it's you."

"Look who's talking, Miss I-Finished-College-in-Three-Years-and-Got-My-Master's-in-Less-than-Two.'"

Although Georgie had never had problems with self-confidence, sometimes her mother's praise and her sisters' admiration made her uncomfortable. She was not exceptional or brilliant, and she kept trying to tell them so. She just knew what she wanted, she worked hard and she didn't waste her time. If she made a bad decision, the moment she realized it was bad, she rectified it. Her sisters were all hard workers, too, but some of them lacked confidence and hesitated before making changes. It was a mystery to Georgie that the four them, so close in age, all born to the very same mother and father, could be so different.

Take Tommi, for instance. The only place she seemed to feel completely sure of herself was in the kitchen.

"So what's on your agenda now?" her mother asked. "Has Alex made any decision about where you'll go next?"

Georgie shook her head. "God, I hope so. We're meeting for lunch tomorrow. Aside from anything else, it'll be nice to see him again."

Her mother frowned. "I thought you were working at Alex's office the past couple of weeks while waiting for a new assignment."

"Not *at* the office. I'm doing research for him at home. But I'll sure be glad to get back into the field. I like research, but not *that* much."

Despite this minor complaint, Georgie loved her job, loved that Alex allowed her to have a say in what she did and where she did it. Since coming to work for him at the Hunt Foundation nineteen months earlier, Georgie had been happier than she'd ever been in her entire life.

Alex was a dream boss. One of the things about him she liked most was that he treated all his employees with consideration and respect. P.J., his wife, was one lucky woman. In fact, if Georgie ever found a man like Alex, she might even change her mind about getting married.

"What're you smiling about?" her mother asked.

Georgie started. She'd forgotten her mother was sitting there. Not a good idea. Her mother was too sharp. She had an uncanny ability to almost read a person's mind, to the chagrin of all her daughters. "Oh, nothing. Just thinking how happy I'll be to get busy again."

Georgie had come home from the Sudan right before the Christmas holiday had begun and had now been on hiatus more than three weeks. She'd told Alex she didn't need that much time off. After all, she had no husband, children or pets to worry about. And although she was the newly proud owner of a small, loft-type condo in near downtown Belltown, the maid service and condo maintenance she paid for took excellent care of her property when she was away.

"Well," her mother said, "I hope, if he's sending you out to the field again, he sends you somewhere peaceful this time. It worries me when you go into countries where there's so much civil unrest."

"You know Alex would never put me in danger."

Cornelia raised her eyebrows. "Afghanistan is terribly dangerous. And so was Burundi. And even the Sudan."

"I was never in danger in any of those places." But Georgie mentally crossed her fingers, because she wasn't telling her mother the entire truth. Sure, she'd been in supposedly protected zones in those countries, and in all cases she'd been accompanied by representatives from the UN, along with a security detail, but still … no one was ever completely safe surrounded by warring factions, and she'd had one or two close—and scary—calls.

Cornelia nodded, but Georgie knew she wasn't convinced. Giving her mother another kiss, she said, "I've gotta run, Mom. I'm getting my hair trimmed. My appointment's at three o'clock."

"Phone me tomorrow?" her mother said as she walked Georgie to the door.

"Why? So you can call Alex and yell at him if you don't like where he's sending me next?" teased Georgie.

Her mother laughed. "Don't think I wouldn't."

"Oh, I *know* you would." And the worst part was, Alex would probably listen. Sometimes Georgie despaired of ever leading a totally independent life. But that's what she got for taking a job with someone so closely intertwined with her family. Although she and Alex Hunt referred to each other as cousins, they were not really related. Their fathers had been best friends as kids, and as young men they'd co-founded a company that eventually became HuntCom.

Of course, the company's huge success came years after George Fairchild's death, so neither he nor Cornelia had benefitted financially the way Harry Hunt, Alex's father, had. It wasn't for lack of trying on Harry's part, though. Harry Hunt wasn't perfect, but he was nothing if not generous to the people he loved. And George Fairchild's wife and daughters were high up on that list. Harry had tried

everything he could think of to give Cornelia money, and she had thwarted every attempt. He *had* managed to gift each of her daughters with $100,000 upon their high-school graduation, along with an honorary seat on the HuntCom board. Furious, Cornelia had refused to talk to him for months afterward.

Cornelia was proud. She wasn't willing to take money she didn't feel she deserved, no matter how much she could have used the help at the time. And the same applied to her daughters.

Georgie admired her mother more than just about anyone. How many women would have had guts enough and strength enough to hold their heads high after finding out, after his death, that the husband they'd trusted had gambled away every bit of their life's savings, including their stock in HuntCom? How many women would refuse to take the easy way out that had been offered by Harry Hunt? Not many, Georgie thought.

Cornelia Phillips Fairchild hadn't wasted a whole lot of time feeling sorry for herself, either. She'd sold the family home, the one asset George Fairchild had not been able to touch, because it belonged to Cornelia outright—her inheritance from the maternal grandmother she'd been named for. She'd bought the much smaller Craftsman-style bungalow in Queen Anne that she still lived in, and she'd taken a job as secretary at the small private girls' school where her daughters were enrolled. In that way, with what she got for the girls in Social Security, what remained from the sale of the big house and her small salary supplementing free tuition for the girls, she was able to keep their lives as close to normal as possible.

Yes, her mother was a remarkable woman, and Georgie thought the world of her. Even so, she mused as she drove away from the family home, she was no longer a child who needed her mother's guidance, especially when it came to her love life … or lack thereof.

Georgie hoped they'd settled that subject today and that Cornelia wouldn't be raising it again. Then she grinned. Of course her mother would raise it again. Her mother wasn't the type to give up easily.

Well, I'm not, either. No one was going to talk her into doing anything she didn't want to do —absolutely no one.

Zachary Prince was ready for the weekend to begin. Although he really liked his job, today he was tired of being cooped up in the office, tired of all the problems associated with too much work and too few people to do it since his assistant had quit, and he just wanted to go home and spend time with his children.

He often felt guilty because he didn't need to work. He could stay home and be with the kids full-time. After all, he didn't need the money. He and his twin sister, Sabrina, had inherited a stock portfolio worth many millions from their grandfather, McKinley. But Zach liked his work as director of the New York office of the Hunt Foundation. And he was wise enough to know that as much as he loved his children, he would go crazy at home all day, especially now that his two oldest, Katie and Jeremy, were in school.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he jumped when his phone buzzed. The CID showed Alex Hunt's name.

"Hey, Alex."

"Hey, Zach. I've got some good news for you. I think I'll be able to send some help your way."

"Really? Who? Anybody I know?"

"She works for me, but you haven't met her because she's been in the field the past year and a half. Her name is Georgianna Fairchild."

Fairchild. Weren't the Fairchilds close friends of the Hunts? And weren't some of them on the HuntCom board? No matter how badly Zach needed help in the New York office, he didn't think having a friend of the Hunt family there was a great idea. But before he could think of a tactful way to say so, Alex continued talking.

"In addition to her experience in the field, Georgie's a whiz at research. She can take over that part of the work easily … and anything else you want her to do. You can trust her, Zach. She's totally dependable … and she's got good judgment. I think she'll be a real asset to you."

Because he couldn't think of any other rejoinder, Zach just said, "She does sound good. Um, when is she coming?"

"I haven't discussed this with her yet, so I don't want to commit until I do. We're having lunch tomorrow and we'll talk about it. I need her here at least another week, and since this will be different from the kinds of assignments she's had in the past, in that she'll be staying in New York until we can find a permanent assistant for you, she may need more time after that to make arrangements. For now, let's say she'll be there by the fifteenth of next month."

Zach listened as Alex continued to extol the virtues of Georgie Fairchild, but despite her vaunted capabilities, Zach had a bad feeling about this. No matter what Alex said, Zach didn't think having a Hunt family friend on staff was a good idea. What if they didn't like each other? What if she were one of those strong-willed women who thought she knew everything and didn't take orders well?

After they hung up, Zach sat there, staring into space and thinking. And the more he thought, the more uneasy he felt. Was it possible that Alex was sending this Fairchild woman to New York to spy on him?

Maybe Alex was unhappy with the way things were going in New York. Maybe he'd decided he'd made a mistake when he'd hired Zach, especially considering the special deal Zach had negotiated. Maybe he didn't think Zach was carrying his weight. But hell, if that were the case, why didn't Alex just say so? Zach had always believed Alex was a straight shooter, that he'd never do anything underhanded.

But maybe Zach had been wrong.

He guessed only time would tell.

Time, and this Georgie Fairchild.

Chapter Two

Georgie always loved lunching with Alex. It used to be the highlight of her week during the brief period she'd worked in downtown Seattle. Lord, she'd hated that first job at the ad agency. Why she'd taken it, she still couldn't fathom. But it had served its purpose because she'd quickly realized she wasn't cut out for the business world and she'd gone back to school and gotten her master's in sociology.

Once she had that degree in hand, she'd gone to work for a large women's hospital. Idealistic when she began, four years later she was burned out. One day she'd admitted to Alex that her job had become depressing and that most days she felt she was spinning her wheels and getting nowhere.

"My hands are tied by lack of money and facilities," she'd said, "And it's getting worse all the time. Besides, I really want to work with kids. I may not think I'd make a good mother, but I still prefer being around kids to being around most adults. Kids are honest, and they appreciate everything you do for them. I want to do something that makes me feel as if I'm really making a difference."

"Then," Alex had said, "it's time for you to come to work for the foundation."

Georgie couldn't believe how much she loved the work she did now. Her job satisfied every part of her. She felt she'd finally found her niche in life. She loved the travel, she loved learning about different peoples and their culture, she loved the children she met and helped and she didn't even mind the fundraising because she was asking for money for a cause she believed in passionately. But most of all, she loved that she *was* making a difference. Everything about her work was rewarding.

Of course, there was still the problem of money. Trouble is, there was never enough money for all the things that needed doing. But that was minor compared to the way she'd felt before coming to work at the foundation.

So today, in addition to the pleasure of spending some private time with Alex—they hadn't seen much of each other since she'd been home, even though she'd been working at the foundation office while waiting to go back into the field—she also had a new assignment to look forward to. She could hardly wait to find out where it would be. Haiti? Indonesia? Ethiopia?

They were lunching at Wild Ginger, one of her favorite places to eat in Seattle. When Georgie arrived, Alex was already there and had secured a window table, a feat in itself at the popular restaurant. Georgie couldn't help smiling as she approached the table. Alex stood to give her a kiss on the cheek, and once again, she thought how handsome he was. Tall and slender, with dark hair and dark brown eyes, he was a man who attracted admiring looks wherever he went. And when he smiled! Well, even Georgie wasn't immune to those dimples. But Alex was well and truly taken, and even if he hadn't been, he was too much like real family, almost the brother she'd never had.

"You're looking mighty sharp today," he said once she was settled across from him.

Georgie grinned. Alex knew she would have scoffed if he'd said "pretty" because she wasn't pretty, and she knew it. The term *pretty* was for cute little cheerleader types, not for five-ten Amazons. "Sharp as in brilliant, or sharp as in chic?"

He laughed. "I'm pretty sure the safest answer is 'both.'"

She grinned. "I can see *you're* as sharp as ever, too."

They continued the lighthearted banter while they studied the menu. Georgie finally tossed her menu aside. There was really no point in looking at it. She always ordered the same thing: the pot stickers—their pot stickers were to die for—and the Spice Trader's Beef. Alex was more adventurous and always tried something different. Today his choices were the Buddha Roll and the Nonya Noodles.

That settled, Georgie finally asked the question she'd been dying to ask. "Well? Don't keep me in suspense. Have you finally got another field assignment for me?"

"What? We're not keeping you busy enough at the office?"

"Alex …"

"Haven't you enjoyed being around for your sister's wedding and all the holiday stuff?"

She rolled her eyes. "Alex, stop teasing me."

His smile said he was pleased with himself. "You'll be going somewhere very different from past assignments."

"Really? That sounds intriguing. Where?"

Alex waited a heartbeat, then said, "New York."

Georgie's smile faded. "New York? You mean … New York City?"

"Yes, our New York office."

"But … why?" Georgie told herself not to get upset.

"Because Zachary Prince, the director of the New York office, is in a bind right now. His assistant quit a month ago and we've had no luck replacing him. We've had a lot of candidates, but no one qualified or experienced enough to be a real asset. I don't want to hire someone just to hire someone. What we do out of New York is too important. That's why I thought of you."

"But, Alex, that's not what I do, I don't work in an *office*, and I don't want to waste—"

He held up his hand. "Wait. Hear me out before you say you don't want the assignment."

Georgie made a face.

"This is only temporary, Georgie. Just until we can find a permanent replacement. Both Zach and I intend to keep looking, but in the meantime—as soon as you can wind things up here—you're perfect for the job. You don't need any training, and you can be an immediate help to Zach, which is a huge plus. And just because you're working out of the office doesn't mean you won't go into the field. In fact, being Zach's assistant means you'll get plenty of chances to look into possible beneficiaries of the Hunt Foundation—the only difference being that those beneficiaries will mostly be in the eastern part of the U.S. Wouldn't you like to go to Appalachia?"

