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MILLIONAIRE'S CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

Mary Anne Wilson

Just
for
Kids



Mary Anne Wilson
Millionaire's Christmas Miracle

Серия «Mills & Boon
American Romance»

Аннотация

Quint Gallagher in love? It would take a miracle...Self-made millionaire Quint Gallagher could rule a boardroom and bend numbers to his will, but he'd rather lose a merger than analyze his feelings for day-care worker Amy Blake. He was too old for the beautiful widow, too jaded to fall in love. Yet when he found a baby on the day-care doorstep just days after Christmas, Quint turned to Amy. The sophisticated millionaire was more man than Amy could handle. But Quint with the tiny babe touched her wary heart. Fate had thrown them together in the season of miracles—was it too late to wish for the miracle of love? Just for Kids: A day-care center where love abounds... and families are made!

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The box moved as the cries increased

Quint crouched down, shocked to see a baby in the box. Acting on twenty-year-old instincts, he reached for the baby and its pacifier. Straightening, he cradled the child in his arm and offered the pacifier. The cries stopped.

He looked around the garage, but no one was there. He tried the back door to the child-care center. Locked.

Within a few minutes, the door opened and Amy was there.

“What are you—?” Her words cut off as her eyes widened. “That’s a baby,” she said. “Who...where did you get a baby?”

“Outside your door.”

She eased the baby out of his arms, then cuddled it to her. She was meant to be a mother. The gentleness in her, the caring, was almost tangible. “I don’t understand.”

Quint’s chest tightened and his mouth felt dry. “That makes two of us.”

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Harlequin American Romance, where you’re guaranteed upbeat and lively love stories set in the backyards, big cities and wide-open spaces of America.

Kick-starting the month is an AMERICAN BABY selection by Mollie Molay. The hero of *The Baby in the Back Seat* is one handsome single daddy who knows how to melt a woman’s guarded heart! Next, bestselling author Mindy Neff is back

with more stories in her immensely popular **BACHELORS OF SHOTGUN RIDGE** series. In *Cheyenne's Lady*, a sheriff returns home to find in his bed a pregnant woman desperate for his help. Honor demands that he offer her his name, but will he ever give his bride his heart?

In *Millionaire's Christmas Miracle*, the latest book in Mary Anne Wilson's **JUST FOR KIDS** miniseries, an abandoned baby brings together a sophisticated older man who's lost his faith in love and a younger woman who challenges him to take a second chance on romance and family. Finally, don't miss Michele Dunaway's *Taming the Tabloid Heiress*, in which an alluring journalist finesses an interview with an elusive millionaire who rarely does publicity. Exactly how did the reporter get her story?

Enjoy all four books—and don't forget to come back again in December when Judy Christenberry's *Triplet Secret Babies* launches Harlequin American Romance's continuity **MAITLAND MATERNITY: TRIPLETS, QUADS & QUINTS**, and Mindy Neff brings you another **BACHELORS OF SHOTGUN RIDGE** installment.

Wishing you happy reading,
Melissa Jeglinski
Associate Senior Editor
Harlequin American Romance

Millionaire's Christmas Miracle

Mary Anne Wilson



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To Taylor Anne Levin

The real miracle in my life...

XOXOXO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

Books by Mary Anne Wilson

HARLEQUIN AMERICAN ROMANCE

495—HART'S OBSESSION

523—COULD IT BE YOU?

543—HER BODYGUARD

570—THE BRIDE WORE BLUE JEANS

609—THE CHRISTMAS HUSBAND

652—MISMATCHED MOMMY?

700—MR. WRONG!

714—VALENTINE FOR AN ANGEL

760—RICH, SINGLE & SEXY

778—COWBOY IN A TUX

826—THAT NIGHT WE MADE BABY

891—REGARDING THE TYCOON'S TODDLER*

589—HART'S DREAM

895—THE C.E.O. & THE SECRET HEIRESS*

637—NINE MONTHS LATER...

899—MILLIONAIRE'S CHRISTMAS MIRACLE*

670—JUST ONE TOUCH

THE TEXAS TELL-ALL

Dec. 24, 2001

Last night's holiday reception at LynTech Corporation was an interesting mix of powerful entrepreneurs, investors and parents whose main concern is the corporation's thriving day-care center, Just For Kids. And just as the party was heating up, in walked Quint Gallagher, the hotshot consultant from New York, who turned a number of female heads (including mine!). Word has it that the devilishly good-looking Mr. Gallagher has returned to his hometown of Houston in an effort to revitalize LynTech. However, business seemed the last thing on the millionaire's mind as he and sexy single mom Amy Blake, coordinator of Just For Kids, talked and flirted the whole night through. The twenty-year age difference between the two hardly seemed to matter, and even this reporter could see the sparks flying! My prediction? Mr. Gallagher's return to Texas will prove to be very strategic in matters of business...and of the heart.

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Prologue

Houston, Texas, December 23

“Come on, Dad, you’re single, rich, a great catch. You need to find someone and—”

“Okay, Mike, that’s enough.” In the back of the limousine, Quint Gallagher cut off his son’s words coming over the cell phone. “I’m here to work tonight. It’s a reception, a business function, not a singles’ party. Everyone, including me, will have an agenda with them and they’re all business.”

“Bummer,” Mike murmured.

Quint could almost see his twenty-two-year-old son sitting in his apartment in Los Angeles, probably with clutter all around from his move last month. “Yeah, bummer,” he echoed. “But it’s part of the package with LynTech and something you’ll learn at your job.”

“I’m never going to be like that,” Mike said. “My work isn’t my life. It’s so I can live life.”

“So you’ve told me many times,” Quint said as he stretched his legs out and slipped lower on the leather seat, enjoying the roominess of the limousine as he tried to ease muscles still tight from the long flight in from New York.

“I mean it. You did your thing the way you wanted to, but I’m not doing it that way. I wish you weren’t anymore. You’ve got all the money you’ll ever need, and you could just cut loose and

have some fun. Why don't you start by ditching the reception and going somewhere else?"

"That's not going to happen."

