

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE



Sterling
House
Jul 05

Love Inspired

Men of Praise

HIS UPTOWN
GIRL

GAIL SATTTLER

Gail Sattler
His Uptown Girl

«HarperCollins»

Sattler G.

His Uptown Girl / G. Sattler — «HarperCollins»,

With long blond hair and painted red nails, beautiful Georgette Ecklington didn't look like a mechanic. But the latest hire at Bob and Bart's Auto Repair could recognize a faulty coil in no time - and fix it just as fast. Only problem was that Bob Delanio was attracted to his new employee. Luckily, he knew business and pleasure didn't mix. Besides, after meeting her wealthy, controlling father, Bob realized he and Georgette came from opposite worlds. It was up to Georgette to show her handsome boss a downtown man should take a risk on an uptown girl....

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“Are you only helping me because you feel sorry for me?”

Bob gazed into Georgette’s blue eyes. Of course he felt badly about the way her father had rejected her, because she wanted to build a life of her own. Actually, he felt proud of her, too.

And yet, he didn’t feel at peace with what was happening between them.

Until now, Georgette hadn’t had to work. She could have lived a life of leisure, and it wouldn’t have been wrong.

But now, all that was gone.

That a working-class guy like him could be her employer was one of life’s cruel jokes. For now, having to work and save money to get what she wanted, and even the necessities of daily life, was a novelty. Very soon, that thrill would wear off . . .

Falling in love with someone from the other side of the tracks only worked in romance novels and fairy tales.

GAIL SATTLER

lives in Vancouver, British Columbia (where you don't have to shovel rain), with her husband of twenty-six years, three sons, two dogs, five lizards, one toad and a Degu named Bess. Gail loves to read stories with a happy ending, which is why she writes them. Visit Gail's Web site at www.gailsattler.com.

His Uptown Girl Gail Sattler



He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

—Isaiah 40:29

Dedicated to my husband, Tim.

Just because I love you.

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Chapter One

The electronic tone of the door chime echoed through the shop.

Bob Delanio laid his wrench down on the tool caddy, wiped his hands on his coveralls, then walked into the reception area of his auto-repair shop.

“Need some help?” he asked his newest customer, trying not to sound as tired as he felt.

The phone rang. Both lines lit up at the same time.

“Oops, ’scuse me,” Bob mumbled as he picked up the receiver. “Bob And Bart’s, can you hold?” He pushed the button and answered the second line. “Bob And Bart’s. Yeah. Hold on.” Bob hit the hold button, walked a few steps, and poked his head around the corner.

“Bart!” he yelled. “Get line two. It’s Josh McTavish.”

Bob nodded at the man still waiting at the counter. The chime sounded again. Just as Bob picked up the phone to talk to the first caller, a man who a week ago had ignored Bob’s warning that he needed a new head gasket stomped in. Bob glanced through the door to see a tow truck outside, the driver waiting to be told what bay to back the man’s car into.

Bob gritted his teeth. It appeared he was going to spend yet another Friday night working until midnight.

He handled the latest influx, then did his best to juggle his time between the door, the phone, and actually getting some work done.

At seven o’clock, an hour past their posted closing, Bart finally had the time to flip the switch on the sign on the door to Closed. Despite that positive turn, neither of them would be leaving just yet.

“This is nuts,” Bart grumbled as he dropped some change into the pop machine for a cold drink. “We can’t keep this up.”

Falling backwards onto the worn couch, Bob stretched out his aching feet. “I know. It’s great that business is picking up, but I’m exhausted.” He extended one arm toward the unfinished work orders lined up on the board. “No matter what time we get out of here, we’ll have to be back at five in the morning.”

“My wife isn’t very pleased about these long hours. At least you’re still single,” Bart retorted.

“Maybe this is why I’m still single.”

Bart turned to look outside at the row of cars they had promised their customers they could pick up sometime within the next twenty-four hours. “We have to hire some help.”

The growing pile of invoices and purchase orders on the counter, spurred Bob’s reply. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

Bart turned and walked behind the counter. He grabbed a blank piece of paper and pulled a pen out of his pocket. “The newspaper charges by the word, don’t they? What should I say? Wanted. Light-duty mechanic?”

Without leaving the couch, Bob scanned the boxes of orders, requisitions, receipts and charge bills to be submitted, as well as deposit slips from the bank. “We’re busy, but we’re not busy enough to add another full-time mechanic. If we hire a bookkeeper, then that frees us up to get more done in the shop.”

Bart scratched his head, pen in hand. “But there are decisions a bookkeeper can’t make, stuff one of us would have to decide. Besides, we don’t have enough paperwork to keep someone busy full-time. When all this stuff is caught up, we can’t afford to pay someone just to sit here and answer the phone.”

“We’re nearly a week behind even on the small jobs,” Bob said, gesturing at the work orders piled under pushpins on their work board. “I’ve got an overhaul that’s been waiting three days. I guess you’re right. We need a mechanic.”

Bart stuck his hand in the closest box and lifted out a handful of papers. “It’s almost our fiscal year-end, time for our corporate taxes. Your friend Adrian always needs everything balanced, reconciled and printed out so he can file for us. You’re right. We need a bookkeeper.”

The two men stared at each other in silence.

“We need both,” Bob mumbled, “But it would be too hard to hire two part-timers. I don’t want to invest all our time and money to train someone, then have them quit for a better job elsewhere that can give them more hours when they get enough experience. Maybe we should forget about it.”

Bart shook his head. “The baby is three weeks old. I never see her except when she’s up in the middle of the night crying. And that’s when I should be sleeping, too. I can’t keep this up.”

Bob felt his whole body sag. Neither of them could continue working eighteen-hour days, six days a week. Lately, the only time Bob wasn’t working was when he took off a few hours Wednesday evening to practice the songs he would be playing on Sunday with his church’s worship team. Up until recently, he refused to work Sundays, but they were so far behind, he’d started to work a few hours on Sunday, too.

He didn’t know when control had first eluded them, but they’d reached their breaking point. Soon they were going to start making mistakes, which, where cars and people were concerned, could not happen.

It had to stop.

“You’re right. We both need to slow down. Let’s hire two part-timers, a mechanic and a bookkeeper, and we’ll see what happens.” The stack of work orders lined up for Saturday, was well beyond what they could accomplish, even if both he and Bart worked twenty-four hours nonstop.

Dropping his pen suddenly as if at a thought, Bart turned to the computer. “I just remembered something. I don’t have to write out that ad. I heard that you can do it online. I can even put it on my charge card.”

Bob stood. “You’ve probably missed the deadline for tomorrow’s paper.”

Bart found the right Website, and started typing in his usual hunt-and-peck, two-finger mode. “Maybe I haven’t.”

Suddenly Bob’s head swam as the magnitude of the process hit him. “I just thought of something. What about all the phone calls, and the time it’s going to take to set up and do interviews?”

Bart’s fingers stilled. “What are you trying to say?”

“We don’t have that kind of time. People are going to start taking their business elsewhere.”

“Have you got a better idea?”

Bob walked to the counter, and reached for one of the boxes containing incomplete purchase orders. He tore off the flap to the box, picked up the black felt pen, and began to write.

HELP WANTED—APPLY WITHIN

Part-time light-duty mechanic

Part-time office assistant

Hours and wages negotiable.

He dug a roll of black electrical tape out of the drawer while Bart watched, and taped the cardboard to the window.

“What are you doing?”

Bob turned around. “Saturday is our busiest day, and lots of people come in. If any of them are interested, we can take care of interviewing right there. We should forget about the ad.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Bob raised his hand toward the sign, which was slightly crooked. “Do I look like I’m kidding?”

“I guess you’re really not kidding,” Bart mumbled.

Bob sighed. The business had supported both him and Bart for years, and now there was also Bart’s family. They couldn’t fail now. There was too much at stake.

“God will provide,” Bob said softly. I’ve always believed in God’s timing, and I still do.”

Bart resumed his typing. “You’re crazy. Certifiably crazy.”

Bob spun around. “Don’t you believe God can send us the right people?”

“I doubt God will have the right people simply fall from the sky. But I do know one thing. If we don’t get McTavish’s 4X4 finished, we’ll be in trouble when he comes to get it at 7:00 a.m. I’m putting this ad in the paper. I’m sure God will have the right people fax in their résumés.”