"Well, of course, I'd like to go to Appalachia, but—"

"But what?"

"I like doing evaluations. That's what I'm good at."

"I know that. It's one of the big reasons you're so perfect for this job. Zach tells me the pile of requests for assistance is stacking up faster than they can look at them."

"You're saying I'll still get to do the evaluations and make recommendations?" Georgie knew she sounded skeptical. Shoot, she *was* skeptical. In her experience, assistants didn't get the interesting jobs. They got the jobs the directors didn't want to do themselves, probably involving tons of paperwork, which Georgie despised. Suddenly a new thought struck her. "Did my mother put you up to this?"

"Put me up to what?"

"Sending me to New York."

"Georgie, come on … don't be paranoid."

"I'm not being paranoid. I know my mother. If she had gotten even an inkling about what happened in Burundi, I know she'd have been on the phone to you in an instant."

"I haven't talked to your mother. She knows nothing about this assignment."

"You're sure." But even as she said it, she could see from Alex's expression that he was telling her the truth.

She sank back in her chair, her shoulders slumping.

"Come on, Georgie. Cheer up. This assignment is going to be good for you. Good for all of us." When she didn't answer, Alex added softly, "Have I ever steered you wrong?"

It killed her to say it, but she finally said, "No."

Alex started to say something else but quit because their waiter had brought their food. When he left them alone again, Georgie sighed and said, "You're sure this assignment is only temporary?"

Alex raised his right hand. “I swear, this is absolutely temporary. And the more you can do to relieve Zach, the more time he’ll have to find a replacement for you.” Then came the kicker. “If you do this for me, Georgie, I’ll owe you.”

Georgie wished she could say no. She knew if she adamantly refused to go to New York, Alex wouldn’t force her. But how could she? Alex was her boss and her friend. He’d never before asked for a favor. And she owed him big time, even though he was too nice to remind her of that fact.

“Oh, all right, Alex. You win.” She picked up her chopsticks. “How soon do you want me to be there?”

Cornelia’s cell phone vibrated from the depths of her handbag as she walked toward the south entrance of Nordstrom. She managed to find the phone before the call went to voice mail and saw from the display that it was Harry calling. She felt like ignoring the call, but a mixture of curiosity and the certain knowledge that Harry Hunt, accustomed as he was to people leaping when he said, “Jump,” would just keep trying until she answered trumped her desire to continue making a statement by avoiding him.

Sighing, she pressed the talk icon. “Hello, Harry.”

“Corny, I’m glad I caught you.”

“Yes, well, I’m just on my way into Nordstrom.” She kept her voice deliberately cool.

“Then I won’t keep you long. I just wondered if my favorite gal in the entire world would do me the honor of accompanying me to a dinner next Saturday night.”

Cornelia could have said a lot of things in response to his “favorite gal” comment, but she decided it was wiser not to. Why open that can of worms? Especially when nothing ever changed. “What kind of dinner?” she hedged.

“Oh, I’m getting some award from the Software Society of America. The dinner’s being held at the Fairmont, and you know how I hate these black-tie things. But it’d be bearable if you’d come with me.” He chuckled. “Make that rubber chicken go down a lot easier.”

I should say no. I should say I’m tired of being an also-ran with you. I should say go find yourself another one of your models or actresses to take. I should say I already have a date.

But she didn’t think Harry knew about her fledgling relationship with Greg Berger, the golf pro at the club, and Cornelia wasn’t sure she wanted him to know. She could just imagine what he’d have to say about her dating a much younger man. Of course, every single one of Harry’s four wives had been considerably younger than *him*. But that was different, wasn’t it? Cornelia gritted her teeth. Just thinking about Harry’s former wives and the double standard about age stiffened her resolve. “I don’t think I can, Harry.”

“Don’t *think* you can?”

“I believe I have another engagement.” Despite everything, she couldn’t bring herself to outright lie to him. “I’ll have to check my calendar after I get home.”

“If you have another engagement, break it. I really want you to be with me at that dinner, Corny.”

“I—” *Where’s your backbone? Just say no.*

“Please, Corny. I haven’t seen nearly enough of you lately.”

“And whose fault is that?” she retorted before she could stop herself.

“I realize it *is* my fault, but I’m trying to rectify that. C’mon, say you’ll go. I really want to see you.”

Cornelia could feel herself weakening, and it infuriated her. Why did she find it so hard to refuse him? He was entirely too sure of himself. Break it, indeed! And yet, despite all this, she sighed and said, “Oh, all right, Harry. I’ll go with you.”

“That’s my girl. We’ll pick you up at seven.”

Cornelia shook her head as she disconnected the call. She was spineless. Yet she couldn't help remembering a night long ago when she had said no to Harry. And who knows how different all their lives might have been if she'd said yes instead.

We were too young, and I was afraid. And when I was finally ready to say yes, it was too late. He'd moved on with wife number one, and then George and I fell in love. After that, all of our lives continued in different directions from the way I'd first imagined they'd go.

She was so lost in the memory of that fateful night when she was only seventeen, a memory she rarely indulged, that she very nearly ran into a young mother exiting Nordstrom while juggling a toddler, a big black umbrella and several packages.

"Sorry," Cornelia apologized, holding the door open for her.

"No problem," the harried young woman said.

No problem, Cornelia thought, ducking inside to avoid having to open her own umbrella, for it had just begun to rain. The young woman was right. Some things weren't worth getting rattled over.

I must stop thinking about the past. What happened, happened. And despite Harry's cluelessness and Georgie's stubbornness and my occasional aches and pains, I have no real problems. My life turned out the way it was supposed to turn out.

Her momentary twinge of nostalgia and regret evaporated as she walked briskly into the store.

"Daddeeeee!"

Zach grinned as Emma, his three-year-old, raced down the hall and launched herself at him as he entered their spacious eleventh-floor apartment near Lincoln Center. Was there any feeling as wonderful as this? he thought as he lifted her up and she twined her dimpled arms around his neck.

"Hello, sweetness," he murmured.

"Mr. Prince. You're home early." This observation came from Fanny, his fifty-something housekeeper, who had followed Emma into the foyer.

Zach kissed his daughter, relishing the sweet, littlegirl smell and the softness of her skin. "I decided everything on my desk could wait till Monday."

It had taken nearly two years for him to stop dreading that first few minutes after arriving home, minutes in which the awareness of Jenny's absence would strike him yet again, minutes when he'd thought the hollow ache in the vicinity of his heart would never go away. But he was finally adjusting to the fact that she was gone, that cancer had taken his beloved wife at a too-young age and he had been left to raise their three children alone.

He knew he would always treasure the memory of Jenny and he would always miss her, but now he also knew he was going to be okay, because he was finally beginning to think about the future instead of constantly mourning the past.

"And how was your day?" Fanny asked. Her hazel eyes were warm as they studied him.

What would he do without Fanny? He couldn't even imagine. She was more than a housekeeper, even though that's how they both referred to her. In many ways, she reminded him of his mother in the manner that she looked after him and his children.

"It was good," he said. "Got a lot done. But I sure am glad to be home. Where are the other two?" Glancing at the grandfather clock that graced the foyer, he saw it was a few minutes before five. Katie, his ten-year-old, and Jeremy, seven, normally were home from school by four.

"Katie's at Madison Werner's house. They're working on a science project together. She'll be home at six-thirty. And your sister came by to take Jeremy skating. She said she'd have him back by nine."

"I wanted to go skating," Emma said, her blue eyes clouding. "But Jeremy said I'm too little! I'm *not* too little, Daddy." Her voice rose in volume with each word.

Sensing a full-blown tantrum brewing, Zach said, "Of course you're not too little, sweetheart. We'll go skating Sunday afternoon. How's that?"

"To Rocky Center."

"This time I think we'll go to the park, honey. The rink at Rockefeller Center is too crowded."

Emma's frown deepened. "I don't care! I wanna go to Rocky Center."

Suppressing a grin, Zach lowered his daughter to the floor. "Tell you what, pumpkin, we'll decide on Sunday."

"I'm not a pumpkin!"

Zach could no longer prevent a smile. "You're *my* pumpkin."

Not to be sidetracked from her grievance, Emma put her hands on her hips and deepened her frown. "Jeremy can't go skating with us. Just girls."

"Today was just-boys day," Fanny explained *sotto voce*.

Zach knew without further explanation that Sabrina had probably been trying to make Emma feel better after Jeremy's taunt about her being too little, so she'd made the remark about boys only. Zach didn't blame his twin for not wanting to take Emma along today. Sabrina's Tommy was eight, and he and Jeremy were best buddies. Emma's presence would have put a damper on their fun together. Besides, his youngest daughter had to learn she couldn't do everything her older siblings did.

"You know," Zach said carefully, "I think it would be more fun for all of us to go skating on Sunday. Then we can show Jeremy just how big you are. Wouldn't you like that?"

Emma stamped her foot. "No! I don't want Jeremy to go." She pronounced his name *Jare-mee*, with two syllables.

Man, she wasn't going to give an inch. "Yes, you've made that very clear," he said dryly. Well, he'd just have to hope she had a short memory, because skating was one thing they could all do together as a family. And because Emma *was* so young, it was tough to find activities that worked for everyone.

"I hate Jeremy," she muttered. "He's mean."

"Emma …"

His youngest glared at him.

"Jeremy is your brother. You don't hate him. You're mad at him right now, and that's okay. You can be mad if you want to be. But I don't want to hear you saying you hate him. I don't want to hear you saying you hate anyone. We don't hate people in this house."

For a moment, Zach was afraid she would defy him and say it again. She certainly looked like she wanted to. And then what would he do? Of his three children, Emma was the most stubborn and the most difficult to sway. *Father Bested by Three-Year-Old*, he thought, seeing the headline in his mind.

Why didn't anyone tell you how hard it was to be a parent? He wished he'd understood just how hard while Jenny was still alive, because he should have gotten down on his knees and thanked her every single day for the wonderful job she was doing.

"Mr. Prince?"

Zach had almost forgotten Fanny was still standing there.

"Mr. Hunt called a few minutes ago. I put the message on the desk in your study."

Lured by Fanny's offer to make her hot chocolate with marshmallows, Emma trotted off after the housekeeper, and Zach headed into his home office.

Five minutes later, he had Alex Hunt on the line.

"Just wanted you to know I had lunch with Georgie Fairchild today, and she'll report to work for you on the seventh."

Zach glanced at his calendar. "That's sooner than you thought."

"She wanted to get going even sooner," Alex continued. "But we compromised. She'll be staying at the corporate apartment in New York, at least initially. If it turns out she's going to be in there more than a month or two, then we'll see about making other arrangements."

"Hell, Alex, I sure hope it doesn't take more than a month to find a permanent assistant." The last thing Zach wanted was for this Fairchild woman to be hanging over him for weeks on end.

"I hope not, either, but you never know. It's better to be prepared."

Zach stifled the urge to say some of the things he'd been thinking. Instead, he said, "Yeah, I guess you're right. Okay. I'll have Deborah make sure everything at the apartment is in order."

Deborah Zelinsky was Zach's office manager and, even though the corporate apartment didn't technically fall under the jurisdiction of the foundation, she was always more than happy to make sure the unit was ready for a visiting dignitary or prospective contributor.

"Thanks, Zach. I think Georgie is going to be a great addition to your team. I know the two of you will get along like a house afire."

After they'd hung up, Zach sat thinking for a long moment. He still wished he'd said something to Alex about his doubts. And yet, how could he, especially without saying what had prompted those doubts? It wasn't like he could have come right out and said, *Hey, Alex, are you unhappy with me? Is that why you're sending a spy to New York?*

Oh, hell, he had to stop thinking about this. For this weekend, at least, he needed to put Georgie Fairchild and anything else connected to the office out of his mind. Time enough to think about work issues again on Monday.

In the meantime, he'd rather think about Emma, who was a lot more fun, and a lot more important to him, than anything—or anyone—connected with his job could ever be.

"Fanny," he called as he headed for the kitchen. "Did you make enough hot chocolate for me?"

Chapter Three

Georgie didn't believe in spending a lot of time packing. Most of the time, she just threw clothes into her trusty old duffel bag on wheels and figured what she didn't have she would simply go without. And in this case—preparing for an assignment in New York—she could certainly buy anything she needed.

Still … it was winter, and New York was a lot colder than Seattle. Looking at the Weather Channel's website, she saw that the median temperature this month was hovering around forty degrees. Just her luck. If she *had* to go to New York, couldn't Alex at least have sent her in the spring? Or in the fall, which Georgie had been told was probably the most attractive time of the year in Manhattan?

She eyed the clothing she'd piled on her bed. She'd thrown her down parka in the mix and the boots she'd bought last winter in preparation for her trip to Korea. But she didn't own a nice winter coat, certainly nothing suitable for meeting with potential donors and grant recipients, plus it wouldn't have fit into the duffel even if she did own one. So she'd definitely have to buy a coat when she got to New York.

"Oh, shoot. I don't want to do this."