"Dad, I hate to say this, but you need to get a love life, to—"

Quint cut that off right away. "What did you call for, besides checking on my love life?"

"So, you do have a love life, huh?" Mike murmured.

"That's none of your business." He and Mike had always talked about anything, but right now, Quint was setting the limits. He wasn't about to go into this with his son. There had been women over the years; they'd come and gone, but he'd kept them separate from his real life as a single father to his only child Mike, and from his work. He'd never introduced those women to Mike, because he hadn't wanted to have another woman do what Mike's mother had done—walk out. It had been a conscious decision on his part to stay free of that possibility ever becoming reality again, and now it was a habit that fit him well, just not to get involved. "Now, are you going to tell me why you called?"

"Okay, okay. Since you aren't going to come out here for Christmas and Grandma and Granddad are going to Florida for the holidays, I was going to head up to Tahoe for some skiing. I just wondered if you had Joe Kline's number so I could see if we could use his condo? I can't find it anywhere."

Quint passed the cell phone to his other ear and looked past his reflection in the tinted window to the night streets of Houston glittering with Christmas decorations. "I don't have it with me,

but you can get it from his son, Dane. He's listed."

"Great, thanks."

"Who's the 'we' in 'we could use his condo?'"

"A friend."

"Okay, fair enough," he murmured. "Just be careful, have fun and leave—"

"—it the way we found it," Mike said, completing the sentence for him.

"You read my mind."

"Now, that's an easy job. Just think work and responsibility." Before Quint could counter that, Mike asked, "So, are you going to be out at the ranch or what?"

"I'm staying at the Towers Hotel in the city. It's just easier than being all the way out at the ranch."

"How'd you convince Grandma that you weren't staying with them now that you're back in Houston?"

"Unlike you, your grandmother understands what work is and how important it is to be close to that work."

"Obviously you haven't talked to her since you landed."

"I called and left a message. What's going on?"

"I talked to Grandma yesterday and she's worried about you. She thinks you should take advantage of being on your own again, that you should find some nice girl and settle down."

Quint narrowed his hazel eyes at his own reflection in the tinted windows, a man with gray-streaked dark hair brushed back from a face that was all planes and angles, dominated by a full

mustache. Hardly a “kid” a mother had to worry about. “She’s wasting her time on that line of thought.” He’d settled down once and lived to regret it. He’d never regret having Mike, and if he’d been able to have the same child without ever having had Gwen in their lives, he wouldn’t have hesitated for a minute. But it didn’t work that way. “I’m too old to buy into that scenario anymore.”

“Why don’t you rewrite the scenario and forget the ‘settling down’ part? Just find some sexy woman and go with the flow? Let it happen. Relax. Chill out.”

“God, you sound like some hedonistic hippy,” he said. “And any lady my age isn’t into the party scene. She’s sitting at home with her grandchildren.”

Mike laughed at that. “Dad, you’re not old. You’re only 49. Besides, who says you need someone your age? You know what they say—if you’re in this world at the same time, age doesn’t matter. So go with that.”

“If you say, ‘let it all hang out’ I’m hanging up on you,” Quint said.

Mike laughed again. “Okay, okay, I won’t, but can’t you ditch that reception and go party?”

“You go to Tahoe and have a great time, and I’m going to work at a job that’s going to be a killer.”

“I’ll bet you’re even thinking of working on Christmas.”

Without Mike around and with his parents away, Quint would be alone. “It’s just another day.”

“What about on your birthday?”

Quint seldom thought about birthdays, and this one was no exception. “It’s just another day,” he repeated.

“It’s New Year’s and it’s your birthday.”

“Why waste a perfectly good day?”

“I don’t think you remember how to have fun,” Mike said, then chuckled ruefully. “I guess, with it being Christmas and all, I was hoping for a miracle.”

“I don’t need a miracle. I’m fine.”

“I hope so,” Mike murmured, then said, “Merry Christmas, Dad.”

“Merry Christmas, son,” Quint said, then turned off the phone and slipped it into one of the inside pockets of his tuxedo.

Mike would learn soon enough that there were no miracles in this life. Quint had learned that the hard way.

Chapter One

Four hours later

Quint left the gold and silver shimmer of the huge room on the corporate level at LynTech behind him. He closed the doors on the Christmas music and chatter blending in a strange rhythm and went out into the broad corridor. If he hadn't quit smoking years ago, he would have lit up and let the acrid smoke fill his lungs, perhaps dispersing the frustration and sense of wasted time that dogged him at these events. And with jet lag mixed in, he was ready to make his escape.

He'd needed to make contact, to get a sense of the place, a sense of the people, but it was time to leave. He nodded to a couple going in, got a blast of the noise as the doors opened, then there was just the quiet of conversation farther down the hallway as the doors closed. He looked in that direction and saw three or four people waiting by the elevators. Robert Lewis, the founder of LynTech, and a dapper man with white hair, was deep in conversation with his daughter, Brittany, a stunning woman with flame hair and exquisite green eyes. To her right stood Matt Terrel, one half of the CEO position at LynTech, a sandy-haired man the size of a linebacker. Wedged between Brittany and Terrel and hugging both of them, was the nine-year-old boy who had been hanging around all evening, Anthony, in a miniature tux.

The four people looked happy enough, very close, but he wasn't about to get near them. He'd talked to Robert earlier that evening to discuss his original vision for LynTech, but had ended up hearing all about his problems with Brittany. Right then the elevator arrived and the doors slid open.

Anthony grabbed Brittany and Matt by their hands, tugging them into the elevator, followed by Robert who turned as the doors started to close. Quint caught the older man's eye long enough to see Robert smile at him, then the barrier shut and Quint was alone in the corridor.

He headed down past the bank of elevators and went directly to the exit door for the stairs. He pushed it back, and his dress shoes tapped on the metal stairs as he headed down to the bottom floor. He was a bit amazed at the congeniality he'd just witnessed, considering the mood Robert had been in an hour ago. Back then, he'd been very upset over Brittany's attitude and actions.