“I still think we’ll do better with the sign in the window. We don’t have the time or the energy for millions of faxes and phone calls. Besides, there’s more to hiring than just looking at résumés.”

“But that’s where we have to start, and the only way we’re going to get qualified people to send us those résumés is through the paper.” Bart hit Enter. “Done. The ad’s in.”

Bob crossed his arms over his chest and turned his head to look at his sign. “And the sign is up. It looks like the battle is on.”

Bart killed the browser. “Yeah. May the best man win. Now let’s get back to work.”

“Daddy! This dress is horrible!”

Georgette Ecklington’s father flashed her a condescending smile. “The girl at the store told me you would look great in it.”

Georgette gritted her teeth and pressed her lips together so hard they hurt. The “girl” in question was thirty-five years old. Because her father was one of their best customers and always paid full price, the woman happily told him anything he wanted to hear.

Still, the woman was probably right. Georgette knew she would look “good” in yet another overly frilly, fussy, pink dress with enough lace to choke a horse. If that was the way she wanted to look.

Which she didn’t.

“Don’t disappoint me, Georgie-Pie.” Her father’s stern gaze belied the familiarity of the nickname.

Georgette stifled a scream. She hadn’t been five years old for twenty years, but whenever her father wanted something, he called her the childish nickname to remind her of something she could never forget.

She was William Ecklington’s daughter.

And William Ecklington was in control. Always.

He’d picked that particular moment to give her another dress she hated because the household staff were in earshot. She couldn’t disobey his orders in front of the staff or any of his peers. He would never forgive her for any act of defiance, or anything that might diminish his public image.

Tonight, at yet another Who’s Who function, Georgette was expected to stand at her father’s side and smile nicely, showing her support of everything he did. Besides his financial empire, the next most important thing to her father was the respect of his peers. After her mother had left him, he’d refused to marry again. He never dated because he was certain that women were only after his money. So, his younger daughter became second-best.

Georgette’s only escape from her father’s tyranny would be to do what her sister had done—to get married. But God said that marriage was forever. Georgette didn’t want to be under the thumb of a man who was a younger version of her father—a man so critical and demanding he had driven their mother away. Her influential father also sabotaged every attempt she made to find a job, completely nullifying all her attempts to become independent. Not that she needed to worry about money, he gave her a generous allowance in exchange for her work on his charity projects. But Georgette wasn’t happy.

“Be ready at five-fifteen. Karl will be driving.” With that lofty pronouncement, her father turned and left.

Georgette crumpled the dress in her closed fists, and raised her head to the ceiling in a silent prayer. She needed to escape, and she had only one place to go, the only place her father left her alone.

The garage. The garage was her haven. Some women made crafts or baked when they needed something to do. Rebuilding an engine was Georgette's respite from "society." She detested being involved with the social climbing of her father's shallow world.

Working on the car, she didn't have to be Georgette Ecklington, socialite. She could simply be, as her friends at the pit crew of the local racetrack circuit called her, George. Today it would help her prepare herself for the ordeal of another taxing night.

She walked out of the room and handed the dress to Josephine, the housekeeper. "This needs pressing. I have some shopping to do, and then I need to be left alone until it's time to get dressed."

Josephine smiled and nodded. Josephine often covered for Georgette when her father was looking for her.

Soon Georgette was on her way to an out-of-the-way, but spectacular, auto shop she'd discovered, where the owners frequently found salvaged items from auto wreckers for her. She needed parts for her current project—restoring an old pickup truck she'd bought from one of the families in her church. The man had lost his job and the family needed money. They wouldn't accept charity, so instead, Georgette had bought the family's derelict pickup truck for many times more than it was worth, a sum that would keep their mortgage at bay for at least six months. She was now working to restore the truck. Perhaps someday the thing would even run again.

As she pulled into the shop, Georgette formulated her priorities. In three hours she had to be showered and ready, so she needed to make good use of her time.

Her thoughts cut off abruptly when she approached the store and saw a cardboard sign in the window.

HELP WANTED.

Georgette's breath caught. She quickened her pace, able to read the smaller print when she stood beside the door.

Light-duty mechanic.

She could do that. Fixing and rebuilding engines might just be a hobby, but she did it well. The pros at the race track confirmed it again and again. She'd never tackled a project she couldn't complete. And unlike the other times her father had ruined her job chances with a phone call, her references could be her friends at the race track. Her father didn't even know about this place, not that he'd deign to go to an auto shop any way. Georgette said a short prayer that they wouldn't ask for more, and pushed the door open.

The phone was ringing, and two customers waited impatiently ahead of her. Bob was behind the counter, taking notes as a woman listed the problems with her car. The voice of Bart, the other proprietor, echoed from the shop, over the noise of the hydraulic hoist, as he called for another customer to come out. Help certainly was wanted at Bob And Bart's Auto Repair.

While she waited for her turn, Georgette watched Bob a little more closely. Even though she'd been there before, she'd paid more attention to the spectacular finds he'd made for her than what either of the men looked like.

He carried himself with confidence as he dealt with his customers. Considering his job, he was relatively tidy in appearance, although his dark hair could use a cut. His olive-green eyes and Roman nose made her suspect an Italian heritage, though, the poster on the wall advertising a discount at Bob's brother's Italian restaurant, was a pretty solid hint, too.

As she stepped ahead in the line, she continued to study Bob.

He was a good-looking man. When he smiled, the hint of crow's feet at the corners of those amazing eyes put him at thirtyish.

After a short conversation, the man ahead of her followed Bob to the opening between the lobby and the shop. Bob called out to Bart, left the man where he was, then returned to his place behind the counter. "Can I help you?" Bob asked as he reached for a blank work order. As he turned

to her, his frown turned to a small smile. “Right. I left a message on your cell phone. Your parts are in. I’ll go get them. What’s your name again?”

Georgette’s stomach quivered. “Ecklington. George Ecklington.”

His smile widened. “Of course. George. How could I forget? I’ll be right back.”

“No! Bob! Wait!” Georgette called as he took his first step away.

When he turned back to her, she cleared her throat. “Yes, I’m here for my parts, but I see you’re hiring. I’d like to apply for the job.”

His smile widened even more. He pulled an application from beneath the counter and slid it toward her. “I didn’t have time to make our own applications, so I borrowed a few from my brother. It says Antonio’s Ristorante at the top, but just cross it out, and write Bookkeeper in the corner so I’ll put it in the right pile.”

Georgette tried not to let her annoyance show. She didn’t want the bookkeeper’s job. Usually she could understand when people in her father’s circle treated her like a frail little tulip, but to Bob, she was a customer—a customer who frequently bought parts, and installed them. Herself. She didn’t like his assumption, but she’d had to prove herself at the raceway, too.

However, it wasn’t as if she couldn’t do the bookkeeping. Having been confined to her father’s charities, she’d picked up the skill, including receivables, purchasing and handling the disbursements. She could imagine her father’s blood boiling at the thought of his daughter doing work that paid by the hour. But not a dime of the allowance he’d given her was truly hers.

This job and its salary, independent of her father, or of anyone who had any association with her father, would be.

Georgette looked up at Bob, trying to show more confidence than she felt. “Actually, I’d like to apply for both jobs.”

“Pardon me?”

“I can do bookkeeping, but I’m also a light-duty mechanic. Your sign said the hours were negotiable. Could two part-time jobs add up to one full-time job?”

Bob’s smile dropped. “I’m sorry, but we need a real mechanic, not just someone to change oil and check spark plugs.”

“But I am a real mechanic. I usually do rebuilds, but there’s no reason I couldn’t work on current models.”

“Well, maybe you could, but I don’t think—”

As she pictured herself actually working there, the things she knew she could do bubbled in her mind. “When people come in and they don’t know what’s wrong, if you just hired a bookkeeper, you’d have to stop what you were doing and listen to them. If you hired me, I would get a pretty good idea of what was wrong right off the bat, even if I wasn’t the one to do the actual work.”

Bob raised one finger in the air. “But—”

Her words tumbled over his protest. “Then you’d have the option of being able to use me in the shop or the office, wherever I was more needed at the time. Or I could—”

Bob put up his hands. “That really wasn’t what we had in mind.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Are you saying a woman couldn’t do this job?”

“No! That’s not what I’m saying at all...”

“I might be a woman, but I’m a good mechanic, and that’s what you’re hiring. I would do a good job for you. For both positions. I could even start Monday.”