Even as she muttered the words, she knew she was wasting time and energy on her negative feelings about this assignment. And that was unlike her. What was it about going to New York that was so bad? She'd never been there before, and she'd always wanted to visit. *Yeah, but this isn't a visit*. Still, she'd agreed, and she couldn't change that now. And Alex had promised her time there would only be temporary.

If all went well, they'd find a permanent assistant for Zachary Prince quickly, and Georgie wouldn't have to stay long at all. And yet … she couldn't help thinking there must be some reason other than what Alex had given her about why they hadn't yet been able to find an assistant. Was Zachary Prince difficult to work with? Maybe he was a pain in the butt and Alex hadn't wanted to say so.

Then she told herself she was doing exactly what Alex had told her not to do. She was being paranoid. Granted, this time her paranoia had nothing to do with her mother, but still …

Lecturing herself to stop borrowing trouble and to think positive, she continued packing. She was almost finished when her cell phone, playing Chris Brown's "Forever," sounded from where she'd placed it on her dresser. The song signaled Joanna calling.

"How's my BFF today?" Georgie said by way of greeting.

"Exhausted."

"What's the problem?"

"Too busy, too little time." Joanna was a struggling fashion designer in the Seattle area, and she was always racing to beat a deadline.

"What else is new?" Georgie abandoned the packing and walked over to the window overlooking the parklike grounds adjacent to her condominium. Below she saw a young couple walking with their arms around each other.

"Nothing, really. Just wanted to see how things were going with you. How was the party last night?" Joanna was referring to Frankie's engagement party to Eli Wolf.

"It was really nice."

"And what about Thursday's farewell lunch with your mother?"

"I enjoyed it. At least this time Mom wasn't upset. At least, not with me."

"Who was she upset with?"

"Uncle Harry."

"What's the poor guy done now?"

"It's not what he's done, it's what he hasn't done." Georgie was still amazed at what her mother had revealed right before Christmas. "Joanna, remember when I told you what my mother told me and my sisters? About Uncle Harry and how she'd once had a thing for him? She made it sound like that was in the distant past, but I think she might really be in love with him."

"Did she say that?"

"She didn't have to say it. She was talking about him and some dinner he'd taken her to, and all of a sudden it seemed so obvious I couldn't believe I hadn't realized it before."

"I thought he was more like her brother or something. Didn't you tell me she and your dad and Harry Hunt were like The three Musketeers when they were young? And she picked your dad."

Joanna didn't have to say what Harry had done. They both knew the story. Harry had picked one gorgeous model or actress after another, gold diggers all—at least, in his estimation. Each short-lived marriage had produced one son, and Harry Hunt had gotten sole custody of each of them.

"That's what we all thought," Georgie said. "But maybe we don't know the whole story."

"You mean you think she's always loved Harry? And not your dad?"

"No, I don't believe *that*. I think she loved my dad. But maybe she loved Uncle Harry first. Or maybe … after Dad died …"

"Did you ask her about her feelings yesterday?"

"Good grief, no. You know how private my mother is. Besides, it wasn't like she'd said anything directly. And, I don't know, I felt funny about it. Like maybe it was none of my business."

"Wow," Joanna said, amusement in her voice. "I think that's the first time since I met you that you thought something wasn't your business."

"Oh, stuff it," Georgie said, laughing. But she knew Joanna wasn't far wrong.

"You know," Joanna said, "maybe this explains why Harry got so weird about your mother dating that golf pro from the club."

"You're probably right. Here I thought he was just worried because the guy's so much younger than my mother. But maybe he was actually jealous!"

"It's possible. I know Chick can't stand it when I even *look* at anyone else."

Georgie nodded, even though Joanna couldn't see her. "It all makes sense now. There's got to be some kind of history here, something my sisters and I never suspected."

"Oh, Georgie. It's terribly romantic, isn't it? Maybe they've been pining for each other for years. I know! Why don't you and your sisters turn the tables on them and try to get them together? I mean, they were trying their darnedest to fix you guys up. Why not fix *them* up, because, Lord knows, if you don't, they might never get it right."

Georgie laughed. "It would serve them right, wouldn't it? But think about it. What could we actually do? It's not like we can plop them down on a desert island or something."

"No, but you can maybe nudge them along a bit."

"I'm afraid my sisters will have to do the nudging, 'cause I'll be in New York." Glancing at the digital alarm sitting on her bedside table, she added, "Speaking of, I'd better get a move on. My flight leaves at noon, and I still have to finish packing and get a shower."

"Okay, I'll let you go. Safe trip."

"Thanks." After promising to call or text Joanna as soon as she hit LaGuardia, they said goodbye.

Fifteen minutes later, duffel packed, laptop and cell phone charging, Georgie headed for the shower.

Katie, Zach's ten-year-old, kept Zach up half the night with a sore throat and a fever. On any other day, even if he had work stacked to the ceiling, Zach would have taken the morning off—maybe even the entire day—and taken his daughter to the doctor himself. But today was the day Georgie Fairchild was to report to work, so he reluctantly agreed that Fanny could take Katie to see their pediatrician.

"Don't worry, Mr. Prince. She'll be fine. I'll call you after we've seen Dr. Noble."

But Zach knew he would worry. Worse, he'd feel guilty all day. He should be the one taking care of Katie, not Fanny. As he had so often since Jenny died, he thought about how little consideration he'd ever given to the plight of single parents. But that was before, and this was now. Now he was a single parent himself. And he was fortunate. He had money, and when he couldn't be here, he could afford the best care possible for his children. And yet he still felt guilty when he couldn't do the things Jenny had done.

Some days he felt he was incredibly selfish—working when he didn't have to. And yet everyone needed some kind of work. Worthwhile work was important. He wanted to set that example for his children, even as he wanted to be with them as much as possible.

He was still mulling over his ever-present, unsolvable dilemma as he wearily headed to the office.

Always begin the way you mean to continue. Georgie thought of her mother's advice, given so often over the years, as she dressed for her first day in the New York office.

Good thing she'd arrived in the city a few days early. She'd quickly discovered her ideas of what New York women wear were wrong. First of all, she didn't own anywhere near enough black. Second, she needed better walking boots that she could actually wear to the office—ones that wouldn't be ruined by dirty snow and slush—because New York was definitely a walking city, which she actually liked.

Now, after a couple of necessary shopping trips, she felt as if she fit in. At least she wouldn't look like a tourist.

She'd also scoped out the location of the Hunt Foundation's New York office (only a couple of blocks away from the corporate apartment), the closest Starbucks (after all, she was a Seattle girl, and if she couldn't have her daily fix of her sister Bobbie's brew, she'd take theirs) and the best place to buy tickets to hear classical musicians she admired (this she was still investigating).

Now she was armed and ready to meet her new boss.

Dressed in black wool pants, her new black boots, businesslike white blouse, lightweight black cardigan and a good-looking black wool coat she'd bought on sale at Bloomingdale's, she left the apartment at 8:25, even though supposedly the office didn't open for business until nine. Why so late? she wondered. Seattle offices started their workday at eight. Did a nine o'clock start have something to do with being on Eastern Time? She guessed it didn't really matter. There was a Starbucks conveniently close by; she'd just duck in there and get a skinny latte.

Latte in hand, she arrived at the foundation office eight minutes before nine, at the same time an attractive redhead was unlocking the door. The redhead looked up. "Hi. Can I help you?"

"I'm Georgie Fairchild. I—"

"Oh, yes, of course. We're expecting you. I'm Deborah Zelinsky, the office manager here." She pulled off a wool glove and stuck out her right hand. "C'mon in. I generally get here earlier, but my son woke up with a stomachache and, well, you know …"

Georgie nodded, although she really didn't know … and didn't want to know what it must be like to be both mother and employee. She felt capable of many things, but juggling two such important roles seemed to her to be the ultimate in self-sacrifice. She had nothing but admiration for working mothers—for *all* mothers—but was glad she'd realized early on that role wasn't for her.

Following Deborah into the office, Georgie quickly saw it wasn't a fancy place. Not that she'd expected it to be. Most foundations, even well-funded ones, didn't waste money on frills. And if they *did*, then they were suspect in Georgie's eyes.

Substance over flash, that was Georgie's credo.

Deborah dumped her handbag and a paper sack onto a desk in the outer office and gestured to a group of chairs against the wall. "Have a seat. Let me get things turned on and organized, then I'll show you around."

"Okay." But Georgie didn't sit down. Instead she walked over to the opposite wall where several black-and-white framed photographs were hung. She studied them with interest. The first showed a familiar actor shaking hands with Bill Clinton. She idly wondered why a photo of Patrick Dempsey would be hanging in the foundation's office. Had he made a big contribution or been involved in a recent humanitarian effort on behalf of the foundation? He and the former president were the only ones she recognized. The other photos were of people she didn't know, people who were obviously either supporters or workers for the foundation. She only glanced at them, thinking it was likely one of the men in those photos was her new boss, Zachary Prince.

"Miss Fairchild?"

Georgie whipped around. She hadn't heard Deborah's return.

"Our one claim to fame," Deborah said, walking over and pointing to the photo of the actor and Bill Clinton.

"What did Patrick Dempsey do for the foundation?" Georgie asked.

Deborah rolled her eyes. "Oh, boy. Zach *hates* that."

"Hates what?"

"When people think he's Patrick Dempsey. He gets it all the time. Women have been known to follow him on the street. One or two have even followed him to the office. And let's not even talk about the paparazzi." She shook her head. "They've been fooled by the resemblance, too."

Georgie stared at Deborah. "That's Zachary Prince? Not Patrick Dempsey?"

"Yep. That's Zach."

Geez Louise. Georgie didn't trust gorgeous men. In fact, aside from Alex, she'd never met one who wasn't full of himself. *I knew I wasn't going to like this assignment, and that conviction just got a lot stronger*.

Deborah was still chuckling as she said, "C'mon, I'll give you the ten-cent tour now."

It didn't take long to see the rest of the offices. There were only three of them, plus a small conference room, a tiny kitchen and a unisex bathroom. The largest office was Zachary Prince's, Deborah explained. Georgie only caught a glimpse of it, because they didn't go inside. The office assigned to Georgie was directly across the hall, and next door to hers was an office that was used by everyone and anyone associated with the foundation at any given time.

"Including visitors and temporary help," Deborah said. "We pretty much operate on a shoestring. Zach doesn't believe in wasting money that can be used in better places."

Good, Georgie thought. At least he and she would agree in one area. "Where is Mr. Prince?"

Deborah smiled. "Oh, don't call him Mr. Prince. He'd hate that, too. He's Zach to everyone."

Georgie noticed that Deborah hadn't answered her question. She was just about to pose it again, when Deborah said, "To answer your question, Zach doesn't usually get here before ten."

Oh, really? Strike two, Georgie thought, only barely preventing herself from rolling her eyes the way Deborah had earlier. Georgie could just imagine why he couldn't make it in early. She'd known a few of his type—pretty boys who did the club scene at night. No wonder Alex was concerned about the New York office, even if he hadn't seen fit to tell her exactly why he was concerned.

She was still thinking about the things Deborah had told her, even as she unpacked her satchel and arranged the supplies piled upon her desk. She hoped she was wrong. She hoped Zach Prince would turn out to be just as great as Alex had made him out to be. But she had a bad feeling that Alex had kept things from her.

And even if he hadn't, even if he really thought Zachary Prince was terrific, there was always a first time to be fooled, especially when you were operating long distance from each other. In fact, maybe the reason they so desperately needed to hire an assistant here was because the assistant actually did all the work. And who knew? Maybe down deep, Alex suspected as much, even if he wouldn't, or couldn't, put his suspicions into words.

Georgie had just finished setting everything up to her liking, booting up her company-issue laptop and logging on to the employee section of the foundation's website, where she'd begun reading the reports of weekend activity posted by various field agents and other foundation employees, when she heard a male voice talking to Deborah, then the footsteps of someone coming down the hall.

Mr. Gorgeous had finally arrived, she guessed.

Sure enough, a few seconds later, the Patrick Dempsey lookalike stood in her open doorway. "Good morning," he said.

Bad night, she thought, eyeing his rumpled, longish black hair and tired eyes. Probably out way too late. "Good morning."

"Zach Prince," he said, walking in. He wore a dark business suit under a black topcoat.

Georgie stood. "Georgie Fairchild." They shook hands. His handshake was firm but not crushing, a minor point in his favor. Georgie hated when men tried to show you how strong they were with a handshake from hell.

He looked at her desk. "Sorry I wasn't here earlier, but I see Deborah has taken care of you."

"Yes, she has."

"Give me a half hour or so to get some things organized, then we'll talk."

If Georgie had been him, she'd have been here an hour before the new person was scheduled to arrive. She'd have been ready to talk immediately. "All right," she agreed.

Not a good beginning, she thought as she watched him walk across the hall and into his office. When he shut the door behind him, she shook her head. *Not a good beginning at all.*

Hell, Zach thought. He could see, just from the way she looked at him, that Georgie Fairchild was judging him and finding him wanting. He could easily imagine what she thought. Not only was he later than usual—10:30 by his watch—but he probably looked like he'd been out all night. Added to that was the way he looked, which caused people who didn't know him to think he was a lightweight.