"My Brittany just can't focus, she can't seem to settle," the man had said. "She runs here and there. She's started so many university courses, so many majors that it's ludicrous, then she just walks away. I'd hoped that getting her to come to work here would help, and I thought it had, but now..." He'd shaken his head as if he'd lost all hope. "I've tried, but I admit that I'm at a loss."

Quint had never been the sort that people opened up to and confided in, partly because he wouldn't have done that with

someone else. He'd learned to keep his distance to make working with people easier, and he really had no answers for anyone's personal life. With the exception of Mike, he'd made a mess out of his personal life.

His hand skimmed over the coldness of the metal handrail as he rounded the corner on the stairs. He'd told Robert to do what any parent did—his best. That was when the conversation had gone beyond what he wanted to discuss. "I've tried, but how I wish her mother was still alive." Robert had exhaled, a sound that was more of a sigh tinged with a shadow of sorrow. "I think I missed having her mother there more than Brittany did." Yes, sorrow. "I heard you'd raised your boy alone, so you understand."

Quint kept going down, level by level. Robert's comment had struck an unexpectedly still-raw nerve in Quint. Whatever mistakes he had made with Mike wouldn't have been righted if Gwen had stuck around. But Robert had obviously loved his dead wife. Quint couldn't relate to that and had been unnerved that the old bitterness about what had happened so many years ago had reared its ugly head.

He went down more quickly, the movement doing nothing to stop the thoughts that came to him in a rush. Plunging into a hurried marriage with Gwen when she'd informed him she was pregnant had begun the nightmare. Then there had been that long year when Michael had been born and Gwen had realized that not only did she not like being a wife or mother, but she wasn't even going to go through the motions. She'd left with little more

than a glance back and a thin explanation about being worried she'd end up hating both him and Michael if she stayed.

Before Robert had been able to say the usual when Quint had told him he was divorced—how sorry he was to hear about Gwen leaving, and how sorry he was that Quint had had to raise Michael alone—Quint had pleaded jet lag and gone to get another drink, which hadn't helped at all. And neither had the next drink. That's when he'd known he'd had to get out of there. He was ditching the party, just as Mike had suggested, but he wasn't going to “find some sexy woman and go with the flow.”

He slowed slightly. Instead of celebrating Christmas, he was going to work on the company prospectus and start his planning. Being brought in as a growth consultant meant a lot of research. Instead of getting crazy for the New Year, he'd probably have an early dinner, get his files in order and ring the New Year in studying financial profiles. He wouldn't be looking for any miracle beyond the miracle of helping a faltering, previously family-owned business become a viable, thriving corporation.

He reached the lobby level, and stopped, took a deep breath, once, twice, then pulled back the door and stepped out into a side area off the main reception space. He glanced past the elevators, past the glitter of Christmas that seemed to be everywhere in gold and silver, and saw clusters of people waiting for their cars to be brought around to the front. Limos lined the curb out in front and a bar had been set up near a stunning Christmas tree.

He spotted several people he'd been introduced to during

the evening in the crowd, but he had no desire to renew any conversation with them. So, turning his back to the crowds, he discovered a hallway that seemed to lead to the rear of the building and probably a secondary exit. He'd head out that way, forego the company-provided limousine and grab the first taxi he spotted to get back to the hotel.

"If you do that, you'll be sorry, Charlie. I swear, you'll pay and you'll pay big-time. And that's a promise!"

The voice seemed to come out of nowhere, and even though it wasn't terribly loud, it came to him over the drone of voices behind him. Maybe it was the passionate intensity in every word, he didn't know, but it made him stop and turn to see where it was coming from.

There were double doors across from the elevators, one true blue, one bright red, and both shared a rainbow logo splashed across them—Just for Kids. It had to be the new location for the company child-care center, a place he'd avoided earlier when tours were being formed to see the facility.

"Charlie, you're vermin!" the voice said and he could tell it was coming from beyond the red door, which was slightly ajar. He couldn't hear whether or not Charlie was defending himself, but he could definitely hear the woman. "If I let you live, and at this point in time, that's a big if, you're going to pay for this."

He went closer to the door. The voice, touched with a slight huskiness even through the frustration and anger, was starting to intrigue him...really intrigue him. There was the promise of

murder and mayhem in the words, but the voice could have been sexy if the words had been different. That thought was shattered when he eased back the red door and glanced inside the facility as the woman ground out, “You rat! You miserable rat!” Not sexy at all at that moment.

He looked down a short, wide hallway to the center of the facility where twinkling lights seemed to be everywhere, and the scent of baking gingerbread drifted on the air. He couldn’t see anyone, but the voice was still there, somewhere ahead of where he stood.

“If you move, if you so much as turn, it’s going to be your last move.” The words were lower now, a bit muffled. “My panty hose are history, just ruined.” There was a tearing sound, and the woman gasped, “My dress! Oh, great! Now it’s ruined, too, and it’s not even mine! Jenn is going to be as mad as I am. You’ll have her to deal with after I’m through with you.”

This was none of his business, nothing to him if employees or guests got drunk and made out in the day-care center, then had a horrendous fight. Torn dresses, ruined panty hose and threats of murder—none of that stopped him going farther into the center until he could see that the twinkling lights were draped all over a climbing-frame tree that stood dead in the middle of the huge main room. Massive branches that probably masked climbing trails spread to four corners and into what looked like four separate tree houses suspended under a domed ceiling over the carpeted floor.

He was beginning to feel suspiciously like a voyeur and would have left right then if he hadn't seen movement high in the center of the tree. It was a quick movement, little more than a flashing image of a woman with dark hair and her back to him. Then she was gone, but the voice was still there, echoing in the gingerbread-tinged air.

"What a waste, the dress, the panty hose, the stupid gingerbread family! I thought it would work. Well, color me wrong, very wrong."

He smiled as he moved a bit closer, the voice drawing him as surely as the words she uttered. Then there was more movement at the bottom of the tree, and he could have sworn he saw a bare foot coming out of an arched hole in the trunk. It was a foot, then another, coming out soles-first, followed by an expanse of legs tangled in some material that could have been ice blue, but the lights were too low to let him see if he was right or not.