“Monday? Really...?” Bob’s voice trailed off. He closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Bart and I never discussed this possibility. We have to think about it. Why don’t you fill out the application, and when you’re done I’ll call him in here so we can talk about it?”

Georgette tried to calm her racing heart. It was a possibility. Thoughts of her father’s vehement disapproval slammed into her, but she pushed them aside. If Bob offered her the job, she would come up with a way to deal with her father. She couldn’t think of anything she wanted more than this job.

The chime sounded behind her as another customer walked in. Georgette slid to the end of the counter to fill out the application, using her race track friends as references, though she had to list her father's holding company as current employer.

When she finished writing, she waited for Bob to complete the work order for his current customer whom she could hear describing the problem he was having with his car.

After the man left, Georgette spoke up. "It's the coil," she said. "Sounds faulty."

"You think so? I was just thinking the same thing."

Before she could respond, Bart walked into the lobby, wiping his hands on the back of his coveralls. "You here for the office job?" he asked.

Bob glanced at Bart, then back to Georgette. "You may not believe this, but she's here for both jobs." He handed Bart her application along with the newest work order. "Pull this one into bay four. If it's the coil that's causing the problem, we just might have found ourselves a new mechanic. And bookkeeper. Bart, this is George."

One of Bart's eyebrows raised. "George?"

She stiffened. "It's short for Georgette. My friends call me George."

He scanned the application, and gave a slight nod when he saw her racetrack references. "This is good. I know Jason from the track. I'll talk to him. But I know I've seen you somewhere before. Do you go to Faith Community Fellowship?"

Georgette shook her head. "No. I attend a church nearer to my house. I don't live nearby. But I buy most of my parts here."

"Must be it." Bart walked back to bay four with Bob.

Her heart pounded as she watched them check her assessment, nodding as they discussed the faulty coil.

When they returned to the lobby, she couldn't hold back any more. "Was I right?"

"Looks like it. As soon as Bart puts a new coil in and test drives it, he's going to watch the front desk so you and I can go into the office and discuss the details. You said Monday is good?"

"Monday is great." She marveled at her calm tone. "But I want to do my first official duty right now."

One eyebrow quirked.

Without waiting for him to respond, Georgette turned, walked to the cardboard sign in the window, and flipped it into the garbage can.

She had a job. A real job. And she'd done it without her father.

Chapter Two

The early-morning spring breeze drifted into the shop, doing its best to combat the smells of gas, oil and lubricants.

Bob had just reached down to check the power-steering belt of the car he was working on when an expensive sports car with tinted windows stopped in front of the bay next to him and began to back in.

Bob straightened, wiped his hands on the rag from his pocket, and watched the door to the car open.

A sleek, spike-heeled shoe poked out, followed by a slender, shapely leg. A swish of soft fabric brought the flow of a skirt, followed by the rest of the beautiful blond driver.

“Hi, Bob. I brought my tools. Where should I put them?”

Bob’s heart pounded. He stared openly at his new mechanic. If she hadn’t spoken, he wouldn’t have recognized her, she was always so casually dressed the other times she’d come into the shop with her blond hair tied up in a ponytail, probably an attempt to make herself appear taller. Today, George wore makeup and a hairstyle fit for a magazine cover. Her outfit was nicer than most women he knew wore for special occasions. It was probably more expensive as well.

He didn’t want or need a fashion model. He needed someone who could change a head gasket.

Bob wondered if he’d made his decision to hire her too impulsively. He tried to think of how to tell her that maybe he would have to reconsider, when George reached into the car, pulled out a duffel bag, and slung it over her shoulder. “I’ll be right back. I have to change into something more suitable before I start working.”

Before he could think of a response, she dashed off, the click of her high heels echoing against the concrete as she ran.

Bob checked his watch. It was fifteen minutes before her agreed start time. If he told her he’d changed his mind before she actually started, that might not count as actually firing her. It would probably be less painful that way.

She reappeared in minutes in comfortably worn jeans, a T-shirt proclaiming the tour of a popular Christian musician, and appropriate steel-toed safety boots. Turning as she spoke, she tossed the duffel into the back seat of her car. “I didn’t know if you had coveralls that would fit me, so I brought my own. I hope that’s okay.”

“Uh...yeah...”

Bob shook his head to clear it. At least he would see what she could do. “Ready?”

“Soon as I unpack my tools. They’re in the trunk.”

Bob turned to stare at her car, which was probably worth at least triple the sticker price of his. “Nice,” he said, positive she’d been driving something else when she’d applied for the job. He couldn’t see why someone who could afford such a car would apply at his simple shop, she was obviously used to living on more money than he could pay.

“This car does tend to turn heads. It’s my father’s.”

Bob’s father had never owned such a car. And if he had, Bob knew he would never get to borrow it.

She pushed the remote button on her keychain. The trunk popped open to display a neat array of good-quality tools packed neatly in two boxes.

“I wasn’t sure what to bring, so I brought just the basics.”

Bart chose that moment to appear. He immediately walked to the car and picked up George’s power wrench testing the heft with visible appreciation.

“Do you have a tool caddy for me?”

“We’ve got four bays,” Bob answered. “Since you’re the one who’s going to be answering the phone most of the time, you take Bay One, which is closest to the lobby. Put your tools in the shelving unit on the wall over there.”

In only minutes they had George’s tools packed away in the appropriate place.

Bart stood beside Bob as George moved her car away. “I hope we’re not taking this ‘trusting God’ thing a little too far.”

“I don’t know. All day yesterday at church, I kept thinking that God was sending us someone who really needed the job, but obviously she doesn’t. I wonder if this is some kind of test.”

Bart shook his head. “Let’s not ask for more trouble. If nothing else, she’ll look good when customers come in. Too bad she took her hair down and wiped off her makeup. Yowsa.”

Bob stiffened. “I won’t resort to the trick of hiring only pretty girls, like some of the places that deliver parts. I hired her because she immediately identified that coil problem.”

“Okay, she knows something about mechanics. But can she balance a spreadsheet? Did you notice that she only had those track references? It probably would have been a good idea to check out her former employer, but that would have made things difficult for her if they hadn’t known she was interviewing. Anyway, now it’s too late.”

“There’s only one way to find out what she’s like. Let’s get her started.”

Bart shook his head. “I don’t have time to show her anything. They’re coming to get that red sedan in an hour, and I’m not sure I’ll be finished. You hired her, so you train her.”

Bart walked off before Bob could respond.

Bob entered the lobby at the same time as George.

“Where do I start?” she asked.

“I guess the first step is to enter all the purchase orders into the computer,” Bob said as he led her to the shop’s computer. “We’ve kind of been letting it slip. When we’re so busy, the paperwork is the last thing to be done. It drives our accountant nuts. Fortunately he’s a friend.”

He showed her how to enter a few transactions. “Write the journal entry number on everything as you enter it, and then put them in that box. I take the box home once a month just so everything will be in a separate location if anything happens.”

She nodded as she entered a new purchase order. “This is a good program. I’ve used it before.”

Bob stood back and watched her work. She entered everything quickly and with obvious proficiency, and her skill got him to thinking.

On Saturday, she’d appeared more the tomboy type, especially since she claimed to be a competent mechanic. But today, after seeing her grace and refinement when she came in, and now her bookkeeping skills, he was riveted to her every movement.

He watched as she paused in figuring out how to handle a difficult transaction. When she found the correct category for the particular part, she smiled to herself, and kept typing.

As she started to reach for another piece of paper out of the box, the phone rang.

Her hand froze in midair. “Should I get that?”

“Yep, that’s another reason you’re here.”

She grinned and picked up the phone. “Good morning, thank you for calling Bob And Bart’s Auto Repair. How may I direct your call?”

Bob dragged his hand down his face.

“One moment, please,” she chirped, then pressed the hold button. “Larry Holt wants to know if his car is ready, and how much it will be.”

“This isn’t an executive office. You can say ‘good morning’ if you want, but we just say ‘Bob ’n’ Bart’s’ without having to make a speech about it. Things are pretty simple here. Tell Larry his car will be ready at two, and we’re not sure how much yet until we know if we have to replace the ignition switch. And try to be less formal.”

Her face reddened. She finished the call, then returned to the entry on the computer.

At the sight of that attractive blush, Bob decided to linger a bit, just in case she had questions. He had wondered what it would be like to have another person around, especially a woman. He'd never had an employee before. Bart and he had been friends long before they became business partners, and it was only their friendship and their shared faith in God that sustained them through the hard times.