One look at Georgie Fairchild and anyone could see that *she* wasn't a lightweight. Her height alone—Zach guessed she was about five ten or eleven—would be intimidating to a lot of people. It wasn't to Zach—he was well over six feet himself—but he would imagine it gave her an advantage in a lot of situations.

In addition to her height were businesslike clothes, a utilitarian watch, no jewelry except tiny diamond earrings, thick wheat-blond hair pulled back into a no-nonsense ponytail, cool green eyes, subtle makeup—it was obvious to anyone that here was a young woman who was capable, efficient and self-confident.

Zach groaned inwardly. All his reservations about Georgie Fairchild bubbled up. He'd been right to be concerned. Having her here was not a good idea. Zach felt like picking up the phone and calling Alex right now and saying, "No way, José." So what if she had an honorary seat on the HuntCom board?

In fact, if she gave him one bit of trouble, she was going to be out of here. But if worse came to worst, if Alex really *had* sent her here for some ulterior motive, then Zach's ongoing work-versus home dilemma might solve itself.

Feeling better now that he'd decided on his modus operandi, he booted up his laptop and opened his email account.

It was almost 11:30 before Zach—she couldn't keep referring to him as Zachary Prince, even in her own mind—called Georgie into his office. She kept telling herself to keep an open mind, but if she was being honest with herself, she'd admit she'd pretty much formed her opinion of him already. Maybe he was as good as Alex had said he was, but his work habits told another story.

He stood as she walked into the office. Okay, so he'd been taught nice manners and they extended into the workplace, but as far as Georgie was concerned, standing for her was another strike against him, because all the gesture meant was that he thought of her more as a woman than a colleague.

"I understand you got here on Friday," he said as they both took a seat—him behind the desk, her in one of the two chairs flanking it. There was also a long leather sofa along the side wall and several framed watercolors hanging above it.

"Yes."

He must have noticed her looking at the watercolors, because he said, "My sister painted those."

"They're lovely." And they were. Georgie would have liked to look at them more closely.

"Thank you," he said, still in that rather formal voice. "So, have you been to the city before?"

"No, this is my first time."

"What do you think of it?"

"So far, I like it."

"How's the apartment?"

"It's very nice, thank you." Georgie hesitated, then added, "I appreciate that you stocked the pantry and refrigerator for me."

"That was Deborah's doing."

"I'll have to thank her, then."

For a few minutes, they talked about the sights she'd taken in over the weekend, and just as Georgie was beginning to think he'd never get down to business, he said, "Shall we get started?"

I thought you'd never ask. "I'm ready anytime you are."

He picked up a large blue bound notebook, and as he did so, Georgie noticed the two framed photos on his desk, which the notebook had partially hidden. Without staring, she could see that one was a photo of three children—one of whom looked quite young—and the other was of a very pretty dark-haired woman.

So maybe he wasn't a playboy type? Of course, the kids could be nieces and nephews. The woman could be the sister he'd mentioned, but she couldn't imagine any man keeping his sister's framed picture on his desk.

Even though she'd thought she wasn't obviously looking, she must have been, because he said, "My family."

Georgie's eyes met his. "Nice looking."

"Thank you."

He looked away, but not before she caught a glimpse of some emotion in his eyes she didn't quite understand. It almost looked like sadness. Surely not. But as quickly as it had appeared, the emotion, whatever it was, had disappeared.

For the next hour they pored over the various grants the eastern division of the foundation had pledged in the past quarter and the projects they were in the process of considering, plus a list of possible beneficiaries that had had preliminary vetting but which needed in-depth research and investigation. Zach also handed her a stack of grant applications that hadn't been vetted at all. "We call these our slush pile," he said.

As Zach talked, giving her background material and status reports, Georgie had to admit he seemed to know his business. He answered all her questions thoroughly and only once had to refer to another source to give her the information she requested. After a while, he seemed to warm up to her, and once or twice he actually smiled.

Good heavens, that smile should be banned, she thought as she found herself responding to its warmth … and potent sexiness. This last thought alarmed her so much she actually backed up in her chair. The last thing she wanted—or needed—was to feel any attraction, even the tiniest bit, for Zachary Prince. She kept her expression as businesslike and cool as she could manage while reminding herself he was a) so not her type, b) her boss, and c), most importantly, married.

She tried to banish her disturbing thoughts with limited success. Finally they finished with the blue book, which Zach had told her they called their bible, and he said, "Since it's already one o'clock, why don't you take a lunch break? In the meantime, I'll ask Deborah to pull all the active files for

you to study this afternoon. I'd like you to pay particular attention to the Carlyle Children's Cancer Center because that's the first possible beneficiary I want you to do a final evaluation on."

"All right." She couldn't wait to get back to her office. And away from him.

"If you have questions, make a note of them. We can discuss them tomorrow morning." Then he added, "I won't be here this afternoon." His blue eyes met hers squarely. This time he didn't smile. Nor did he offer any explanation.

Georgie told herself he was the boss and he had a perfect right to come and go as he pleased. And he certainly didn't have to justify himself to her, did he? Besides, he could have perfectly legitimate business to take care of. She told herself where he might be going or what he might be doing wasn't her concern and she shouldn't jump to any conclusions. She told herself she was there to do a job, that Alex had not asked her to report back about Zach *or* his work habits and no matter how she felt about Zach herself, she was going to do that job to the best of her ability. And she was going to keep her relationship with Zach strictly business. In fact, the less she knew about him and the less she saw of him, the better off she'd be. She might not have been here long, but she already knew Zachary Prince was bad news—on more than one level.

As Georgie returned to her office, she couldn't help thinking how right she'd been to resist coming to New York.

Chapter Four

"I'm glad you could come in this afternoon, Mr. Prince. I know you're a busy man."

Zach liked the counselor at his children's private school. Celeste Fouchet had proven herself to be compassionate and intelligent, and she had a great rapport with the students. Katie liked her; he knew she did, even though his daughter didn't talk about her counseling sessions at home.

"Nothing is more important than my children," he said, taking the seat the counselor had indicated.

"I noticed that Katie is out sick today," Miss Fouchet said.

"Yes. She's got a strep infection. Dr. Noble saw her this morning and said we'd need to keep her home until she's no longer contagious."

"Well, I hope she feels better soon." The counselor smiled. "The reason I asked you to come and see me is I'm still a bit worried about Katie." Unlike some others who might have avoided his eyes or fiddled with something on her desk, she met his gaze directly.

In her gray eyes, he saw sympathy. His heart sank. He'd hoped the summons from the counselor had meant that Katie didn't need additional help, that she'd finally accepted her mother's death.

"I thought she was doing really well," he said. "I haven't heard her crying at night in a long time."

Miss Fouchet nodded. "She is doing better, but she's still not where I'd like her to be. She's accepted her mother's death, and she also knows no one is to blame, that it was the disease that took your wife, not anything she or anyone else did wrong. That's a good thing, because for a long time she was secretly blaming herself."

"Which was totally irrational."

"Yes, but we all think irrational thoughts when we're devastated by loss. Very few of us have objectivity in times of great pain."

Zach sighed. "I know." God knows that for a while he'd blamed himself, too. Why had he not seen Jenny's symptoms so that he could have insisted she see a doctor sooner? *If only he'd done this … or that …* He grimaced. *If only*. Those two words were the most useless words in the dictionary. "What else can I do to help Katie?"

"Just keep doing what you're doing: loving her and reassuring her anytime she begins to show signs of her fear of losing you, too." The counselor gave him an understanding smile. "I know it's hard. I know you want to make every bad thing go away for Katie, but healing from a loss like this is a slow process, Mr. Prince. It doesn't happen overnight."

"I know, but it has been two years." Jeremy had seemed to snap back to his old self within months of Jenny's death. Then again, he was only four when Jenny first got sick. He'd quickly adapted to the fact that his mother couldn't do the things she'd always done, so her loss hadn't affected him in the same way it had affected Katie. *And me.*

"Each of us is different. Some of us deal with these things better than others. In your case, you're stronger than Katie … and wiser. For a girl, losing a mother is traumatic. And for a girl Katie's age—on the cusp of her teen years—it's life-changing. But your daughter is going to be all right, I feel quite sure of that. I just wanted you to know that we're not there yet. And I wanted to tell you again now much I like your daughter." Her expression softened. "Katie's a special girl. She's going to be a remarkable woman someday."

Zach suddenly found it hard to speak around the lump in his throat. "She's … very like her mother."

The warmth in the counselor's eyes said she understood exactly how he was feeling. "I suspected as much. She talks about her mother with so much … love and gentleness."

Zach managed to get a grip on his emotions, but once he stepped outside and began the twenty-block walk home—he'd decided he could use the exercise today—that feeling of emptiness and loss

returned with a strength he hadn't felt in months. And he knew—sadly—that both he and his oldest daughter, at least, still had a ways to go before they'd be completely whole again.

"So how was your first day at work?"

Georgie made a face. "It was fine."

"Georgie, I can tell just by the tone of your voice that it wasn't fine," Joanna said.

So Georgie, who hadn't planned to say a word until Joanna had called and begun pumping her, spilled the whole story—how Zach Prince had showed up at the office so late, how he'd skipped out again without any explanation about where he might be going, how she felt even more uneasy about him now than she'd felt before—and then she even found herself telling Joanna how good-looking he was.

"Really?" Joanna said. "He actually looks like Patrick Dempsey? Gee, he can't be *that* hard to work with, then. At least you've got something great to look at! I mean, he didn't act obnoxious or anything, did he?"

"No."

"Well, then? How bad can it be? Just sit back and enjoy the scenery for a while."

Joanna's comments caused Georgie to remember what she'd said to her sisters a while back when they'd started bugging her about getting married. "What?" Bobbie had said. "You're going to go without sex for the rest of your life?" And Georgie had laughed and retaliated, saying she hadn't said a thing about going without sex, that she intended to have plenty of lovers.

Now why on earth had Joanna's comment about Zach made her think of *that* conversation?

"Speaking of scenery," Georgie said, "how's your romance going?"

"Chick's wonderful," Joanna said dreamily. "Oh, Georgie, you should try it."

"Try what?" But Georgie knew.

"Being in love. There's no feeling like it in the world."

Later that night, as Georgie slathered moisturizer on her face in preparation for bed, she thought about her conversation with Joanna again. She was glad she hadn't confessed the momentary attraction she'd felt toward Zach, especially since soon after that she'd discovered he was married. Georgie knew it wasn't uncommon to be attracted to people who were out of bounds. Shoot, she wouldn't be human if she could turn off physical reactions the way you turned off a TV remote. Still, the memory of her involuntary physical response to Zach's smile continued to plague her even after she'd climbed into bed and turned off the bedside lamp, because it had been such a strong response, the likes of which she hadn't had in a long time.

Her last thought before drifting off to sleep was that tomorrow she would redouble her efforts to be a perfectly controlled, perfectly businesslike employee. And hopefully, her future assignments would keep her well away from the office … and from Zachary Prince and his damned smile.

"You look beautiful, as always, Corny."

Cornelia kept her voice light as she answered, although the expression in Harry's dark eyes unleashed some unwanted butterflies. "Always the flatterer, aren't you, Harry?"

He smiled. "I mean every word. No one would ever believe you're sixty-six. Why, today you don't look a day over forty."

"Oh, please," Cornelia scoffed. "Don't exaggerate. Fifty maybe. But forty?"

"You're more beautiful now than you were as a young girl," he insisted.

The two of them were having a late lunch at a charming lodge-type restaurant out near the Hunt mansion. It was a typical Seattle winter day—cold and gloomy and threatening rain at any moment—but the lodge had a cheery fire going in their big stone fireplace, and Harry had secured a table close by the inviting warmth. And, of course, Cornelia had ridden to their lunch date in comfort and style, because Harry had sent Walter, his long-time driver, to pick her up in the Lincoln Town Car.

"You don't look so bad yourself," she said with a chuckle. "For a seventy-two-year-old man, that is." Harry was still as tall as he'd been as a young man—topping six feet four—with the hawklike features and thick hair that had always been the standard by which Cornelia measured other men.

He laughed. "You just couldn't resist letting me know that I'm an old geezer, could you?"

"You know I was teasing you."

His smile faded, and he reached across the table to take her hand. "Were you? Maybe you really do think I'm too old."

Cornelia's wayward heart betrayed her at the look in his eyes. What was happening here? she wondered. She was afraid to hope. For so long, she'd hoped to no avail. She couldn't go through that again. She'd been disappointed too many times. "Too old for what, Harry?" she said carefully.

"Too old to try again."

"To try *what* again?" Cornelia wasn't going to make anything easy for him. Not after what he'd put her through.

"You're going to make me beg, aren't you?"

Cornelia refused to look away. Instead, she met his gaze squarely. Almost defiantly.

"Beg for what, Harry?"

"For you, Corny. For you. I let you slip through my fingers once. And that was a big mistake. Maybe the biggest I've ever made."

"Yes, you did."

"Well? What do you think?"

"What do *you* think, Harry?"

"I think we belong together."

"I once thought we did, too. But you couldn't wait for me to grow up, could you? Instead, you picked all those other women." For the first time, she couldn't hide from him the bitterness she thought she'd eradicated.