What he did know was that a woman was backing out of an arched hole in the tree trunk on her hands and knees. She was slowly inching out, showing a swell of slender hips, and all the time muttering. "Well, never again. Once burned, that's it with me. You've run out of chances, Charlie."

A narrow waist, then she was out with her back to him. But he could see that she was tiny, slender, and when she shook her head, hair the color of night tumbled around her bare shoulders and partway down her back. He remembered hearing somewhere that long hair was sexy on a woman, but he hadn't realized the

truth of it until that moment. Sexy. Damn sexy. As sexy as the way the fine material of her dress defined a tiny waist, clung to her hips and the ripped hem tangled with her slender legs.

Lucky Charlie, he thought, as something stirred in him, something so basic and sexual, that it startled him. He hadn't felt anything like this for a woman for what seemed ages, if ever. No matter what his son thought, he'd had a personal life, but right then he knew that he'd never let himself really go.

Just find some sexy woman and go with the flow? Let it happen. Relax. Chill out.

Looking at the woman, he thought that maybe it was time to just go with the flow, to let whatever happened happen and not look back. He was on his own. He wasn't protecting anyone anymore. He wasn't looking for a miracle. He was looking at a woman who stirred him, and he hadn't even seen her face.

He would have spoken then, said something to get her to turn so he could see her face. As if on cue, she started to turn, one arm tucked out of sight in front of her. Quint literally felt his breath catch in his chest with anticipation as he took in her profile, the elegant sweep of her throat, a small chin, softly parted lips, a tiny nose, improbably long lashes.

Then she faced him, her features filled with delicate beauty that he knew could haunt a man's dreams. When she saw him, dark eyes widened with shock, and in the next second, she screamed, her hands flew up, and something came flying through the air toward Quint.

Amy Blake hadn't known there was anyone else in the day-care center until she'd turned and found a tall, lean stranger, all in black, no more than two feet from where she stood by the tree. The world suddenly moved in slow motion as her first thought was to protect herself. And that meant instinctively thrusting out her hands to ward the man off. That's when Charlie, the fat black-and-white pet rat, flew out of her hands and sailed through the air, headed right for the stranger.

Her second thought was that no matter what misery the animal had caused her by getting loose right before she began to close up and leave, she was sending him to his death. His little legs were flailing as he flew through the air, right at the stranger's chest.

She lunged in an effort to save the poor animal from meeting a horrible end, and realized the stranger was moving, too, right at her. In a heartbeat he had the rat in both hands, but she couldn't stop her own momentum any more than he could stop his. She was as out of control as Charlie had been a split second ago, but she wasn't being caught and rescued. Instead, she hit the stranger, tangling with him, feeling a stinging blow at her forehead, inhaling a jumble of scents, from gingerbread to aftershave, all layered with body heat.

The momentum kept up, the uncontrolled tumbling with the man until she hit the ground, felt the back of her head make contact with the floor, gasping as the man seemed to be everywhere. In the next heartbeat she twisted and the world stopped. All motion ceased. She'd gone from flying wildly into

a stranger, to lying on top of the stranger on the floor with her eyes tightly closed.

She could literally feel his heart beating, and it took her a second to define the fact that her breasts were pressed to his chest, that his body was under hers, a hard, lean body, filled with heat and strength. A horrid thought—she hadn't been this close to a man since Rob had died—was there before she could stop it. All she had to do was open her eyes and see the man, but she couldn't. She wouldn't.

She pushed back then opened her eyes and was thankful that the man was little more than a blur of darkness to her. His hand was on her arm, his fingers all but burning her skin, and she tried to jerk free. But he wasn't imprisoning her, just holding her, and the motion of pulling hard sent her to her right, and she fell sideways onto the carpet.

She closed her eyes again, so tightly that colors exploded behind her eyes. She gasped for air, while her mind raced. Just explain that she was tired, that Charlie was important to Taylor and the other kids at the center, and that she was ready to leave. That was all true. Very true. Weariness ate at her, weariness that sleep didn't dispel, when she could sleep.

“Whoa, lady,” the man uttered in a deep, rough voice touched by a faint Texas twang.

She kept her eyes closed for a long moment, then scrambled to her feet, her chest tightening as she finally opened her eyes to look at the man. He was flat on his back on the floor, and

his image was painfully clear to her, from the thick dark hair streaked with gray brushed back from a face with sharp features, a full, graying mustache and a strong jaw. But it was the eyes that caught her attention and held it. They were dark eyes, partially shadowed, narrowed as they looked up at her, yet capable of making her heart lurch in her chest. It didn't help that they were crinkled at the corners from humor, the same humor that made the mustache twitch above a mouth with a decidedly sensuous bottom lip.

She looked away quickly, not prepared to be so instantly uneasy with a man, especially with a man who was smiling at her. No, it wasn't exactly uneasiness she felt. As her eyes ran down his lean frame, over the perfectly cut tuxedo, she knew that she was disturbed. Very disturbed, and she was embarrassed by it while he lay on the floor laughing. She was also embarrassed by her own clumsy stupidity. She felt heat rising to her face.

"I am so sorry, I mean, really sorry," she said in a rush, crouching down by him as she held out her hand to help him up. "You scared me and I didn't think. Poor Charlie, I sure didn't mean to throw him at you like that."

"Poor Charlie is right," he murmured in a low rumble.

"Poor Charlie is—" Horror shot through her. "Charlie!" Instead of taking his hand, she grabbed at the shoulder of his tuxedo, tugging with all her strength to move him quickly. But it was like trying to move the Rock of Gibraltar. "Oh, God," she gasped. "Charlie—you're killing him. Move, get off of him!"

He moved then, scrambling away from her and the rip of material was jumbled with frantic movement, then her own sigh of relief when she saw the carpet under where the stranger had lain. The only thing there was the vague imprint of his body on the new carpeting.

Relief almost left her giddy, and she exhaled in a rush as she sank back to sit on her heels. “Oh, thank goodness,” she said on a relieved sigh. “You didn’t kill him.”

“Kill him?” he asked from right beside her. “You’re the one who threw him at me.”

“I know, I know, but I thought you were lying on him. Crushing him.” She shuddered. “I was sure he was a goner.”