This was different. George was an attractive woman and Bart was, well, Bart. But George was also his employee, and no more. He'd often heard not to mix business with pleasure, and this was definitely one of those times. It was his decision to hire her, and conversely, if she messed up, it would be his responsibility to fire her.

He didn't want to think of firing her when she'd been there less than an hour. He wanted to give her a chance to prove what she could do.

He cleared his throat. "I'm going to get back to work now. If you need help, just call and one of us will come."

George frowned at the computer and looked up at him. "There's an awful lot of stuff not entered. I'm okay for now, but the true test will be when I have to do the monthly reconciliations. You do reconcile monthly, don't you?"

"Uh... We try, but not always. Anyway, we'd like you to do the paperwork in the morning, then after lunch you'll work in the shop. We need you to get right into routine today."

She smiled. "Of course. While I don't mind the paperwork, remember, it's the mechanic's job I applied for first."

Bob stared at her face, which held nothing but sincerity, trying to make sense of her. While he'd met a few women who could tell an alternator from a fuel pump, he didn't know many who were willing to touch them, much less actually change them.

"I'll leave you alone, then. Call me if you need anything."

She nodded, and Bob walked into the shop to finish his own work.

The morning moved more slowly for him than any other morning in the history of their business. It didn't help that he kept looking through the glass partition between the shop and the office to see how George was doing.

Just as she had when he was beside her, George appeared to be doing fine without him.

The real test would be when lunch break was over, and the second phase of her duties began.

Georgette looked up at the clock. Right on time, Bob walked into the lobby.

"I'm back. It's time for your lunch break, and then I'll get you started on a few tune-ups and things."

Georgette folded her hands on the countertop. "Actually, I ate my lunch as I worked. I hope that's okay." Her father would have died to think that she'd eaten while standing at the counter, as people came in and out. However, with all the excitement of doing something new, and running back and forth between the shop and the phone all morning, she'd been hungry an hour before it was technically lunchtime.

It was actually kind of fun, breaking the rules.

"I hope you don't think we mean for you to work through your lunch break, because we don't. If you've already eaten, would you like to go for a walk or something? There's a place down the block that has great ice cream cones. It's opened early because of our great May weather." The second the words were out of his mouth, he paused as if to gauge her response.

Georgette broke into a smile. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had the simple pleasure of eating an ice cream cone, or any kind of ice cream that wasn't a part of a fancy dessert, meant to impress. Her father didn't think ice cream cones were very dignified.

She reached under the counter for her purse. "I'd love an ice cream. How long will we be gone?"

"We? I... Uh..." Bob looked up at the clock, then shrugged his shoulders. "I hadn't intended for any of us to take our breaks at the same time, but we can probably make an exception for your first

day. Just a sec.” He turned and walked the three steps to the door leading to the shop, and opened it. “Bart!” he hollered. “I’m taking George for an ice cream down the street! We’ll be back in twenty!”

Bob didn’t wait for a reply. “Let’s go while things are quiet. This doesn’t happen often.”

He shucked his coveralls off, pressed a few crinkles out of his jeans and T-shirt with his hands, and met her at the door.

“What about the phone?”

“Bart will do the same thing we’ve always done. He’ll keep working, and when the phone rings, he’ll go answer it.”

“It’s really nice that you don’t ignore your calls and let them go to voice mail.”

Bob nodded. “When we’ve got someone’s car, they don’t want to talk to a machine. They want an answer from a person, even if it’s an ‘I don’t know.’ I feel the same way when I’m calling for status.”

Georgette thought of her father’s charity. Only people who wanted to ingratiate themselves with him called. They found leaving a message more efficient.

She hated dealing with the machine because she missed the personal contact. On the other hand, the way everything was handled now suited her well. She’d told her father that she could handle the organization’s details in the evening, since it only took an hour each day, and she never talked to anyone, anyway. This left her free to seek out something else to do during the daytime. He wasn’t pleased she had found something now, but didn’t press her for details probably figuring it wouldn’t last.

As they crossed the intersection, Bob pointed to the north. “There’s a small mall down that way, if you ever need anything. Next door to the mall are a couple of fast-food places.” He jerked his head in the opposite direction, toward the residential area. “But if you want one of the best corned beef on rye sandwich in the world, there’s a neighborhood market down that way.”

“It sounds like you know the area really well.”

Bob smiled. Little crinkles appeared in the corners of his eyes. His whole face softened, confirming her earlier opinion that her boss was quite a good-looking man.

“I grew up here. The reason Bart and I chose the location is because most of our initial customers were people we knew. It’s worked well, so we’re still here.”

As they walked, they passed a number of specialty stores and small office buildings in the small commercial district. Not a single building was over two stories tall, and there were actually open metered parking spots on the street. The ambience of the district was nothing like the hustle and bustle of downtown. Georgette liked it.

By the time they arrived at the ice cream shop, Georgette could feel effect of the unaccustomed weight of the steel-toed safety boots on her lower back, far different from too-high high heels. Thinking of her closet-full of spike heels, and the shoes she’d worn earlier, she inwardly shuddered at the thought of forcing her feet back into such things to go home.

“What flavor do you want?”

Georgette stared up in awe at the board listing the flavors.

She probably could have picked an old standard, but today was a day of new experiences. Today was her first day of independence. Therefore, she wanted to pick the wildest flavor she could.

She tipped her head toward Bob and whispered, “What’s Tiger Tiger?”

He pointed to a bin containing swirls of black and orange stripes. “I’ve had that before. It’s a little strange. Orange and licorice. My favorite is the Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough.”

She didn’t care if it was strange. She wanted to have an ice cream flavor she’d never had before, to celebrate her first day of doing a job she’d never done before.

She turned to the kid behind the counter. “I’ll have the Tiger Tiger, please.”

When the clerk began scooping the bright colors into a huge waffle cone Georgette reached to open her purse, but Bob stopped her.

“No, this is my treat. In honor of your first day.”

“Really?”

Bob smiled and turned to the clerk. “And the usual for me. Thanks.” He paid the teenager.

Georgette didn’t know how to respond. Of course it was only a simple ice cream cone, an inexpensive treat, but no one had ever given her anything when her father hadn’t been either watching, or would be informed later.

“Thank you,” she muttered, thinking that she didn’t know enough nice people. Of course the people at her new church were nice, but she didn’t know any of them that well, since she’d only been attending church for a few months.

When the clerk handed her the cone, Georgette gave it an experimental lick, confirming that Bob was right about the exotic flavor—it wasn’t bad, but it was a strange combination.

On their way back to work they walked faster than she would have liked, but they didn’t have time to dawdle.

“The phone hasn’t stopped ringing, Bob.” She paused to stifle her smile. Apparently there had been an ad in the help-wanted section of the newspaper. It had given her great pleasure to tell everyone that both positions had been filled. “Is it always like this? It hasn’t been when I’ve shopped before.”

“It never used to be this busy, but lately it has been. We hope with you here, it won’t be so hectic, and we can all go home at a decent time.”

She would gladly have worked as many hours as they needed, but she never would be able to explain longer hours to her father, who was not exactly pleased that she’d found a job on her own.

By the time they arrived back at the shop, both cones were finished.

“Let’s get you started in the shop. Unfortunately, you’ll still have run into the lobby to answer the phone, but it doesn’t ring as often in the afternoon.”

“Why don’t you have a cordless phone?”

Bob smiled. “Sorry, but that doesn’t work here. When the phone rings, we’ve got power tools going or we’re banging on something. It’s impossible to hear the caller speak. So you really do have to leave the room.”

“I didn’t think of that. I understand.”

“I’m going to give you all the tune-ups to do,” Bob continued.

She opened her mouth to protest that she was capable of much more, but stopped herself. The terms under which she’d been hired stated light-duty. “Sure,” she mumbled, trying to smile graciously.

Bob walked behind the counter and stacked a few work orders into a pile. “Do these, and when you’re finished, come see me.”

Georgette picked up the pile and moved the first car into Bay One, anxious to begin the job she couldn’t have foreseen in her wildest dreams.

As she worked on her tune-ups and waited for the oil to drain, she watched her bosses as they worked. They both worked hard and appeared to share all tasks and decisions equally, yet they still remained friends.

Of all the people Georgette knew, she couldn’t call a single woman a real friend. She seldom saw them outside formal events, and even then those events were mainly venues to make or strengthen contacts. Even at the gym, Georgette felt as if her life was a competition.