"Hell, Corny, I know I was stupid. I'm trying to tell you that. I guess my pride was hurt." He shrugged. "I was young, too. I may have been smart when it came to electronics and computers, but I didn't have much experience with life. Certainly not with women." His dark gaze shined intently as he put more pressure on her hand. "Cornelia, I love you. I always have loved you. And I don't want us to waste another minute. I want us to be together for as many years as we've got left."

Cornelia's traitorous heart was now pounding. But she was determined not to make this easy for him. He'd hurt her too much in the past. He needed to suffer a bit, too! *There are none so blind as those who will not see*. The familiar line from the Bible stiffened her resolve as she reminded herself of all the years of Harry's cluelessness. If he really had come to his senses and wanted her now, he was going to have to work for her. "I might want that, too," she said, "but right now, I'm not sure. I need some time."

His gaze narrowed. "Is it that golf pro? Dammit, Corny, he's too young for you."

Cornelia yanked her hand away. "Is that so? Well, maybe I don't agree." She had half a mind to get up and walk out on him, even though their dessert hadn't yet been served. She knew Walter would take her home. He liked her better than Harry, anyway. And how did Harry know about Greg?

"Ah, come on, Corny, stop it. You know we belong together." Harry reached into his inside jacket pocket and took out a small black velvet box. Snapping it open, he showed her the ring inside. "I bought this for you. I want you to marry me."

Cornelia almost gasped, but she stopped herself just in time. Sitting there was one of the most magnificent rings she'd ever set eyes on. A huge round pink diamond circled by dozens of tiny diamonds, it was set in what she figured was platinum—nothing but the best for Harrison Hunt—and it was breathtaking. The ring would probably overpower her slender hand, but that was Harry. He did nothing by small measures. Gathering every ounce of strength she possessed, she said quietly, "That's quite a ring, Harry."

"Is that all you have to say? I said I was sorry, Corny. I said I was stupid. I said loved you. I said I wanted us to spend the rest of our lives together. What more can I say?"

"Oh, I think you can say a lot more, Harry. And if you're really serious, if you really mean everything you've said tonight, then you'll be quite willing to court me the way you should."

"The way I *should?*"

"Don't sound so incredulous or I may decide I'm not interested no matter what you do … or say."

For a long moment, he just looked at her. She knew she'd shocked him. She knew he'd expected her to fall at his feet. After all, very few people, and *no women* that she knew of, had ever said no to him. Harry Hunt had always been able to buy anything he wanted. Well, she wasn't for sale. And the sooner he knew that, the better.

Finally he sighed. "You win, Corny. You want me to court you, I will. You want me to grovel, I will." His smile this time was almost humble. Almost. "Because I really do love you, Corny, with all my heart. And I'll prove it to you. We *are* going to spend the rest of our lives together, and that's a promise."

For Georgie, at least, Day Two at the office began earlier than Day One. Deborah had given Georgie a key, so she decided she didn't have to wait till nine to get a start on her workday. Always a morning person, she was at her desk before eight and reading all the information she could find on the Carlyle Children's Cancer Center. She was almost finished with a preliminary report on her findings when she heard Zach arrive. A glance at her watch showed it was a few minutes before ten. She stood, hoping she could talk to him before he got involved in anything else.

But except for a quick "Good morning," and "It'll have to wait," in answer to her query about a meeting, he spent the remaining hours before lunch closeted in his office, where she could faintly hear him talking on the phone.

What was so important that he couldn't at least answer a few questions? The longer his door remained shut, the more irritated she became. What did he expect her to do? Sit and twiddle her thumbs until he was ready to pay some attention to her? She'd already read everything she could find about every single funded and non-funded agency they currently worked with or were considering. The only thing she hadn't yet attacked was the "slush pile." She eyed it thoughtfully. She didn't want to muddy the waters by reading through all those applications before she and Zach had had a chance to talk in more depth about the ones already in process.

Huffing out a frustrated sigh, she wished she were the kind of person who could pick up the phone, call Alex and tell him exactly what she thought about Prince Zach, the pretty boy with the questionable work habits. Finally, when her watch read 12:30 and her stomach started telling her it needed food, she decided she might as well go to lunch.

She debated knocking on Zach's door to tell him she was leaving, then changed her mind. *The hell with him. If he wants me, he can just wait till I get back*.

She told Deborah she was going to get something to eat, then walked to a small deli a few doors away from her building. Forty minutes later, revived by tuna salad, cheese and fruit, she returned to the office and found that Zach was indeed waiting for her. In fact, he was sitting on the corner of Deborah's desk and stood when she opened the door.

"I read your report on the Carlyle Center," he said. "I thought we could visit there this afternoon. I want to introduce you to the principals, and I think it'll be helpful to hear in person their arguments for the grant they've applied for."

"I'd like that, but in the future, if you think we'll be visiting one of our prospective grant recipients, I wish you'd let me know the day before." Georgie knew she sounded stiff, but dammit, if she'd known they'd be calling on the Carlyle people, she'd have worn something a bit more professional. She made a mental note to make sure to keep a suit and heels at the office so she wouldn't be blindsided in the future.

"Oh?" Zach seemed taken aback by her tone. "What's the problem?"

"The problem is, I don't feel dressed appropriately." Today she'd worn russet wool slacks and a matching cowl-necked sweater. And flat shoes.

Zach's gaze swept over her. "You look perfectly fine. We're not going to some fashion house. It's a hospital."

"I realize that." Men simply didn't get it when it came to clothes. They always wore the same thing. Maybe that's what she should do, too. Wear a suit every day and only vary the color of her blouse. But even though Georgie pretended she didn't care about clothes or fashion, the truth was, she liked to look good. And she also liked the feeling of control wearing a professional outfit always gave her.

"You look fine," he said again.

Georgie would have liked to say something else, but she knew if she did, she would just sound petulant. Worse, she'd sound like a silly woman. So she swallowed the smart remark and simply shrugged.

Zach, unfortunately, looked better than he had yesterday, mainly because the dark circles were gone from his eyes, and he'd obviously made an effort to tame his unruly hair. Why was it men could do the minimum in grooming and manage to look great?

"Oh, all right," she said. "Just give me a minute, okay?" She wanted to at least brush her teeth first. Because a person's smile was the first thing *she* noticed, Georgie was a fanatic when it came to her teeth—brushing after every meal, flossing nightly and making periodic visits to the dentist—usually between every assignment in the field.

Five minutes later, teeth clean and makeup freshened, she joined Zach, who again waited in the outer office.

"It's a good two miles," he said when they walked out of their building. "I'll get us a cab."

"I don't mind walking," Georgie said. "It'll be good exercise."

"The streets are messy, and I don't want to be splattered with dirty snow when we get there."

Georgie hated that she agreed with him. "Okay, fine."

A typical New Yorker, Zach stepped right out into the street and stuck his arm out. Within minutes, a cab pulled up. Georgie had already figured out that when the center dome light was on, a cab was free.

When Zach climbed into the back first, Georgie was surprised. But she quickly realized that he was the one who had to slide over to the other side and that it was much easier then for her to get in. "Thanks," she said.

"For what?" He leaned forward and gave the driver the address of the cancer center.

"For not making me slide over to where you're sitting."

There was that smile of his again. And dammit, it produced the same effect it had produced the day before. What was *wrong* with her? She didn't even *like* him.

"I learned about that kind of thing a long time ago," he said, still smiling. "I have a twin sister, and she educated me about women and skirts and heels." He chuckled. "Among other things."

"But I don't have a skirt on," Georgie retorted, just to be perverse.

The smile remained. In fact, now his eyes twinkled. "But you *are* a woman."

And just the way he said it, Georgie knew he thought she was attractive, and her face heated. Thank God the cab's interior was shaded. Oh, she hated her tendency to blush. She decided the best thing she could do was ignore the remark. "So you're a twin," she said instead.

"Yep."

"Any brothers?"

"Nope. Just Sabrina. What about you?"

"I have three sisters." She was surprised he didn't know that. After all, all four Fairchilds had honorary seats on the HuntCom board.

"Younger? Older?" he asked.

"All younger." Georgie didn't intend to say more. More than ever, considering her unwanted reaction to him, she intended to keep their relationship strictly business. But he seemed so genuinely interested, she added, "But we're stair-steps. Only one year between each of us."

"Any brothers?"

"Unfortunately, no. And my dad wanted a boy desperately. That's why we have the names we do." Forgetting she didn't like him and hadn't intended to be friendly, she laughed and said, "My dad's name was George."

Zach laughed, too. "What about your sisters? Do they all have boys' names, too?"

"Afraid so. Frankie—actually, Francesca—is named for my dad's brother. Bobbie was going to be Robert, and Tommi would have been Thomas." Georgie made a face. "When we were younger, we all hated our names. There I was, in class with a million Heathers and Tiffanys and Kims … and me with a name like Georgie. And, of course, being the tallest girl in my class didn't help."

"My sister's tall, too. She also hated it when she was young, but now she realizes it's an advantage."

Just then the driver asked a question, and after Zach had answered, he said he wanted to give her a brief rundown on the two main contacts she would be working with at Carlyle during her evaluation of the cancer center. "Jonathan Pierce can be hard to deal with," he began.

Georgie had familiarized herself with Dr. Pierce's background that morning. A specialist, Pierce had sixteen years' experience in pediatric oncology/hematology, had trained at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and was board certified in both specialties.

"Why is he hard to deal with?"

"He's a sought-after doctor who is highly regarded, but he resents the fact that the foundation required the center to meet certain conditions to be eligible for one of our grants."

"But that's standard practice with nonprofits, isn't it?"

"Yes," Zach said. "Yet I can understand how he feels. Pierce is passionate about what they do at Carlyle. He expected to be approved immediately. Whereas Carolyn Love, the CFO—she's the other one you'll meet today—is more tolerant of our position, because she understands budgetary constraints and that we have a board to answer to."

Just then, the cab pulled up to the entrance of the center, which was a division of Carlyle Clinic, and a few minutes later they were on their way to the third floor, where the administrative offices were located.

"I think it would be best if you let me do the talking today," Zach said as they stepped off the elevator.

Georgie bristled. "Why?"

"Because, as I said before, Pierce can be a tough nut."

"So? I'll have to deal with him sometime."

"I know, but it'll be better if we ease him into the new relationship."

"You don't trust me, do you?"

"It's not that I don't trust you, it's that I'm used to Pierce. You're not."

"Seems to me letting me take charge today would be the best way to get used to him."

"Look, bottom line? He can be a bit arrogant when it comes to women."

Oh, great. Fortunately, most of the men Georgie'd worked with during her time with the Hunt Foundation were the opposite; most didn't care what your gender was, they were simply grateful for any help they could get. Of course, that didn't always hold true for some of the bureaucrats she'd had dealings with. She'd often wondered why the least important political hack put on the most airs. The way she'd always dealt with these types was to let them know right off the bat that she wasn't going to put up with any B.S. from them … or anyone.

"Look," she said to Zach, "I am not one of those seen-but-not-heard women. And I refuse to pretend to be."

Zach sighed. “I can’t stop you from talking. But it would make things a lot easier for everyone if you’d just back off a little. You and I know you’re going to be in charge, and Jonathan Pierce will soon know it, too. I just don’t want to rub his nose in it today, okay?”

“Oh, all right,” she finally said. “I’ll keep my mouth shut and let you do the talking.” *This time*.

Maybe the expression on her face gave away her thoughts, because he raised his eyebrows. “Why do I get the feeling Jonathan Pierce better watch out?”

Chapter Five

The meeting hadn't been too bad, Georgie thought. Although Zach had done most of the talking, she hadn't felt like a fifth wheel, because he'd included her in his remarks, saying things like, "I know Miss Fairchild agrees," or "After today, please contact Miss Fairchild with any questions or concerns."

She'd only broken her promise to Zach once, and that was at the very end of their meeting, when they'd all stood and were saying their goodbyes. Georgie had turned to Carolyn Love—and Zach had been right about her: She was businesslike, and Georgie immediately liked her—to say she'd call for an appointment in the next few days, and Jonathan Pierce had said, pointedly, to Zach, "Call me as soon as you've made your decision, Zach, so I can get that new equipment ordered."

Before Zach could open his mouth to reply, Georgie said, also pointedly, "Dr. Pierce, you've already been told that it's me you'll be dealing with from now on. I'll be the one calling you."

Pierce's gray eyes had darkened, and he'd glared at her. But before he could reply, Zach said, "Yes, Jonathan, Miss Fairchild will be contacting you."

They were saved additional histrionics by the doctor's pager going off, and he'd abruptly left the small conference room where the meeting had taken place, but not before giving Georgie the evil eye. She almost laughed. Her eyes had met Zach's and he'd winked.

Maybe I've misjudged him, she thought grudgingly.

She and Zach rode the elevator down to the main floor in silence. There were hospital personnel getting on and off; it paid to be discreet.

Georgie tightened her scarf as they exited the building. She was also glad she was wearing warm leather gloves, because the temperature seemed to have dropped while they were inside. Or maybe the contrast between the warm building and the bitterly cold February wind just made it feel colder out. Georgie did notice how quickly most of the people on the sidewalk were moving, most with their heads down.