“All of this concern seems odd coming from someone who was threatening him with murder a few minutes ago.”

“Well, sure, but I didn’t want him dead.”

That brought unexpected laughter from the man as he crouched right in front of her. She looked into those eyes and saw they were a rich hazel filled with flashing humor. “I’ll take your word for that, but either way, neither one of us committed raticide.”

“Raticide?”

“The murder of a rat? I thought that was going to happen when you threw the thing at me, right before you attacked me.”

“Attacked you?” She scrambled backward, grabbing at the tree trunk to get to her feet. But as she stood, he was on his feet, too, right in front of her. “No way. You’re the one who scared

the bewaddle out of me by sneaking up on me like that.”

A grin came with her words, a grin that stunned her when she realized how seductive an expression it was. She was more tired than she'd ever dreamed. “Bewaddle?” he asked. “Lady, you're definitely going to have to define bewaddle for me.”

She brushed at her hair as it tangled around her face, regretting taking it out of the clips when she'd thought she was leaving. “Bewaddle is...well,” she began with a shrug. “It means you really scared me so badly that I...I wasn't responsible for what I did, and I wasn't attacking you, I was trying to save poor Charlie.”

“So, bewaddle made you throw a rat at me?” he asked with mock seriousness. “And saving him meant you attacked me?”

“Oh, for Pete's sake, I never—” She remembered what she was doing to begin with, before this man ripped into her world and turned it and her on their collective ears. “If you weren't lying on Charlie, then where is he?” She turned from the grin and scanned the center.

“If he's not dead, he's loose,” the man said.

She glanced back at him, at that smile that seemed a permanent fixture, and immediately regretted her next words. “And it's all your fault.”

She turned from him, embarrassed to be so petty at the moment, and she wasn't prepared for him to touch her. His fingers pressed heat to her arm, and she jerked back and around to face him again. “Lady, we should all be thankful you aren't sitting on any jury trying me,” he drawled. “Hell, you'd give me

the death penalty for jaywalking.”

She barely knew him, but she knew for sure that she'd never vote to stop whatever time he had left on earth. “I'm sorry,” she said. “This has just been the most awful evening. There was so much work and so many people crawling out of the woodwork asking the dumbest questions. I tried, I even made a gingerbread family thing, and that drove Charlie crazy. He loves gingerbread. And my dress...” She brushed the tear in the skirt. “It's not even mine, I mean, my—” She bit her lip, not about to explain anything else to this man. A stranger. She didn't even know his name. “Listen Mr....?”

“Gallagher, Quint Gallagher.”

She stared at him. Quint Gallagher? Oh, no! Gallagher, the planner, the man brought in from New York by Matt Terrel to map LynTech's future. The man who, so she'd heard, had refused to go on one of the tours of the center they'd arranged for this reception. And she'd thrown a rat at him, knocked him over and accused him of killing that same rat. “Oh, Mr. Gallagher, I didn't know.”

“Stop. Let's just start all over again.” He held out his hand. “I'm Quint Gallagher.”

She would gladly start all over again, but when she slipped her hand into his, she knew that whatever was spooking her tonight was just getting worse. She had to try twice to say her own name. “Blake...Amy.”

“What goes first?” he asked, his gaze flicking over her as he

kept his hold on her hand.

She drew back on the pretext of smoothing the dress she'd borrowed from her sister-in-law. "Amy...that's first."

"Amy Blake. And you're here because...?"

"I was giving tours of the center to the people invited for the reception."

He eyed her again. "A professional tour guide?"

"No, I work here in the center, and right now, I need to find the rat."

"No, he found you," Quint said and pointed down at her feet. Sitting on the carpet, right between the two of them, was Charlie methodically licking his paws then cleaning first one ear and then the other. "And if you don't move, I think your worries are over," he murmured in a half whisper.

Slowly, he sank down to his haunches and Amy watched with fascination as he reached out strong, tanned hands, easing them cautiously toward the rat. He cupped his hands around and behind the rat, then closed them around the animal. Charlie squealed once, then Quint stood with the rat at his chest, just the head peeking out and the nose twitching in the air. "Okay, Amy, show me the cage."

"I'll get it," she said and hurried around the tree and back to her office, trying to ignore the way the ruined skirt of her dress was riding up on her thighs with each step she took. She flipped on the overhead light and crossed to her cluttered desk where she'd left the metal cage. Grabbing the wire handle, she turned

and ran right into Quint behind her. Heat, muscle, fine material, that aftershave, all mingled, and she gasped. “Good heavens,” she said as she moved back, her hips pressing against the edge of the desk to help her keep her balance. Amazingly, she didn’t drop the cage, but the handle began to bite into her hand as she saw that smile again, that slow, seductive curve to his lips. “That is a horrible habit you’ve got there,” she muttered, not daring to move because she didn’t want to touch him again.

“Well, catching rats isn’t my idea of a habit,” he drawled while Charlie cuddled in his hands against his chest. Even the rat liked the guy. Damn that amusement deepening in his eyes.

“No, you sneak up on people.” She turned from him, plunking the cage back on the desk, then she turned to take Charlie out of the man’s hands. “I’ll take him,” she said, and reached for Charlie, being very careful to make as little contact with Quint as possible.

She didn’t reckon on the man’s heat being in the rat’s fur as she cupped Charlie and eased him through the door of the cage. She set him down, then snapped the clip to secure the door. She stared at the rat instead of turning back to Quint as he spoke.

“I wasn’t sneaking anywhere the first time. I heard you talking to Charlie, and I thought...” The sudden chuckle was rich and deep and disturbing. “Lady, why don’t you just forget what I thought. Everything’s turned out just fine.”

Well, it wasn’t just fine. She was harried and tired, and feeling just a bit sick about being near a man who so disturbed her. She

seldom noticed men. Even before Rob, she'd walked past most men in this life. Then Rob had shown up in her world. He'd been the other part of her soul, and she knew that the wait had been worth it.

This wasn't happening to her. She wouldn't let it. She didn't want it. "Never mind. It's late," she said softly, then turned as he moved back half a step.

"Would you do me a favor?"