She liked to think of the guys at the track as her friends, but she never saw them anyplace else. She suspected much of that had to do with their wives and girlfriends being suspicious that she was there for more than automechanical work.

Everyone at church was friendly, but three months wasn’t enough time to nurture any real friendships, especially when she only saw them once a week, and then rushed home directly after the service, since her father didn’t want her going in the first place.

At four twenty-five, Bart appeared beside her. She hadn’t finished the pile, but it was time to go home in five minutes.

“Didn’t get as much done as you thought you would, did you?”

“No, I didn’t,” she said quietly.

“Before you go, Bob wants to see you. He’s in the office. Okay?”

Georgette stepped out of her coveralls, hung them on the hook, picked up the pile of work orders she hadn’t completed, and made her way to the lobby. Her stomach clenched with the thought that she wasn’t good enough, or fast enough, and that her first day was also going to be her last.

Chapter Three

Bob paused at his customer's question, halfway through typing the invoice. "It was just a tune-up, Don," Bob responded. "I guarantee all the work we do, and I guarantee this, too." Bob hadn't hovered, but he had watched George when she couldn't tell he was there.

She knew what she was doing.

"If you tell me what you think she did wrong, I'll fix it."

"Well, maybe I spoke too quickly," his customer said. "It seems to be running smoothly, and I didn't see any oil on the ground. At least not so far."

"You won't see any, either. George did a good job."

"Do I get a discount?"

Bob gritted his teeth. "You were more than happy when my high-school-age cousin tuned up your car last year. You didn't ask for a discount then. What makes the difference now? Is it because a woman did the tune-up?"

Don's voice deepened. "No. Of course not."

Bob typed the last code for the computer to add the tax, and hit Print. "Good. Will that be on your charge card?"

A flicker of movement in the doorway to the shop caught his eye.

George was standing in the doorway, stiff as a board, holding the orders he knew she hadn't had time to do. She cleared her throat. "You wanted to see me?" she asked in a raspy squeak.

"Yes. Can you meet me in the office?"

He swiped the card, completed the transaction, closed the program, and waited until Don was out the door before he joined George. He sat behind the desk. "Bart and I had a little talk today about you."

He slid an envelope across the desk. She stiffened in the chair.

"Unfortunately, as a mechanic, you really stick out being a, um...uh...a woman. Our customers have this corporate image of us, as a business, even though there's only been the two of us. We think you'd fit in better if you didn't use those blue coveralls and bought gray ones, like ours. Bart's wife washes everything on the weekends, so buy enough to last a week. Here's a few crests with our logo. Sew them on right here." He patted the logo on his own coveralls. "Of course we'll reimburse you. This is something I should have thought of sooner. Sorry about that."

She picked up the envelope, and pulled out one of the crests. "This is what you wanted to see me about? My coveralls?" Her blue eyes, big and wide, and very, very pretty took him in.

Her voice lowered to barely above a whisper. "I thought you would be angry because I didn't finish everything you gave me."

"That's nothing to get angry about. We knew you wouldn't be able to finish everything in that pile in one day, especially with the way the phones have been ringing. But we would like you to get those coveralls as soon you can. I could probably phone the place I usually go. They size them by height. How tall are you?"

Her cheeks darkened. "I'm five foot three. I hope you're not going to ask me what I weigh."

"I have three sisters and one of my brothers is married." A smile tugged at his lips. "I know better."

"You have brothers and sisters? Plural?"

"Yes. I have three sisters and two brothers. It's a large family. What about you?"

"I only have one sister. She's married, so I don't see her much anymore."

"I don't see my family as often as I used to since I switched churches." He shrugged his shoulders. "But that's okay. I still see them at family functions and stuff."

"You can't see your family because of church? I don't understand."

“Well, every Sunday I play on my church’s worship team with three of my friends. Actually, four friends, now. You remember me mentioning the accountant? His name is Adrian. He’s one of them.”

Her eyes widened as she stared at him in open astonishment. “My church has a lady who plays the piano, which my father tried to get me to learn as a child, but I just couldn’t get it. What do you play?”

“Drums.”

Her eyes flitted to his arms, before returning to his face. “I’ve never seen drums in church. But then I’ve only ever been to one.”

The words were out of his mouth before he had the chance to think. “You’re more than welcome to come and worship with us one Sunday. It’s a very contemporary service, and the crowd is very informal. Sunday evenings we have coffee and donuts after the service.”

Her eyes widened even more than they had before. “Coffee and donuts? At church?”

“Uh, yeah...” He let his voice trail off, not knowing how to reply. Her surprise told him that she hadn’t been a Christian very long.

“I’d love to go. Thank you so much for inviting me. Can you write down the address?”

Warnings about not mixing business with pleasure clanged through his head. George had done well today, but today was only one day. If her skills and abilities didn’t mesh with what they needed, and if he became too friendly with her, it would cloud his ability to make a rational judgment when her probationary period was over. That clashed with his duty toward her fledgling Christianity, which included widening her Christian circles. He couldn’t very well take back his invitation.

He scribbled down the address for Faith Community Fellowship. “Would you like directions? It’s actually not far from here.”

She scooped the paper up quickly. “That’s okay. I’m sure I can find it. I can hardly wait.”

He pictured the way most people dressed for church, compared to the way George had been dressed when she first arrived that morning.

A newcomer was always noticed, especially during the evening service. A newcomer, coming with him, dressed to the nines, would be almost newsworthy enough to make the bulletin. He wouldn’t hear the end of it for months.

“Just one thing. Like I said, it’s really informal there. Please, wear jeans.”

“It’s Sunday night. Where are you going?”

Georgette smiled at her father. “I’m meeting a friend from work. Then we’ll be having coffee and donuts. Don’t wait up for me! Bye, Daddy!”

She closed the door behind her before her father could question her further. Every day, he became increasingly irritated at the lack of details she provided him about her job, but she didn’t know what to tell him. Her clothes on the first day, suitable for work in an office, let him initially believe what he wanted to believe. But the questions became more and more insistent, and she’d finally told her father she was working as an assistant for two gentleman entrepreneurs in a limited partnership. She had told him her primary job was working in the accounting department, but part of her duties involved customer service.

He watched her leave daily, openly showing displeasure that she was going to work. However, at the same time, he seemed proud that she dressed well. He’d even noticed her new bright-red nail polish, and asked if it was because she was trying to attract a man.

Georgette detested wearing nail polish. She did it to hide the grease she couldn’t get out from under her fingernails. She took the nail polish off on the way to work, while sitting in traffic, then put it back on, on the way home.

She knew Bob wondered why she arrived at work every day dressed to impress and then changed clothes, but she found herself caught in a cycle she couldn’t break. In order to make the long drive across town and be on time, she had to leave before her father. She couldn’t let him see her leaving the house wearing anything other than what his preconceived ideas told him she should be wearing.

So the household staff wouldn't have to lie for her, Georgette changed back into her good clothes in the gas station washroom on the way home. But, once at home, she changed in order to work on the old truck in the garage, so her father wouldn't wonder why she smelled like oil at supper time.

Instead of confronting her father, she was acting like a coward.

She pushed that thought aside as she pulled into the parking lot of a well-cared-for building that looked as if it had once housed some kind of small business. Inside, everything had been renovated and decorated in neutral shades of greens and browns, giving the place a welcoming atmosphere. Signs indicated that classrooms and a gymnasium were downstairs. As she stepped forward, soft music from the worship team echoed in the background.

A couple welcomed her as they gave her a bulletin.

"Welcome to Faith Community Fellowship. My name is Kaitlyn," the woman said, smiling. "Are you new to the area?"

Georgette smiled back. "No, I actually don't live near here. I'm here with Bob Delanio, except he had to come early."

The woman's eyebrows arched. She quickly glanced at the man she was with, then turned back to Georgette. "Then you'll want to go in right now, so you can find a seat close to the front. Would you like me to show you where to go?"

Georgette shook her head. "I'll just follow the music. Thanks."

As she'd said, Georgette followed the music until she was in the sanctuary where Bob, two other men and a woman were at the front.

Georgette slid into a chair, and surreptitiously she checked the place out. It was nothing like the church she'd been attending.

Even though she felt strange, she had worn jeans because Bob had told her to do so. Now she was glad she'd listened to him. Everyone was wearing either jeans or casual clothes. Not a single man wore a tie, including a man she thought might be the pastor.