Before hailing a cab, Zach turned to her and said, "Do you mind if we stop off at my apartment before going back to the office? I left some files there that I meant to bring with me this morning."

"No, that's fine."

A cab pulled over almost immediately, and they got in. Georgie found she was actually looking forward to seeing where Zach lived. Maybe she'd even get to meet his wife.

"My oldest daughter is home sick today," he said after giving the driver their destination. "She's got a strep infection."

"I used to get those when I was a kid. They're not any fun."

"No. She was pretty miserable yesterday, but the antibiotic seems to be doing its job. She seemed better this morning."

Georgie knew it was none of her business, but he'd given her an opening, so she said, "Is that why you left the office early yesterday afternoon?"

He only hesitated a moment before shaking his head. "No. I had an appointment at Katie's school." He sighed. "She's had a rough time since her mother died."

Georgie's mouth went dry. "Your … your wife *died?*"

"Yes. Jenny … had cancer."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thank you."

Georgie's mind spun. A lot of her ideas about Zach had been wrong, then. He wasn't married. And he wasn't a playboy who stayed out late every night. He was a widower with three young children. *That'll teach me to be so judgmental, to jump to conclusions about people.*

What else had she been wrong about? Maybe he wasn't a slacker as far as work was concerned, either. He certainly had conducted himself well today, and he definitely seemed to know what he was

talking about. She could see that both Jonathan Pierce and Carolyn Love respected him. And Love, in particular, had impressed Georgie as the kind of businesswoman who wouldn't be easy to fool.

Georgie wondered if Zach would say anything more, but he turned away from her and stared out the window on his side … or pretended to. She wondered how long ago his wife had died. Maybe his children weren't as young as she'd originally thought. Maybe that photo on his desk had been taken a while ago. But she'd be willing to bet that Zach was only in his thirties. He certainly didn't look any older than that. So unless he'd married right out of high school, which she was certain wouldn't be the case, his children couldn't be that old.

Now she was avidly curious about him. Why hadn't Alex informed her that Zach was a widower? Yet why should he? She realized Alex rarely repeated anything personal about any of the Hunt Foundation employees, especially since she'd begun working for him. Actually, she appreciated his respect for their privacy. That told her he would not have discussed anything personal about her, either, not with Zach and not with any of the people she'd worked with or for.

Her mind teemed with unanswered questions during the ten-minute cab ride. When the taxi pulled up in front of an apartment building on W. 66th Street, right around the corner from Lincoln Center, Georgie blinked in surprise. Even as a newcomer to the city, she recognized that they were in a high-rent district.

As they exited the cab, a uniformed doorman opened the door of the building as soon as he recognized Zach, saying, "Good afternoon, Mr. Prince."

"Good afternoon, Thomas."

The doorman smiled at Georgie.

There was a security guard sitting at a desk in the lobby of the building, and he, too, called Zach by name. "Cold one out there today," he said as they approached.

"Sure is," Zach said, then added, "How's Mona doing?"

"Better," the guard said. "She'll get her cast off next week."

"I know she'll be glad." Turning to Georgie, Zach said, "This way," and led her around the corner to a bank of three elevators.

Georgie couldn't help thinking what a fortune this building must cost to live in. How did Zach afford it? She knew his job at the foundation couldn't begin to pay enough to live on this scale. In fact, she knew, because Alex had recently mentioned it, that the board of directors had been talking about raises for the administrative staff since salaries at the Hunt Foundation had been found to be lower than comparable companies, and if they wanted to remain competitive and attract the best employees, they had to spend some money.

When the elevator doors opened on the eleventh floor, Georgie wouldn't have been at all surprised to find they were already in Zach's apartment, but instead they walked out into a hallway. There were two entrances that Georgie could see. Zach headed for a double doorway midway down the right side of the hall. After unlocking the doors, he gestured her ahead of him.

They entered a small foyer containing an antique lowboy upon which sat an ornate Chinese vase filled with fresh flowers. "It's me, Fanny," Zach called. Seconds later, an attractive fifty-something woman with dark hair and a pleasant smile greeted them.

"Fanny, this is Georgie Fairchild, my new assistant. Georgie, I'd like you to meet Fanny Whittaker, our housekeeper and the one person I can't live without."

Georgie smiled and shook the woman's hand. The housekeeper's hazel eyes, filled with intelligence, gave Georgie a quick once-over.

"How's Katie doing?" Zach asked.

"She's much better today, Mr. Prince. In fact, she's watching a movie now. I fixed her some tea and cinnamon toast."

"And where's Emma?" He turned to Georgie. "Emma's my three-year-old. Normally, when she's around, you can't get a word in edgewise."

"Sabrina took her for the day," Fanny said.

"Sabrina's a saint."

"Well, Emma was driving poor Katie crazy. She wanted to play Go Fish and wouldn't take no for an answer."

Zach shook his head. "She's a pistol," he said to Georgie. "When she sets her mind to something, you cannot sway her."

Georgie laughed. "Sounds like me when I was little. Actually, my sisters would say that sounds like me now."

"Uh-oh," Zach said. "That doesn't bode well for me, does it?"

Georgie shrugged. "We'll see. Depends on whether you agree with me or not."

Now it was his turn to laugh. "C'mon, I'll introduce you to Katie."

A few minutes later, they stood in the family room, whose windows faced Central Park. Although it was bitterly cold outside, the afternoon sun gave the illusion of warmth as it streamed through the windows. Katie was propped against pillows on one of two matching love seats and covered by a gaily patterned quilt. A TV tray sat next to her, and Georgie could see the remnants of her snack along with a box of tissues.

Zach's daughter had his dark hair, but her eyes were a warm brown and her face was heart-shaped. Even seated, Georgie could tell she was petite. Her face lit up at her father's appearance. "Hi, Dad."

"Hi, honey. Fanny tells me you're feeling better today."

Katie nodded. "Lots better."

"Katie, I want you to meet my new assistant. This is Miss Fairchild. Georgie, this is my daughter Katie."

"Hi, Katie."

"Hello, Miss Fairchild."

"Oh, please. Call me Georgie. Everyone does." Georgie smiled at the girl.

Katie studied her as if considering. Her expression remained noncommital.

"We had a meeting at the Carlyle Clinic and we're on our way back to the office," Zach said. "We just stopped by to pick up some files."

"Oh."

There was no mistaking the disappointment in Katie's voice.

"I'm sorry, honey. I'll try to be home early. In the meantime, get a lot of rest. When I get home, we'll have a game of chess."

She gave him a dubious look. "Emma and Jeremy will be here by then."

"I know, but we'll still have our game, I promise."

Katie shrugged. "Whatever." In that gesture, Georgie saw all the times Katie's interests had had to take a backseat to her younger siblings' demands for attention. Georgie could relate. As much as she now loved her sisters, she could remember all those times she wished they'd just disappear.

Bending down, Zach kissed his daughter on the cheek. "We've got to get back to the office now, but I'll be home no later than six."

Katie sighed. "Okay." She picked up the remote and before they'd even left the room, Georgie saw that the movie was playing again.

Cornelia hated being late. She felt it was rude and sent the message that you thought your time was more valuable than the person's you were meeting. But today her lateness was unavoidable, because when she'd gotten in her car she'd discovered her battery was dead.

She'd immediately called Kit Hoover, the old friend she was meeting for lunch at the club, and Kit said not to worry. Then Cornelia had called a cab. She simply didn't have time to deal with her car this morning.

"You're looking very chic today," Kit said as Cornelia approached their table, where Kit was already halfway through a glass of wine. She eyed Cornelia over the tops of her oversized red frames, which she wore perched halfway down her nose. Kit kept her short hair dyed the black of her youth and had half a dozen pairs of glasses with bright frames that matched her outfits. Today was no exception; she wore a fire-engine-red pants suit.

"Thank you. So are you. I like the red," Cornelia said, sitting opposite her friend. Cornelia rarely, if ever, wore primary colors, favoring instead the soft, muted shades that were more suitable to her peaches-and-cream coloring.

"And I love that sea-green dress," Kit said. "On you, at any rate." She drank another healthy slug of wine.

Cornelia told herself she was not Kit's mother, nor was it her job to monitor how much Kit drank. But sometimes Kit's tendency to over-imbibe bothered Cornelia.

They didn't talk while Cornelia looked over the menu, then gave their orders to their waiter, an older man who had been working at the club almost as long as Cornelia had been a member. He greeted Cornelia with a big smile. "Nice to see you again, Ms. Fairchild," he said.

"Thank you, Fred."

After he left to place their orders, Kit said, "So what's new? I feel like I haven't seen you in weeks."

"That's because you haven't," Cornelia said, laughing. "Well, let's see. My Seattle-based girls are all busy and happily in love."

"What about Georgie? She still roaming around the world?"

Cornelia was in the middle of telling Kit about Georgie's new job in New York when Kit suddenly sat up straighter, looked beyond Cornelia and said, "Well, hello, Greg."

Cornelia's heart gave a little hop, and she turned around. She hadn't seen the golf pro for a while; he'd been participating in a tournament in Hawaii and had also taken some personal time, but now he was obviously back.

"Hello, Kit, Cornelia." Greg's smile encompassed them both, but his blue eyes focused on Cornelia and remained there.

"We missed you," Kit said. "How'd you do in Hawaii?"

"Not bad. Came in sixth."

"When did you get back?" Cornelia asked.

"Last night."

Cornelia knew she wasn't in love with Greg, but she had to admit that he always got her blood stirring. It was very flattering to know that he found her attractive and wanted to be with her. At forty-nine, he could have had his pick of younger women, yet he seemed to prefer her company.

"Well, we're glad you're home," Kit said. Her gaze lasered in on Cornelia. "Aren't we, Corny?"

Cornelia could feel herself flushing, and she wanted to kick Kit. "Yes, we are. And I'm delighted you did so well in the tournament."

"Thank you." Greg looked at the table. "Are you two just starting lunch or just finishing up?"

"Just starting," Kit said before Cornelia could answer. "Would you like to join us?"

Greg looked at Cornelia. "Do you mind?"

"No, no, of course not." But Cornelia did mind. She'd been looking forward to a relaxing meal. Now she'd have to be on her toes, because with Kit there, avidly listening to every word, conversation would be a minefield she'd have to carefully navigate.

Their waiter noticed the addition at the table almost immediately and came over to take Greg's order.

Once he'd left them alone again, Greg turned to Cornelia, "I'm glad I ran into you today, because I have some news. In fact, I planned to call you later."

Cornelia knew Kit would be storing up every morsel of gossip. "Good news, I hope."

Greg shrugged. “It *is* good news, but there’s bad news that comes along with it.”

“Well, come on. Don’t keep us in suspense,” Kit said.

Still looking at Cornelia, he said, “I’ve been offered a terrific job in Hawaii.”

Cornelia couldn’t hide her surprise. He had taken her completely off guard. “That’s wonderful, Greg,” she finally managed to say.

“Greg!” Kit said. “But that means you’ll be leaving us.”

“Yes,” he said, finally turning to Kit, “that’s the bad news.”

Cornelia used the few seconds his attention was directed elsewhere to pull herself together again. She wasn’t sure why Greg’s news had affected her so strongly. After all, she had never viewed their relationship as anything but pleasant and temporary. “You’ve accepted, then.”

His eyes met hers again. “I haven’t officially, but I plan to. It’s just too good an opportunity to pass up.” This last was said more softly, almost apologetically.

“I’m glad for you, Greg,” she said, meaning it. But she would miss him. Funny that she hadn’t realized how much she had begun to count on him as a good friend. And, if she were being completely honest with herself, as someone who made her feel important … and almost young again.

They continued to discuss the new job and what it would entail until their food arrived. Once again, they fell silent for a few minutes. But after Fred was gone and they’d begun to eat—Cornelia her chicken salad, Kit her tuna tartare and Greg his ribeye special—Greg said, “You know, I’m still wondering why this opportunity came my way. I asked how they’d decided on me, but I never really got an answer.”

“Well,” Kit said, “obviously your reputation preceded you.” She took a bite of her tuna. “Yum. No one does tuna like Paulo.”

“One of the other golfers mentioned that a Seattle company was heavily invested in the resort where I’ll be working,” Greg said. “Maybe that had a bearing on their decision to offer me the job.”

Cornelia put her fork down. “A Seattle company? Which one?”

Greg speared a fry. Smiled at her. “HuntCom.”

“HuntCom,” Cornelia repeated.

Perhaps her tone sounded odd, because Greg frowned a little and said, “Yes. You know the company, don’t you?”

“Know it?” Kit squealed. “Why, Cornelia’s husband was one of the founders of HuntCom.”

“Really?” he said. “I had no idea.”

“Yes, well,” Cornelia said, keeping her tone light even though her insides were churning. “It’s old news. *Very* old news.”

“But you’re still *very* good friends with Harry Hunt,” Kit persisted.

Cornelia now wanted to strangle Kit, even though she was sure Kit had no idea how uncomfortable Cornelia felt, because Cornelia had never even hinted at her feelings for Harry. In fact, she’d kept the subject of Harry Hunt out of all her conversations with Kit … and just about everyone else. She’d always been too afraid of giving herself away. “Yes,” she admitted, because she really had no choice, “Harry and I are old friends.”