"I don't know what favor I could do for you." She edged around him as she spoke, making it past without touching, and headed for the door to go out into the main area. He was there, she felt him behind her, and she kept going toward the tree.

"Amy?" he said right behind her as she stopped by the tree.

She touched the painted bark with one hand, the hand with her wedding ring on it. The gold band glinted in the twinkle of lights, and it centered her. Grounded her. As she turned to Quint, she felt a control that she hadn't felt since he'd walked in on her. "I'm sorry, what was that favor?"

"I missed a tour of this place earlier, and I thought since you're here and I'm here, I wouldn't mind looking around."

She clasped her hands behind her back and relished the feel of her ring, smooth and warm and comforting. "Well, if you really want to. Where did you want to start?"

He shrugged, the action testing the fine material of his tux jacket. "Surprise me," he said in a low voice that ran riot over her nerves.

She turned to avoid looking at him and to concentrate on the center, but as she turned, she realized that the fragrance of baking gingerbread coming from the new oven in the redone kitchen had become a pungent odor. And smoke was seeping out through the swinging door of the kitchen.

Chapter Two

Quint didn't realize what was going on until Amy turned and sprinted barefoot across the room, then he saw the smoke. She burst through swinging doors and disappeared as smoke spilled out into the room. He ran after her, heading for the smoke, and suddenly a sound split the air—a smoke alarm.

He cursed himself for being so distracted by the woman and the rat that he hadn't noticed anything else. Instead of paying attention, he'd been trying to figure out if Mike's advice was worth taking. The damn building could be burning down around him, and he was trying to figure out if he should go for it and ask Amy out for a drink, stalling for time by asking her to give him a tour of the place. He shoved back the door and stepped into a room filled with smoke.

“Amy!” he called above the alarm, coughing when he took a breath.

Quint heard a scream, a crash, and he dove into the smoke as someone behind him called out, “What's going on?”

Through coughing, Amy's disembodied voice came from inside the room, “Gingerbread.”

There was movement behind him, then a motor started up and the smoke began to thin dramatically. Quint spotted Amy crouching on the far side of the room by an open oven surrounded by shattered glass from what looked to have once been a dish and

a number of blackened, smoking lumps. He went to her, dropped to his haunches and made himself not touch her. That scream had shocked him, followed by his reaction that something had happened to her.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She stared at the mess in front of her, coughing again before she answered him. “Yes, I’m fine.”

Someone else was there, rushing around doing something to controls on the wall. But all he could focus on was Amy and the charred mess between them. “The gingerbread family, I take it?”

“Exactly.” Amy waved at the air in front of her as if she could disperse the last of the smoke. “I was baking them to show off the oven and to make this place smell nice. You know, the trick Realtors use to make houses more inviting? Bake cookies or something that smells great? Well, I had some dough left, so I put them in to take home with me when I went, and I forgot all about them.”

“The family’s toast,” he murmured.

She looked at him, grimacing. “That’s terrible.”

“Sorry.”

“So am I,” she muttered as she frowned at the broken glass all around them. “I’d hoped the smell of it baking would cover the paint and new carpet smells and people would think the place was homey and nice.” The alarm stopped as she added, “What a mess.”

He watched her in profile, and didn’t miss the slight

unsteadiness in her chin. “For what it’s worth, it worked. That’s the first thing I smelled when I came in.”

She looked up at him. “Then the smoke, huh? I can’t believe I got so distracted.” She bit her lip, then finished. “Charlie has one more thing to answer for.”

She stood, then turned to the guard who was coming toward them through the haze of smoke lingering in the room. “Sorry, Walt, the gingerbread is a bit overdone. I hope this didn’t mess up things too badly for you.”

“No, I got to the sprinkler control before they came on and I got a couple of fans going. The smoke’s almost gone.” He went over to a central range with a huge hood over it and flipped a switch. Another fan roared to life. “I’ll leave them on for an hour or so, then check back here.” He turned to Amy and Quint. “Meanwhile, I’ll get maintenance in here to clean this up.”

“No, please don’t,” Amy said as she stood. “I did it. I’ll clean it up.”

“Whatever you say, ma’am,” Walt said. “You two okay?”

“We’re fine,” Quint said and then heard glass crunch under the man’s shoes as he turned and left. “Where are the brooms kept?” he asked Amy.

“I’ll get them,” she said, and she would have if he hadn’t stopped her by capturing her upper arm and stopping her before she could take a step.

“Don’t move,” he said, trying to block out the pleasure of her soft skin under his hand.

He drew back as she turned to him. "What are you doing?"

"Stopping you from getting cut." He pointed to her bare feet.

"There's glass all over this place. I've got shoes on. You stay put and tell me where the supplies are."

She glanced down, then back up at him, her lashes partially shadowing her deep-brown eyes. "I never thought..." She bit her lip. "The broom is in the closet to the right of the door over there." She pointed behind her. "There's a dustpan, too, and a bucket of some sort to put the pieces in."

As Quint crossed to the cupboard, he heard glass crunch under his shoes, too. He got the broom, pan and bucket, then went back to where Amy stood very still. He handed her the pan. "Just hold this and don't move your feet."

"I never thought of that," she said as she crouched down and he started to sweep the pieces into the dustpan. "Thanks."

"No problem," he said, sweeping the shards into the pan. By the time the floor was clear, the smoke was gone, but the odor still lingered. "You stay here," Quint told her as he went to put back the equipment, and when he turned she was where he'd left her, her hair mussed, her feet bare, her dress torn and little or no makeup on her face. Not only was she beautiful at that moment, but she made his decision for him. Mike had been right after all. He needed this, a diversion, some time off to "go with the flow."

He went back to her, and she coughed softly. "Thank goodness everyone had pretty much left before that happened." She looked up at him and said, "If anything had happened to this center,

after everything everyone's gone through..." She sighed heavily. "I don't know what I would have done."

Not willing to think back to that moment of sheer horror when she'd disappeared into the smoke, he tried to make a joke. "If anyone asks about it, do what you said you were going to do, blame it on the rat."