Instead of a stately sanctuary with stained-glass windows and wooden benches, this sanctuary was a large rectangular room. A large opening in the wall showed a kitchen, which indicated that the sanctuary also doubled as a banquet hall. But for now, a single, plain wooden cross at the front, and banners on the walls clearly defined it as a church setting.

Most of the people in attendance were her age, except for a large group of teens, who took up at least a quarter of the seats in the back.

At the church she'd been going to, everyone was solemn, and once inside the sanctuary, silent. Here, all around her, people talked and even laughed. Out loud.

"Hello, everyone!" a voice boomed from the speakers mounted on the walls. "Welcome to Faith Community Fellowship. Please stand and let's worship God together."

Georgette hustled to her feet. To her surprise, the first song was from one of her praise CDs that her father hadn't managed to find and throw out.

She forced herself not to watch Bob, and to pay attention to the words.

Until now, the only time she'd actually sung God's praises out loud was in the closed car, but here things were different. The enthusiasm of the crowd around her encouraged her to ignore her father's warnings not to make a spectacle of herself. Here, she joined in with the rest of the congregation to praise God in song. Being able to express herself out loud among other people opened a rush of emotion she hadn't experienced before.

By the time they had sung the fifth song in praise and wonderment of God's glory, tears streamed from her eyes, and she didn't care if her mascara ran.

When the songs were over, she quickly reached down and started digging through her purse for a tissue.

Bob sat beside her just as she was blowing her nose.

"Hi, George. I'm glad you found us."

She nodded and stuffed the used tissue into her purse to hide it, taking her notepad out to record the sermon. “I’ve never been to a place like this.” She stopped as the pastor began speaking.

Bob whispered, “If you want, we can get a tape. Randy records everything for the church’s tape library.”

She stopped writing. “Really? I can have one?”

“Of course.”

At the end of the pastor’s message, Bob rose quietly and returned to the front. The worship team closed the service with one more song, one that she knew she would hear in her head all week long, encouraging her to think about God more over the days to come.

The congregation quickly left their seats and flocked to the back of the room, where coffee and trays of donuts sat on a large table. Georgette was in the process of reaching for a donut when a man with dark hair and vivid blue eyes shuffled in beside her.

“You must be George, the mechanic.”

Immediately, she backed up. The man grabbed a Boston cream donut, and smiled at her. “I’m Randy. Bob told us you’d be here tonight and I saw you together. You’d better grab that donut fast. The Boston creams go quickly.”

Before she could think of something to say, Bob’s voice sounded from behind her. “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

Randy shrugged his shoulders. “If you snooze, you lose.”

Bob stiffened. “I gather you’ve met my friend, Randy?”

She smiled. “Briefly.”

As they spoke, the other members of the worship team joined them.

“Everyone, this is George, the new mechanic and bookkeeper I told you about. George, this is Paul, Celeste, and Adrian.”

Adrian, the only one of the four men who wore glasses, smiled. “Welcome, we hope to see you back here.”

Georgette nodded. “Yes, I think you will.” She doubted she would be able to attend the morning services at Bob’s church because of her obligations to her father, but she was free to attend Bob’s church on Sunday evenings, especially since her father thought she was going out on a social visit, not to church.

She looked up at Bob, who was now standing beside her.

She couldn’t help but like him, even though she told herself what she was feeling was simply a schoolgirl’s crush, a few years too late. For the first time she was happy with her life, and everything centered around Bob.

However, it was neither practical nor wise to become personally involved with one’s boss, regardless of his strength of character. She enjoyed her job too much to jeopardize it in any way.

Bob spoke up, “We have to go put our stuff away. I’ll be right back.”

Celeste shook her head. “I can pack up the drums for you. Why don’t you two visit? We can all go out for coffee together after. You’re not in a rush to get home, are you, George?”

The opposite. Since her father thought she was going out to visit friends, he wouldn’t expect her back for a long time. “No. That sounds like fun.”

Bob’s friends all returned to the front, leaving her alone with him, or as alone as they could be in the crowd.

“What did you think? You were saying this is quite different from where you’re going.”

“Yes. Where I’ve been is quite formal. Your church doesn’t even have pews.”

Bob nodded. “Yes. We also use this room for banquets and things like the women’s auxiliary functions.”

Her heart ached, thinking of just sitting around with a group of women, talking about nothing in particular—not about who was cheating on whom or the other back-stabbing theatrics that passed for conversation in her current social circle.

Bob told her about how his parents and most of the rest of his family attended the main church, of which this one was a plant. While they talked, a bunch of the teens cleared and stacked the chairs to make the place ready for the next group using the room.

Just as the last of the chairs were stacked away, Randy joined them.

“Sorry, I can’t go with you, after all. I have to go to Pastor Ron’s place to fix his computer.”

Bob nodded. “I guess I’ll see you Wednesday, then.” Bob turned to Georgette. “We practice at Adrian’s house every Wednesday night for the coming Sunday.”

She knew Bob worked every evening except Wednesday. Now she knew why. “You mean even when you’re this far behind, you stop working and go do church stuff?”

“Yup. Every Wednesday.”

Georgette studied Bob’s face, which held nothing except honesty. Taking time off meant a loss of income. She couldn’t imagine what her father would have thought of someone willingly taking a financial loss on a regular basis to do something for church. “That’s pretty dedicated,” she muttered.

Bob smiled. “God’s done a lot for me. This is only one small thing I can do for Him. Besides, it’s something I enjoy.”

She could imagine that after a frustrating day, or week, there might be significant release in being able to whack a drum set.

Paul was coming down the steps of the stage as they were starting to go up. “I just remembered that I have a super early staff meeting tomorrow morning I need to prep for. I’ll have to take a rain check. Sorry.”

Bob blinked and looked at Paul. “Must be a very early meeting. See you Wednesday, then.”

They passed Paul and got up on the stage just as Adrian closed the zipper on the electric piano case. Celeste stood off to the side, talking on her cell phone.

“Celeste’s mother needs some help moving some furniture. I’m sorry, we can’t go after all.”

Bob’s eyes narrowed. “On Sunday night? This just came up now?”

Adrian shrugged his shoulders. “Sorry. See you Wednesday.”

Bob rested his fists on his hips as Adrian carried off the electric piano. Celeste tucked her phone into her purse, picked up Adrian’s guitar case, waved, and also walked off the stage.

“If I didn’t know better...” Bob muttered. He turned to Georgette. “I guess that means it’s just you and me. Still want to go out for coffee and a donut?”

Georgette’s foolish heart fluttered. While she’d certainly enjoyed working with him, she had also learned in casual conversation that Bob was single. Very single. Besides, she would have been stupid if she couldn’t recognize the way people in the church did a double-take at seeing Bob at church with a woman.

She also had her suspicions about why Bob’s friends had suddenly changed their minds about joining them for coffee.

Going out with Bob away from a work setting wasn’t smart.

Georgette looked up into his eyes and cleared her throat.

“Yes.”

Chapter Four

Bob unlocked the door to the lobby promptly at 7:00 am, punched in the alarm code, then headed straight for the coffee machine.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd needed coffee so badly.

At first he'd been a little nervous about going to the twenty-four-hour donut shop with George alone, but today he had no regrets. They'd talked, they'd laughed and they'd talked some more. It was well after midnight by the time they'd realized they both should have been home asleep. Bob couldn't remember the last time he'd been so tired after a weekend, but he also couldn't remember the last time he'd enjoyed himself so much.

It told him it had been too long since he'd set the worries of the business aside, and gone out to do something just because it was fun. Now that he had help in the shop, he could look forward to trying some new things.

People started coming in before the coffee was ready, dropping off their cars on the way to work.

Bart arrived as usual at seven-thirty and George arrived with enough time to run into the washroom, change and be at her station for eight o'clock.

Bob shook his head. He had no idea why she did such a thing, but he had to admit he enjoyed watching her run by before she re-emerged in the shapeless coveralls.

When the washroom door opened, Bob had her coffee poured, complete with double cream and no sugar.

"Thanks, Bob," she mumbled as she closed her eyes to take her first slow, luxurious sip, then sighed. "What's lined up for today?"

"About the same, nothing critical. We'll get the morning rush caught up, then you can get back to the bookkeeping."

"Okay." She nodded, then took a bigger sip of the hot coffee. "The way you've got me splitting my duties is working really well. I'm making good progress."