“Maybe you could ask him why they picked me,” Greg said.

Oh, I’ll ask him, all right. And that’s not all I’ll ask him. “If I ever have the opportunity, I will.” She picked up her fork again and took a bite of her chicken. But it no longer tasted good. Cornelia knew, without ever having to hear one word of explanation from Harry, that he had done what he did best. He had gotten rid of the competition.

Cornelia didn’t know whether to be flattered or furious.

One thing she *did* know. Harry had never intended for her to find out about his behind-the-scenes machinations.

She almost felt sorry for him.

When Zach and Georgie got back to the office, Deborah greeted Zach with a slew of phone messages. “You’d better call Jonathan Pierce first,” she said. “He didn’t sound happy.”

“That man is a royal pain.”

“Don’t I know it! He nearly snapped my head off.” Deborah made a face and looked at Georgie. “I don’t envy you working with that man.”

Zach heaved a sigh. “Okay. I’ll call him.”

Zach closed his office door before picking up the phone. If Pierce was going to be hard-nosed, he might have to be told some home truths.

“I resent the fact that you’re handing me off to some second-rate assistant,” Pierce said without preamble.

“Miss Fairchild is not a second-rate assistant. She’s a top-notch researcher and specializes in evaluations of possible grant recipients. You couldn’t be in better hands.”

“I prefer dealing with you.”

“I’m overloaded right now, Jonathan. Miss Fairchild is taking over all pending evaluations.” Zach kept his voice level, but inside he was seething. Who did Pierce think he was? He wanted something from them, not the other way around. If Zach didn’t think Carlyle was such a worthy possible beneficiary, he might just tell Pierce to take a hike.

“I would think you’d make an exception for us.” Pierce’s voice was steely.

And why is that? “I’d like to, but I can’t.”

“I see. And that’s your final word?”

Zach sighed. What the hell was the man’s problem? “Come on, Jonathan, be reasonable. I—”

“Be reasonable! I am being reasonable. You’re the one who’s blowing me off. Maybe we should just go elsewhere.”

Zach almost laughed. Go elsewhere? Did Pierce think that was a threat? There were dozens of possible grant recipients lined up, hoping for a positive response from the foundation. And the foundation could not say yes to all of them. They simply didn’t have enough resources. “If that’s your decision, we’ll certainly understand.”

If he’d thought Pierce would back down, he was wrong, for the doctor, still obviously furious, said a curt goodbye and hung up before Zach could reply.

Zach just stared at the phone. Sometimes he couldn’t believe the way people acted. He wondered if he should tell Georgie what Pierce had had to say, but he quickly decided against it. There’d be time enough after Pierce made his next move. Frankly, Zach had just about had enough of the arrogant prick. He’d almost be glad if Pierce went elsewhere. Let someone else deal with his grandiose fantasies.

Looking through the rest of his phone messages, he saw that his sister had called. Deciding he could use a dose of her good humor and common sense, he called her next.

“Hey, bro,” she said.

“Hey, sis. How’s it going with Princess Emma?”

“Oh, we’re having a fine time today. As a matter of fact, we’re baking peanut-butter cookies.”

Zach smiled. “She loves them.”

“Don’t I know it. She also loves the raw dough. I had a time stopping her from eating it.”

“I’m surprised you were successful.”

Sabrina laughed. “Me, too. That child of yours personifies the word *stubborn*.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Why I called is, I wondered if Emma could spend the night. I noticed that her shoes are all getting tight on her, and I thought I’d take her shoe shopping tomorrow.”

“You’re a saint, you know that?”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because it’s true.”

"I'm not a saint, Zach. I just … I don't know. Every time I look at Emma, I realize how much she's missed. *Is* missing."

"I know."

"I mean, everyone worries about Katie, and of course, they *should*. She's still hurting. But at least she remembers Jenny. But Emma … she was only a year old when Jenny died. Her memories are gone."

"I know," he said again.

"If I can give her any of that, I want to. And Peter agrees with me." Her voice softened. "He loves Emma, too."

Zach was eternally grateful that Sabrina had married such a stellar man in Peter Norlund. Peter, a respected radiologist at New York Presbyterian, was exactly the sort of man Zach would have chosen for his sister. Generous, thoughtful, intelligent and kind—he was everything a husband and father should be.

"Well," Sabrina said, "I know you're busy. I just wanted to make sure it was okay to keep Emma overnight."

Once again, Zach sat looking at the phone after terminating the call. Only this time he felt good. In fact, he felt so good he decided everything else on his work agenda could wait. He would surprise Katie and go home earlier than expected. Maybe they'd get in several games of chess.

But first he'd give Georgie a heads-up, just in case Jonathan Pierce called back.

Georgie looked up from her computer when Zach knocked on the doorframe. Zach quickly gave her a rundown on Pierce's phone call. "I just wanted you to be prepared in case he calls back. I'm going to tell Deborah to route him through to you, because I'm leaving for the day."

Her eyes flicked to the clock on the wall for a second. Zach knew she was remembering that he'd told Katie he'd be home by six. It was only four o'clock.

"Okay," she said. Then she smiled. "And don't worry. I can handle him."

Zach smiled back. "There was never any doubt in my mind."

In fact, Zach thought as he rode the elevator down to the lobby level, from what he'd seen of Georgie, she could handle anything.

Probably including him.

Chapter Six

Zach hadn't been gone from the office ten minutes when Deborah buzzed Georgie to say Jonathan Pierce was on the line. "And he's not happy," she warned.

Georgie grimaced. He'd be even less happy after they talked.

She pressed a button. "Georgie Fairchild."

"There's been some mistake, Miss Fairchild," he ground out. "I asked to speak with Zach."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Pierce. He's gone for the day." She waited a heartbeat before adding, "May I help you?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Look, I get it that you're not happy I'm now in charge of the Carlyle Children's Cancer Center application. You made that very clear earlier today, but—"

"Not happy? I consider it absolutely outrageous that I've been foisted off on some *underling*."

If his voice got any frostier, it would rival the temperature of the Arctic. She decided not to make a point of the fact he'd interrupted her or that he was beyond rude. Keeping her own voice pleasant, she said, "Despite your reservations, I believe we can work together. Unless, of course, you've decided to withdraw your grant application?"

A long moment pregnant with tension passed before he spoke again. "How long are we supposed to wait before you make a final decision?" he said stiffly.

Georgie stifled the impulse to smile. She knew he wouldn't be able to see a smile, but perhaps he would sense it. "I expect to have my recommendation ready by the end of the week."

"I see."

She knew he wouldn't complain because he had probably thought she'd take much longer than that. "In fact," she added, "I've finished going over all the paperwork given to us so far. Now all that's left is last quarter's financial report, which Ms. Love has promised will be in my hands no later than Wednesday."

"You'll call me immediately upon making your decision."

Now Georgie did smile. "Absolutely. You'll be the first to know."

Pierce said a terse goodbye without thanking her. But Georgie hadn't expected thanks. It was enough that he had been made to realize that he wasn't calling the shots.

She was, whether he liked it or not.

It normally gave Georgie no pleasure to brandish her power over applicants, but in the case of Jonathan Pierce, that rule didn't hold true. It gave her a great deal of pleasure to knock that supercilious man down a peg or two. If he hadn't been such a pain in the butt, she would have told him that unless the cancer center's last quarterly financial report showed some discrepancy, their application was all but approved now. That she was making him wait (and sweat a bit, she hoped) was exactly what he deserved for his immature behavior.

She wished Zach were still here, so she could tell him about the conversation. Instead, she sent him an email saying she'd like to meet with him in the morning. She added the teaser, *to tell you about my conversation with Jonathan Pierce*. She smiled, thinking how much Zach would enjoy hearing about the exchange.

Less than thirty minutes later, her email program alerted her to new mail from Zachary Prince.

If you don't have plans for the evening, he wrote, *maybe you'd like to come for dinner. Fanny made stuffed pork chops. We can talk about Pierce then.*

Georgie was so surprised, she had to read the message twice to make sure she hadn't made it up. She immediately wrote back. *I don't have any plans. What time shall I come?*

A minute later he answered, saying, *Great. Let's say six-thirty. See you then.*

Georgie didn't know what had prompted the invitation, but she'd have been lying if she said she wasn't looking forward to the evening. Now that she had changed her opinion of Zach, she could actually admit she enjoyed his company. And, if she was being completely honest (oh, Joanna would laugh at her!), she did enjoy looking at him.

"Well, you look awfully pleased with yourself," Deborah said from the open doorway.

Georgie jumped.

Deborah laughed. "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you. So what did the great man say?"

For a moment, Georgie thought Deborah was referring to Zach, and she couldn't think what to answer. But then she realized Deborah meant Jonathan Pierce when she'd said "great man." "He tried to intimidate me by saying he didn't want to work with *me … again*. I guess he thought if he said it enough times—especially with Zach not there to protect me—I'd cower or something."

Deborah grinned. "I've only known you a few days, and I already know you're not the sort of person to cower … for anyone." She shook her head. "Wonder how men like Jonathan Pierce get to be that way? Think they have domineering fathers? Who maybe treated their mothers like serfs? Or maybe treated *them* like serfs?"

Georgie shrugged. "Beats me. I'm no psychologist."

"Well, I'm glad you showed the good doc he can't push you around, with or without Zach." Deborah glanced at her watch. "It's almost quitting time." Looking up, she smiled. "Hey, if you don't have plans for the evening, want to come and have dinner with me and my son? Jack's in Cleveland on business, and it's just me and Kevin tonight. Nothing fancy, though. We're having spaghetti and meatballs."

"Oh, thanks, Deborah, I would've loved to, but I *do* have plans. In fact, I'm going over to Zach's for dinner. He just now invited me. I guess he's anxious for a play-by-play of my phone conversation with the great Dr. Pierce."

"Oh, that'll be fun. You'll get to meet his kids."

Had Deborah given her an odd look? "I've already met Katie. We stopped by the apartment on the way back from our meeting at Carlyle so Zach could pick up some files he'd forgotten."

"How is she? Is she feeling better?"

"She told Zach she was." Yes, that was definitely an odd look. Speculative. Or was she being paranoid again?

Deborah sighed. "I feel so bad for those kids. Katie especially. She's taken the death of her mother really hard. When Jenny died, the other two were really too young to be affected. Well, Jeremy probably remembers her a little—he was three when Jenny first got sick and four when she died. But Emma was just a baby."

"It's sad they lost their mother so young."

"It's heartbreaking, actually." She turned as if to leave, then said, "It's been really tough on Zach."

"I can imagine," Georgie said. "Raising three young children on his own. That's a lot of responsibility. Plus … losing his wife. She must have been very young."

"She'd just turned thirty-four."

Thirty-four. Georgie swallowed, imagining only having four more years to live.

"It was awful," Deborah continued. "Such a sad time for everyone. Jenny's mother was devastated. Jenny's father had died a few years earlier, and Jenny was an only child. Zach has done a wonderful job on his own, though. I really admire him. He's got his priorities straight. Unlike a lot of men, he always puts his kids first."

Had Deborah added that last bit for Georgie's benefit? Oh, surely not. Georgie was imagining things.

"I admire that, too," she said. Georgie couldn't help but think of her uncle Harry, who hadn't put his kids first and had paid dearly for that neglect. But at least he'd wised up eventually and made things right with his sons.

"I do hope Zach will meet someone one of these days, though," Deborah said thoughtfully. "He's far too young to be alone. Besides, those children really need a mother."

Those children really need a mother.

The words seemed to echo in the room after Deborah left.

As Georgie cleaned up her desk and got ready to leave herself, she kept thinking about them.

Those children really need a mother.

Georgie knew, if she had any sense at all, she'd steer a wide path around Zach. He was far too attractive, and the more she learned about him, the more she liked him. *I shouldn't be going to his apartment for dinner. I should have said no.*

Yet, what was the harm? It wasn't a date or anything close. It was just dinner, and his kids would be there.

True, but just yesterday, she'd decided she was going to keep her distance from him. Of course, yesterday she'd thought he was married, and today she knew he wasn't.

Did that make any difference, though? He might not be married, but as Deborah had pointed out, he had three young children who needed a mother—the kind of life that was eons removed from Georgie's.

And if Georgie had learned anything in her thirty years, she'd learned that it was dangerous to play with fire. And her undeniable attraction to Zach was definitely fire. *Plus, aside from all else, he's your boss.* She grimaced, imagining what Joanna would say. Georgie had certainly cautioned *her* about getting mixed up with *her* boss.

If I had any brains at all, I'd run for the nearest airport and hightail it on home.

But since she couldn't do that, and since she couldn't call Zach up and say she couldn't make it tonight after all without looking like an idiot, she would make sure that from now on she would stick to her original decision. She would steer a wide path around him. She would be friendly and helpful at the office, and she would firmly stay away from him at all other times.

No matter how much she might be tempted otherwise.