She looked at him, and for the first time since he'd glimpsed her, she was smiling. Not hugely, but a soft lifting of her pale lips, and there was a sparkle deep in her dark eyes that accompanied that touch of humor in her. It made him wish he could see her smile fully realized. "Poor Charlie, how do you suppose I convince everyone that the rat burned the gingerbread family?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Well, lady, my theory is, if a mouse can own one of the biggest theme parks in the world, a rat could have done this."

His wish came true and she smiled at him, really smiled, and the sight of it literally made his breath catch in his chest. Beautiful? Was that what he thought? This woman was beyond beautiful. "I guess that's why they pay you the big bucks, huh?" she asked.

"What?" he asked, his thinking not exactly clear at that moment.

"Coming up with ideas to fix what's going on in this place. I think they called you a 'visionary,' and I know that visionaries don't come cheaply, at least not in this world. So, solutions equal

big bucks.”

“I just do a job,” he said, noticing the faint touch of a dimple to the left of her mouth. Just the suggestion of a dimple. “That’s all.”

She exhaled, and the smile started to fade a bit, something he regretted greatly. “It’s time to leave, before I really burn this place down,” she said and looked down at the floor. “I hope all the glass is gone, because with my luck today, I’ll find the last piece, cut myself and really make a mess.”

“Amy, you’re brilliant. As a visionary, I can see you’re absolutely right. You’ll do that very thing.” She frowned slightly, as if trying to figure out where he was going with this. “And since I’m being paid big bucks to keep this company on the right path, I figure that keeping an employee from hurting herself is all part of the job description, and one of the reasons I make all those big bucks.”

He went closer to her as he spoke, so close he could see that there was a deep amber burst around the pupils of her eyes.

“Mr. Gallagher—” she started, but he stopped her.

“It’s Quint, and let me earn my money.” Before she could evade him, he picked her up. She was as light as a feather, but a feather wouldn’t have twisted the minute he held it, or gasped with shock as he caught it high in his arms.

“Put me down,” she was saying, but he was busy trying to absorb the way the fascination he’d had with her from the start was transforming into a basic need to keep this contact.

“Not in here,” he said.

She felt soft and warm and smelled like burnt gingerbread and flowers. Her hair tickled his face as she wiggled around, pressed one hand to his chest and looked him right in the eyes, her face inches from his own. “You do not have to do this.”

He did, but he couldn’t explain to her why he did. He couldn’t explain it to himself. “Oh yes I do,” he said, carrying her across the room to the door. “It’s for the good of LynTech.”

“Oh, come on,” she muttered, finally stilling in his arms.

“Oh, yes, if you cut your foot, you’ll go on disability and lose time, and the company will lose your work time, and you can see that we’ll all be headed down the road to ruin.”

She stared at him as they went out into the main room, then suddenly that smile came back. “You’re ridiculous, you know?”

“I’ve been called worse than that,” he said. There was carpet underfoot now, but he kept going with her, taking her over to the tree before he even considered letting her go. And when he let her down, he had to quite literally keep himself from reaching out to brush at the hair clinging to her cheeks as she stood to face him.

“You’ve earned your big bucks,” she said, her face slightly flushed, probably from all the excitement.

He was going to ask her out for drinks or coffee or something. Anything to prolong this evening. “We’ve got our stories straight, right?”

“What?”

“You’re pulling a Watergate. You need to blame someone else

for all of this, and Charlie is an excellent scapegoat.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, Watergate? Sure, of course. Boy, that’s pretty ancient history, isn’t it?”

Ancient history? It had happened during his college years. He looked at her then, really looked at her, beyond that incredible sensuality that rocked him, beyond the voice and the eyes. She was young. It hadn’t even hit him before. He’d been too busy “going with the flow” and with everything else. “Very ancient,” he murmured, then found himself saying, “How old are you?”

He hadn’t meant to ask that bluntly, but it was out there and he waited. “How old are you?” she countered without batting an eye.

“Let’s put it this way, I was there when ancient history was made.” He tried to joke, but it seemed flat in his own ears.

She smiled again. “Well, if you were there for the Civil War, I want to know if Scarlett and Rhett ever got back together?”

Her smile was melting his reason—big-time. “I never met the lady, but rumor has it that she kept Tara and lost that Butler fellow.”

“Too bad. I heard he was pretty cool.”

If you’re in this world at the same time, age doesn’t matter, Mike had said, and looking at Amy right then just solidified that for him. Besides, he wasn’t looking to “settle down” or anything like that. Drinks, talk, a bit of fun, a diversion. Time out of time. If Mike were here, he’d call this decision a miracle. Quint just called it a good idea. “And I bet he got paid big bucks, too.”

She laughed then, really laughed, and the sound floated around

him and seemed to seep into his being. God, it felt wonderful. He wanted to ask her out right then, but he felt almost as uncertain as a teenager as to how to go about it. He was out of practice with this dating thing. But she seemed like such a perfect person to start practicing with.

“I bet he did,” Amy said, then sighed. “Thanks for everything, including the lesson in excuses. Now, I need to get going.”

It was now or never. “It’s getting late, but I wanted to ask you something,” he said quickly, before she could just take off.

Amy had barely recovered from him carrying her, from that sense of being supported and surrounded. She hadn’t realized until the moment Quint picked her up that she sorely missed that sort of contact. The strength of a man, the scent of a man. She pushed the thought away. That was a foolish path to take. That was part of the past, not here and now. “What?”

“Would you like to go somewhere and recover?” he asked in his low, rough drawl. “We can have drinks or food, or both, and work on your defense some more.”

He couldn’t be asking her out. No, he wasn’t. She probably looked like she needed a stiff drink. She knew she felt as if she could use one. “I don’t think so.”

“Listen, I’ll be honest with you. I’m no good at small talk or playing games. I never have been.” His hazel eyes narrowed on her. “I’ll just say this right out. I’m attracted to you, and I’d like to get to know you better.”

She stared at him, her heart starting to beat faster, and she

pressed her hand to it, a futile action that made no difference to her heartbeat. She touched her tongue to her cold lips. “No, thanks. I’m sorry.”