Bob smiled. He was pleased with how fast she was getting everything organized, and Adrian would be even more pleased. "Great. We've got the usual tune-ups lined up for the morning, but after lunch I've got some bigger jobs for you."

He started to go over the row of work orders pinned to the board with George when the electronic chime for the door sounded.

They both turned simultaneously as a tall, good-looking man in an expensive suit walked in.

George fumbled her coffee mug, spilling a little over the edge. A splash of coffee dribbled onto one boot.

Bob stared at this new potential customer, one better dressed than the majority of people who walked in off the street. He'd probably had a breakdown mid-trip, as the neighborhood wasn't exactly the center of the high-rise financial district.

Instead of looking at Bob, as most potential customers did when they needed help, the newcomer only had eyes...and raised eyebrows, for George. He surveyed her from head to safety-workboot covered toes.

"Hello, Georgette."

Her voice came out barely above a whisper. "Hello, Tyler."

Tyler gazed around the room, taking in everything from the work board to the coffee machine to the old couch, and treating Bob as just another furnishing. Bob tried not to take it personally.

"I need some work done on my car." Tyler focused on the crest on George's coveralls, blinked, then looked back up to her face. "Can you help me?"

George cleared her throat. "What seems to be the problem? With your car."

“It, uh... It makes this noise every once in a while, and I thought I should have it looked at.”

It was Bob’s gut feeling that there wasn’t really anything wrong with Tyler’s car, and that Tyler was there only to see George.

To give them some privacy, he walked into the shop.

“Hey, Bob, did you see what just pulled in?”

He turned toward Bart. I don’t want to know what Tyler drives, Bob thought. “What?” he asked.

Bart jerked his head in the direction of Bay Four’s open door.

He could see a shiny new Porsche through the large opening.

A Porsche so new that any alleged noise would be covered by the warranty, and could be fixed at the dealership.

Bob resolutely ignored the car, fixing his attention instead on the large window between the office and the shop. George was standing at the counter, writing something down. Tyler was leaning forward, resting his elbows on the counter.

“Looks like you’ve got competition,” Bart’s voice drifted from behind him.

Bob spun around.

“No one is competing,” he mumbled, then began searching through his tool caddy for just the right wrench.

“If you say so.” Bart shrugged, then turned around to continue his current project.

As soon as Bart was busy, Bob turned to watch Georgette.

She didn’t seem very excited to see her acquaintance, and Bob didn’t know why he found that comforting. Her behavior reinforced it—she shook her head a few times, then glanced through the window, straight at him.

Bob quickly turned his head down and continued his search for the wrench. When he found his spare, he picked it up and turned to continue the job he was supposed to be doing when the movement of the door of Tyler’s Porsche opening caught his eye. Slowly and carefully, the Porsche was backed out of the parking spot and driven away, purring like the well-tuned machine it was, not a suspicious noise to be heard.

Bob pulled the rag out of his pocket, wiped his hands, and returned to the lobby, where George was busily typing purchase orders into the computer.

“I see your friend left.”

He waited for her to deny that Tyler was her friend, but she didn’t.

“I told him that if he thought there was a problem, he should take it back to the dealership where he got it, because anything wrong would still be under warranty.”

He again waited for her to say something more, anything, but silence hung between them.

He cleared his throat and stepped behind the counter. “Let’s go over today’s lineup together.”

She nodded silently as he paged through the orders. When he’d divided up the work for the day, she logged off the computer, picked up her pile, and made her way quietly into the shop.

Bob couldn’t remember the last time a day had dragged this way. Even though the three of them didn’t talk any more or any less than they had in the past week, a heavy silence seemed to hang in the building, despite the constant noise of their repair work.

His earlier thoughts about shaking up his social life continued to echo through his head during the rest of the day. He was thirty years old and ready to settle down. Yet, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a steady girlfriend.

Only days ago, Adrian and Celeste had announced to the worship team that they were getting married. That, along with Bart’s endless baby pictures, reminded Bob how boring and predictable his life had become.

Of course, to start something with George would be unwise. She was his employee. However, that didn’t mean they couldn’t hang out as friends. Her reaction to Tyler indicated that although she had some sort of history with him, it didn’t appear to be romantic.

When it was time for George to go home, she disappeared into the washroom to clean up and Bob moved to the large window in preparation. When the washroom door opened again and she'd cleared it by a few steps, Bob entered the lobby, hoping she would think the timing was coincidental.

George started in surprise at seeing him in the lobby at that hour of the day, without the phone ringing. "Goodnight, Bob," she said on her way to the door. "See you tomorrow."

"Wait," he said, and she stopped.

"Before you go, I wanted to ask you something. I haven't been able to go as often as I used to, but every Monday night my church has a Bible study. It's at the home of one of the deacon couples, and it's really informal. I was wondering if you'd like to go with me tonight."

She blinked a few times, then glanced toward the door. "Sorry, I can't," she mumbled, then kept walking. She opened the door, stepped outside, then just before the door closed, she said, "I'm going out with Tyler."

Georgette stepped back to look at herself in the mirror.

The housekeeper had helped to style her hair into perfect order.

It was stiff and felt artificial.

Her makeup was flawless, her shadow just the right color to accent her eyes. Her nail polish matched her lipstick. The artifice brought back a memory of posing for promotional photographs meant to encourage people to help the starving children of the world. It had raised only marginal funding, but it brought phenomenal publicity for her father. The experience was a good reminder of how shallow people could be.

Just like at that session, her outfit was the height of fashion, and emphasized her figure to perfection while binding it uncomfortably.

Her shoes were darling, and the perfect accent to her legs. They also pinched her toes, and she didn't know if she could stand more than twenty minutes in them. If she took them off under the table to wiggle her toes, she knew she would never get them back on.

Georgette looked perfect.

She felt like a fake.

"Georgie-Pie, honey, you look magnificent!"

Georgette inhaled deeply, pasted on a smile that was as phony as the rest of her appearance, and turned to face her father, who was standing in her bedroom doorway. "Thank you, Daddy. Tyler should be here in a few minutes, and I want to be ready."

"Always a stickler for punctuality." He grinned and playfully wagged one finger in the air at her. "It wouldn't hurt to be fashionably late."

"We have reservations for dinner." Besides, Georgette considered being fashionably late incredibly rude and self-centered. It was only one of many ways to draw attention to oneself. She hated that, too. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need a few more minutes to finish getting ready." She didn't bother to watch him leave.

It was at times like this she thought of her mother, and wondered if the endless social charade was one of the things that had driven her mother away. Georgette had been very young when her mother had left. Her father had told her it was because her mother didn't want to be part of their family anymore. It had hurt terribly at the time, and still did. As an adult, though, Georgette could see how her father's tyranny made her family dysfunctional. She could only guess at the difficulty of being married to him. She often thought about how bad it must have been to make her mother run away and abandon her two children.

On the way to the closet, Georgette's step faltered. She had one picture of her mother left that her father hadn't found and destroyed. She kept it hidden in the lining of her purse, and whenever she switched purses, she made sure the picture went with her. It would never do to have her father find it now. She turned in time to see her father close the door behind him.

When the door was closed, Georgette dumped the contents of her purse haphazardly onto the bed, but she carefully removed the laminated and carefully preserved picture from where she'd hidden it in the seam of the lining.

She paused to sit on the bed to study the picture, and to remember.

As an adult, the resemblance between her and her mother was strong. They had the same light-blond hair color, the same blue eyes, and, sadly, the same lack of height. The picture had been taken only days before her mother had left. Georgette had been ten years old, and the two of them had been together, laughing and making rabbit ears behind each other's heads with their fingers.

Josephine had taken the picture in the afternoon, while her father was at work. He never would have permitted such nonsense if he'd been there. Georgette had sneaked the picture out of the package and taken it to school to show a friend. When she'd arrived back home, not only was her mother gone, but so was everything her mother owned, and every reminder of her. It was a clean sweep. All she had left of her mother was one candid photograph and a small gold cross on a delicate gold chain that she never took off, not even at night.

"Georgie-Pie, honey. He's here!"

She gently tucked the photograph into its new secret hiding spot in the new purse lining, then rammed everything else in as quickly as she could. "I'll be right there!" she called, taking one last look at herself in the mirror. She stuck out her tongue at her reflection, stiffened and walked slowly, in a dignified manner, out of the bedroom, and down the stairs.