When Cornelia arrived home from the club, she smelled the flowers before she saw them: an enormous bouquet of hyacinths mixed with tiny white roses. She didn't have to look at the accompanying card to know they'd been sent by Harry.

Darling Cornelia,

I know how much you love hyacinths. Every time you look at them, I hope you'll think of me. All my love, Harry

Yesterday he'd sent her a nosegay of violets, the day before a huge spray of baby orchids, all with approximately the same message. All three selections were out of season and had probably cost the earth. And if she hadn't been dealt a body blow today in the form of Greg's news, courtesy of Harry Hunt, she'd probably be thrilled about the flowers. But she was still reeling a bit by the knowledge that Harry wouldn't think twice about playing dirty, even when it came to her.

And why should he? Ruthless tactics had stood him well in business. Winning was all that counted. Take what you want by any means, fair or foul. That was Harry's truth. It was the way he operated. Hadn't he shown her just how merciless he could be when he'd threatened to disinherit his sons unless they married and gave him the grandchildren he coveted? He'd been deadly serious, too.

She was still thinking about him and trying to decide how she would deal with what he'd done about Greg when her cell phone rang. She wasn't even surprised to see Harry's name on the display.

"Hello, Harry," she said.

"Hello, my dear. How are you this afternoon?"

"Just fine, thank you."

"Did you have a nice lunch with Kit?"

"How did you know I was having lunch with Kit today?"

"I have my ways."

She heard the smile in his voice, and it hardened her resolve. "Oh, yes, I know you do." *I know all about you, Harry. You're not fooling me for a second*. "And yes, it was a very nice lunch."

"I'm glad. You deserve everything nice. And what about the flowers? Did they arrive?"

"They did, and they're lovely. Thank you. But you really shouldn't send flowers every day. It's terribly wasteful."

"It's not the least bit wasteful. Not when they're for you. You're very important to me."

"Really," she said.

He laughed. "Oh, Corny, I can see I have a lot of work to do to get rid of that skepticism I hear in your voice."

"You must admit, I do have reason to doubt you. Two blonde reasons, one brunette and one redhead, to be exact." The redhead had particularly upset Cornelia, maybe because by that time she was thoroughly disgusted with Harry's choices. *And hurt. Don't forget hurt.*

"Touché. But it's time for you to forget about the follies of my youth. I'm a grownup now, and I finally know what I want." His voice lowered. "And what I want is you."

A frisson of pleasure rippled through her, even as she reminded herself that Harry had more to answer for than the follies of his youth and that she shouldn't forget it.

"I have a great idea," he said.

"Oh?"

"How would you like to go away for the weekend?"

"Go away?"

"Yes, you know … the two of us … somewhere romantic. Doesn't that sound good?"

"Well," she hedged.

"We could go to Paris …"

Paris. Her favorite city in the entire world. She almost said, *If I do eventually agree to marry you, I'd rather save Paris for our honeymoon*. But something held her back.

"What do you say, Corny? The Eiffel Tower all lit up at night. Montmartre. Maxim's. We could even be naughty and go to the Folies Bergère, if you so desire. And if you don't want to go to Paris, we could go somewhere closer to home. Montreal or Quebec City. What strikes your fancy?"

They all sounded wonderful. But then, when you were as rich as Harry, everything sounded wonderful.

"Let me think about it," she finally said. She refused to allow him to rush her into anything.

"What is there to think about? Which city you prefer? Or whether you're going to go at all?"

"Whether I'm going to go at all."

He sighed heavily, the sound clearly audible over the phone. "All right, Corny. Have it your way. When do you think you might have an answer for me?"

"Why do you need to know? Are you planning to ask someone else if I say no?"

He laughed. "It would serve you right if I did. But no, I've learned my lesson. It's you I want. You and you alone."

She almost said yes right then, but she bit her tongue to keep from saying it. He could just wait a few days. It wasn't as if he had to make plane reservations or anything. Harry's private jet was always ready and available to him, even on an hour's notice. And a few days would give her time to plan just what she was going to say to him about his role in the matter of Greg and his new job.

After telling her he would check in with her the following day, they said goodbye. Cornelia stood there afterward holding the phone and thinking. Was she being silly? Should she just forget all this courtship business and the way he had summarily gotten rid of Greg and tell Harry yes, she'd

marry him? Neither she nor Harry were spring chickens. Who knew how many years they had left? Why was she wasting even one minute of them when they could be together?

You love him, faults and all. You know you do.

Yes, she did.

Then there's no reason not to say yes.

But there *was* a reason. Harry had broken her heart once. How could she be sure he wouldn't break it again?

Now why had he done that? Zach'd had no intention of inviting Georgie to dinner, yet he'd given in to the impulse. And he had to admit that he was looking forward to having her there. Truth was, he liked her. He hadn't thought he was going to, but she'd quickly proven herself to be not only hardworking, with good judgment, but she was smart … and he could relate to her. It also didn't hurt that she was easy on the eyes.

It was kind of a shock that he had noticed. And, if he was being honest, that he'd responded to her. Until now, he'd been attracted to women who were more like Jenny: small, dark, girl-next-door types. No doubt about it. Georgie Fairchild was at the opposite end of the spectrum: tall, blonde and … sexy. Very sexy, because the sexiness wasn't flagrant. But it was there. It certainly was there.

Still thinking about her, he walked into the kitchen to tell Fanny he was having a guest for dinner. He wondered what Fanny thought. She didn't reveal anything of her inner thoughts when he told her, simply smiled and said, "I'll use the good china, then." After a moment, she added, "Will you still be joining the children for their dinner?"

"Until Miss Fairchild arrives." Zach usually ate his dinner early, with the children, but tonight they would be fed first so he could enjoy a more relaxed evening with Georgie.

After he'd freshened up with a shower and changed into jeans, well-worn loafers and his favorite blue sweater—a shade Jenny had always teased him about, saying it matched his eyes—he went back to the family room to check on Katie and Jeremy. He found Katie there alone.

"Where's your brother?" he asked, looking around.

She shrugged. "He got bored. I think he's in his room."

"What're you doing, honey?" The television was dark, and Katie just seemed to be sitting there.

She shrugged again. "Nothing."

He gave her a quizzical smile. "Nothing? Is something wrong?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? Is your throat hurting again?"

She shook her head. "No. It doesn't hurt."

"Well, then …"

For a long moment, Katie stared down at her hands, which were folded in her lap. When she looked up, her eyes met his almost defiantly. "Fanny said that woman is coming for dinner."

"By 'that woman,' do you mean Miss Fairchild?"

"Yes. Her."

Zach suppressed a sigh. Before Jenny died, he could count on one hand the number of times he'd sighed. Now that's all he seemed to do.

"I don't like her."

"Katie, you don't even know Miss Fairchild. How can you not like her?"

"I don't know," she mumbled. "I just don't."

"But why not, honey? You must have a reason."

Katie didn't answer, just kept looking down and avoiding his eyes.

"Katie?"

Finally she looked up. Zach was alarmed to see tears. "Katie," he said gently. "What's wrong, honey?"

"Are you gonna *marry* her?"

Zach's mouth dropped open. "Marry who? Miss *Fairchild?*"

She nodded miserably.

"Of course I'm not going to marry her. She's just a friend. Someone who is working for me." And yet, even as he said this, he knew it wasn't the whole truth. He and Georgie weren't really friends. They hadn't known each other long enough to be friends. And he *was* attracted to her. Too much so, in fact. Maybe Katie had sensed that.

"I don't want you to marry somebody else." Now the tears had spilled down her face. "I want Mommy."

"Oh, sweetheart …" Zach knelt by the bed. He felt like crying himself. "I know you do. I—I do, too."

"Why'd she have to die?" Katie sobbed.

At times like this, Zach felt so helpless. He knew the pat answers to these questions, but he also knew how unsatisfying they were. "I don't know, sweetheart," he said honestly, putting his arms around her. "Sometimes things happen that have no explanation."

"It's not fair."

"I know it's not fair."

"I miss her."

"Me, too," he whispered.

After a few minutes, Katie seemed to gather herself together, and her tears stopped. "You know, honey," he said, reaching for a tissue so she could wipe her eyes, "Mommy's always with us. I know you can't see her, but she's here. She's probably watching us right now, and maybe, if you close your eyes, you can feel her giving you a hug."

Katie's eyes met his, and he could see she wasn't buying it. She didn't want her mother's spirit. She wanted a real, live mother. And not just any mother. *Her* mother. Zach sighed again. What could he say to his sweet child to make her feel better? That he would never marry anyone else? Never bring another woman into their lives? How could he promise that? He was only thirty-seven years old. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life as a widower. And he knew Jenny wouldn't have wanted him to, either. In fact, one of the last things she'd said to him before she died was that she hoped he'd meet someone someday.

Finally, not knowing what else to say to his daughter, he whispered, "I love you, Katie. That will never change. You know that, don't you?"

She nodded.

Zach hugged her again, then in a brighter voice said, "Fanny's got macaroni and cheese and tomato soup for you and Jeremy. Do you feel like eating tonight?"

"Uh huh."

"Okay, let's go then. I'll sit with you until Miss Fairchild gets here, okay?"

"Okay."

It hurt Zach to hear the resignation in her voice. Poor kid. She'd barely had time to be a kid before Jenny got sick. Then there'd been the year of treatment, the chemo, the hair loss, the weight loss—all taking place in front of Katie's eyes. She'd had to grow up too soon, experience things no kid should have to experience.

In that moment, Zach knew he could not add to the burden Katie carried. No, he couldn't promise his daughter he'd never marry again, because he hoped someday he would. But he could promise himself that he would never do anything to make Katie feel she came second in his life. And if that meant he would have to be alone for longer than he'd like to be, well, that was the way it was. Unless and until he met a woman his children could wholeheartedly love and accept, he'd just have to accept his own burden of loneliness.

Because his kids came first.

And always would.

Chapter Seven

Georgie had just finished getting ready—she'd changed into her favorite pair of black jeans, a red sweater, knee-high black boots with four-inch heels (she'd take a cab to Zach's, no walking in *these* boots)—and was ready to go out the door when her cell rang. Stopping, she dug the phone out of her bag and saw that it was her mother calling.

"Hey, Mom, I'm just on my way out the door."

"Hi, honey. I was thinking about you and thought I'd check in. See how you're doing."

"Great. I'm doing great. Listen, can you hold on a minute?" Georgie juggled the phone and her bag while letting herself out of the apartment. Once the door was securely closed and locked, she headed for the elevator and resumed her conversation.

"So where are you going?" her mother asked.

"My boss invited me to have dinner at his place. Right now I'm waiting on the elevator."

"Are he and his wife having a dinner party or something?"

"No, it's just me, and there's no wife. But don't worry, it's all on the up and up. He's a widower with three young children. Plus a housekeeper." Georgie wasn't sure if Fanny lived in, but she probably did.

"Oh, really? A widower? What's he like?"

"He's very nice. I wasn't sure I was going to like him, but I do."

"Well, that's good. How old are his children?"

"He's got two daughters, ten and three, and a son. I'm not sure how old the boy is, but I think he's the middle child."

"Oh, that's sad, they're so young. How did his wife die?"

"Honestly, Mom, I don't know. I just know she did."

"What's his name? Is he attractive?"

Georgie rolled her eyes. "His name is Zachary Prince. And yes, he's attractive. But I'm not interested in him as anything other than an employer and a possible friend. So don't get any ideas."

"I just asked a simple question, Georgie."

"Yeah, right. I know you. That was more than a simple question."

Her mother laughed. "No sense arguing with you. I never win. You'll think what you want to think, anyway."

By now Georgie was outside and had bravely stepped off the curb to try to get a cab. Unfortunately, at this time of night, every single cab seemed to be occupied. Shoot. She should have allowed for that contingency and left earlier.

"Well, honey, have a good time. Call me tomorrow and tell me all about it."

"Okay," Georgie said. "I will. So what's up with you? Anything new?" Deciding to put her mother on the spot for a change, she added, "Seen Uncle Harry lately?"

"Actually, I just talked to him. In fact, I—" She broke off. "Oh, darn, someone's at the door. I'd better go. We'll talk tomorrow."

It wasn't until Georgie had finally hailed a cab and was on her way to Zach's apartment that she thought about her mother's call again. Had her mother wanted something other than to find out how Georgie was doing? For some reason, Georgie had gotten the impression something was on her mother's mind. Well, if there had been, Cornelia would call her again. Because if there was one thing Georgie knew for sure about her mother, it was this: when Cornelia Fairchild wanted something, she doggedly pursued her goal.

As evidenced by the way she is still trying to find a man for me.

Georgie grimaced. Good thing her mother had no clue that Georgie was attracted to Zach, because if she did … she'd never give up. For the first time since arriving in New York, Georgie was extremely glad there were thousands of miles between her and her family.

This way, if Georgie forgot everything she'd decided about steering clear of Zach after tonight and ended up making a fool of herself, at least no one else would ever know.

"And this," Zach said, "is Jeremy."

Georgie smiled at the dark-haired youngster standing before her. Bright blue eyes the exact shade of his father's stared back at her. In fact, Jeremy Prince was a miniature Zach. He would be a heartbreaker when he grew up. "Hi, Jeremy."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.