Tyler smiled, but he didn't leave her father's side. "You look lovely, Georgette."

"Thank you, Tyler," she said gracefully. She batted her eyelashes coyly, positive that Tyler wouldn't catch her sarcasm.

Bob would have caught it if she did such a thing to him. In fact, Bob would have laughed.

She should have been with Bob right now. She'd been thrilled that he'd invited her to a Bible study meeting. But instead, she was with Tyler because she couldn't take the chance he would tell her father he'd seen her. She needed to talk to Tyler immediately.

Tyler held the car door open for her and whisked her away to an intimate and very expensive restaurant.

She was almost surprised he hadn't taken her somewhere splashy, somewhere people they knew would see them, but she guessed Tyler wanted the privacy rather than the notoriety, at least for the moment.

They made polite chitchat until their meals came and the waiter made the obligatory last visit to make sure everything was satisfactory before leaving them alone.

Georgette had been dreading the moment they would be assured of privacy.

"So, tell me, Georgette, what in the world were you doing at that place?"

"I think it should be obvious. I work there. What were you doing there?" She still didn't know if she'd ever overcome the shock of seeing someone she knew on that side of town.

"I told you what I was doing there. I was on my way downtown when I heard a noise. I must have just run over something, because the noise didn't happen again."

Georgette poked at her salmon with her fork. "I suppose," she said. It was possible, but unlikely. Bob And Bart's was nowhere near the route between Tyler's home and his office downtown. The only way Tyler, or anyone, for that matter, would have run into her was if they already knew she was there, because it wasn't the type of neighborhood any of her acquaintances would normally ever go to.

She cleared her throat. "I meant, what were you doing there in the first place? It's kind of out of your way, isn't it?"

Tyler flashed her his most charming smile—a smile clearly meant to distract her from their conversation. "It might be a little out of my way, but I felt like taking an indirect route that day."

Indirect, nothing. His little side trip doubled his commute.

Unless he had been following her...

“Was there any particular reason you felt like going out of your way? Did you see my car when I was on the way to work or anything?”

“Yes, actually, I did see your car. That’s why I stopped in. When I walked in the door, I was certainly surprised to see you. And what a getup!”

She noted that he avoided any mention of when he’d seen her car. She was positive it wasn’t in the parking lot. It was long before that. A long, long time before that. Possibly when she was backing out of the garage at home. He could have been behind her the whole time, following her, and she wouldn’t have noticed. Of course, if she accused him of following her, he would never admit it.

She narrowed her eyes. “Lots of people wear uniforms and the like, you know.”

Tyler choked on his mouthful, swallowed, coughed and cleared his throat. “But not like that. I could see you doing accounting, but why are you delivering parts?”

Georgette’s heart skipped a beat. She wasn’t ready for anyone she knew, especially someone so close to her father, to know what she was doing. But she’d been caught and now it was time to defend her choices.

“I don’t deliver parts. I work in the shop, fixing things. Getting my hands dirty.” Georgette laid her knife and fork down, and clasped those hands in front of her. “And that’s exactly the job I wanted. I’m only doing the accounting because I couldn’t get one without the other.”

Tyler shook his head. “You should be working for your father.”

Been there, done that. She hated her father manipulating her like a puppet on a string. This was her first chance at independence, and nothing was going to take it away from her. Nothing. “Maybe. But for now, this is what I want to do.”

“What could that two-bit outfit possibly be paying you to make it worth your while?”

Georgette sighed. She wasn’t there for the money. The allowance her father gave her for the hour a day she spent managing his charities was more than double her full-time salary. It was one more thing her father used to control her, paying her for her loyalty. It made her feel as if she was being bought, and she hated herself for it.

“Auto mechanics is a hobby for me, so I consider this a hobby that pays.”

“You know what your father would say if he found out, don’t you?”

She shuddered at the thought. He would consider what she was doing pure defiance, and in a way, it was. But it was also the only place where she was out from under her father’s thumb. Even though she’d told Tyler she considered it a hobby, she worked hard at her job and when the day was done, she was at peace with herself and with God, and she could sleep well at night.

She raised one hand up, pressing into the tiny cross, something else her father didn’t approve of. “I don’t think I’m ready to tell Daddy the specifics yet.” In fact, she didn’t know if she would ever be ready to tell him. But at the same time, she knew that one day she would have to. To think otherwise was unrealistic.

“Tell me, Georgette, does anyone else know? Besides me?”

Her breath caught in her throat. “I don’t know,” she muttered, at least she hoped and prayed no one knew. That Tyler knew was not in her favor.

He leaned forward toward her, over the table. “I could help you keep your secret.”

Her heart began to pound. She didn’t trust Tyler, but he had her between a rock and a hard place. Perhaps graciousness on her part would evoke a similar response. “Could you? I’d really appreciate that.” She wondered nervously what he would ask for in return. She had nothing to offer. To offer money would be an insult. Any work he would ever need done to his car was best done by the dealership where he bought it.

“But in return, there’s something you can do for me.”

Here it was. She leaned closer to Tyler. “What do you have in mind?”

Tyler sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. “I need to attend a number of functions, and it doesn’t look good for me to go alone. I need you there as my companion. Your father would be pleased to see us together, you know, in the past, he’s encouraged me to spend time with you.”

Georgette forced herself to breathe. Tyler came from old money, but that wasn’t enough for Tyler. He was ambitious, which shouldn’t have been bad, except that like her father, Tyler didn’t care who he stepped on.

“I don’t know...” she let her voice trail off, trying to give herself more time to think.

Tyler tipped his head to one side. “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.”

Maybe to him, it was back-scratching. To Georgette, it sounded an awful lot like extortion.

But until she could figure out a way to approach her father, she didn’t have any choice. By not dealing with the problem sooner, she had set herself up to become an easy victim.

“I can’t believe that you, of all people, would be unable to find a date. I’m sure there are any number of women who want to go out with you.”

“Maybe. But it looks better if I go to these things with the same person. It gives me a reputation for stability and maturity.”

Georgette’s blood boiled. What Tyler looked like on the outside to strangers was more important to him than anything.

Bob would never have behaved in such a manner. Even though Bob wasn’t in the upper echelons of the corporate world, he was still a successful business owner. He was a good Christian man, and he made an income he was comfortable with. His entire business was built on one thing. Doing honest work in order to satisfy his customers.

The only one Tyler wanted to satisfy was himself, no matter what the cost.

“How many times? Does today count?”

“Today we’re negotiating. Does this mean you agree?”

For now, Georgette didn’t have a choice. Soon she would find an appropriate time to tell her father, on her own terms, but until the time was right, she would have to put up with Tyler.

“I agree,” she muttered, then pushed the plate containing her half-eaten meal slightly forward on the tabletop. “Do you mind if we leave? I’m not as hungry as I thought I was.”

Tyler signaled the waiter for the bill, but continued eating. “Great. Today is Monday. I’ve got to go to a wild-life fund-raiser on Wednesday. I’ll pick you up at five-thirty. It’s a dinner engagement. Dress appropriately.”

Chapter Five

Georgette pushed a little more sawdust over the spill with the toe of her workboot. “It should be absorbed by tomorrow,” she mumbled to Bart, who reached out to run his finger along the seal of the leaky oil filter of the car on the hoist above them.

Bob appeared beside her. “Did you find out what’s wrong?”

Georgette nodded. “I don’t know where she went to change the oil, and I don’t know how they could have done it, but the O-ring was twisted and it wrecked the seal. That’s what’s been causing the leak.”

Bart looked up and watched as another drop leaked out. “Mrs. Jablonski is going to be happy. She was so afraid of what it would cost to fix, she’s just been adding more oil instead of bringing it in. The only reason she finally came was because her neighbors were complaining about the growing puddle on the street.” All we have to charge her for is changing the filter.”

“You mean you’re not even going to charge her for the full oil-change package?” Her father’s mechanic charged a service fee just to look at any vehicle, then took the money off the cost of the repair later. However, if nothing was done, they kept the money for their time, which was only fair.

“Naw. It took under a minute to see what the problem was. Besides, we never charge for estimates.”

“But how are you going to make money on this, then?”

“Mrs. Jablonski is living on a pension. We’ll get back our time in the markup on the new filter we’re going to give her, so it’s not like we’re losing anything. The only reason she brought it here is because my mother told her I would look at it and fix it for a fair price. I’m not doing it for free. I’m just being reasonable.”

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