He glanced down to her hand pressed to her chest, and everything changed when he shook his head. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I had no idea that you were married. I’m more out of practice than I thought.”

Married. Oh, God. She could feel her stomach tense, and sickness rise in the back of her throat. He was looking at her wedding band, the simple gold ring that Rob had given her three years ago. The ring she’d never taken off since he’d put it there. She lowered her hand, pushing it behind her back and clenching her hand so tightly that the ring pressed into her fingers.

Quint was watching her, waiting, and she didn’t have a clue what to say or do. She could let him just believe she was married and he’d leave. It seemed like such a simple solution to stop whatever was going on. But she couldn’t lie.

She took a partial step back. The words were there, but she found them as hard to say now as she had right after Rob had died. Touching her tongue to her lips, she swallowed hard and made herself say them. “I’m...I’m a widow.”

The look that came to everyone’s eyes when they found out about Rob’s death was there in his. Pity, sympathy. She hated it, but she could deal with it. What she couldn’t deal with was Quint being so close, so close that when he spoke again, she could have sworn that she felt his breath brush her cold cheeks.

“Boy, I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

“Of course you didn’t,” she said, her voice vaguely tight now. “It’s getting late.” As she spoke, she turned to get more space between them, but that simple act backfired when her foot tangled with the silver slingback heels she’d left by the tree when she’d had to crawl inside to get Charlie.

Quint had her by her upper arm, gently easing her back, and she was facing him, inches separating them, and there was no way she could ignore him. Trying to ignore him at that moment would be about as easy as walking on water for her. So she stood very still, tried not to inhale too deeply and tried very hard to think realistically to explain her scattered emotions right then.

She was lonely. She’d been lonely for what seemed forever—or at least since the car accident that had taken Rob’s life. And she wasn’t having a good evening. Quint just happened to be here, and he was a man. A man who happened to make her remember more of what she’d lost than she’d remembered until now.

“Are you okay?” he was asking.

She wanted to pull back and free herself from his touch, hoping that would help her think more clearly. But she was embarrassed enough by all of this and not about to make any more of a scene than she already had. “I promise you that I’m not self-destructive, and I don’t usually need help staying on my feet.”

“That’s good to know.” He exhaled and she felt the vibration through his hand and into her arm. “Amy, let me be totally honest

about this,” he said in a low voice. “I told you I’m not good at this. I’m way out of practice.” That suggestion of a smile was there, but now it was tinged with what could have been uncertainty. “I’d like to sit and talk with you, just get to know you.”

He drew back from her, his hand letting her go, but without physical contact he was still affecting her on some level that she didn’t want to admit. She didn’t want to feel heat and she didn’t want to feel an aching loneliness. She was being pulled into something that terrified her, and all she wanted was to be out of there and away from Quint. “I’m not dating now,” she blurted out.

He was just inches from her, his eyes narrowing on her. “That’s a shame,” he murmured as his gaze flicked over her and her stomach clenched. “But I understand. It’s too soon?”

Honestly, she’d never thought of ever dating again. That wasn’t in her plans. She’d had love once, real love, and she knew that only came to a person once in a lifetime. “I just don’t date.” She felt her wedding ring almost biting into her from clenching her hands at her sides. She had Taylor, worked ten-hour days and didn’t think too much about what she didn’t have. She didn’t want to start now. “I’m really too busy.”

“I understand about work,” he said, but he didn’t make any move to leave.

“Work and other things,” she murmured as she scooped up her shoes and looped the straps over her fingers. “And on top of everything, I haven’t gotten all my Christmas shopping done.”

“That’s a big chore?”

She fingered her shoes nervously, shrugging. “With a two-year-old, everything is a big chore.”

“A niece, a nephew, brother, sister?”

“A daughter, Taylor.”

Words that made her smile did the opposite to Quint. They brought a slight frown, killing that shadow of a smile that she’d thought was semipermanent with the man. He glanced at his watch, then back at her, and it was as if a curtain had dropped between them. “You’re right, it’s time to go,” he said. “It’s late, and I’m keeping you from your shopping.”

It was what she’d wanted, him leaving, but she didn’t count on it being so disconcerting for her. Then she realized what was happening, something she should be very grateful for, but something that almost made her angry. “That’s why you didn’t take the tour earlier, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t have the time to take any tours.”

That didn’t wash with her. He was here now, killing time, and obviously in no hurry until he’d found out she had a child. “You don’t like kids, do you?”

“Oh, lady,” he said with a chuckle, but it had little humor in it. “You’re way off the mark with that.”

“You didn’t do the tour, and now that you know that I have a child, all bets are off?” That sounded ridiculous to her, but it made sense. “So you’re going to say good-night, and goodbye and walk out.”

“You said you didn’t date, so I guessed you didn’t want to go

and have a drink.”

“But you—” She bit her lip to cut off the words, stunned that she was arguing with him, when he was set to do what she wanted him to do—leave. “You’re right. I don’t.”

He hesitated, then said, “Let’s leave it at that. I’m right and you don’t.”

She hated it, but wasn’t going to argue anymore. She just wanted him to go. “Okay. Thanks again for your help.”

“Sure, and merry Christmas. Good luck with this place.”

“Merry Christmas and good luck with your new job.”

He looked at her, hesitated, then said, “Can I ask you one more thing?”

She braced herself, but asked, “What now?”

“How are you with plant identification?”

“Excuse me?”

“Plants.” He nodded above them, and she looked up to see the sprig of mistletoe that Anthony, the boy who had latched onto Matt and B.J. had put up earlier. He’d said he wanted to get Matt and B.J. in here to stand under it. Now Quint was pointing at it above them. “Is that mistletoe?”

“Yes, but...”

Her words died on her lips when he took a step closer to her, so very close, then one finger touched her chin, a single contact point, yet it robbed her of all her strength to move away from it. The world slowed for the second time that night, but her mind raced. This couldn’t be happening. It couldn’t be. Not to her. Not

here, not now, not with this stranger.

But it was happening, his head lowering toward hers, then his lips found her lips and a kiss brought her world to a complete stop.

Chapter Three

Pulling back from the impulsive kiss under the mistletoe, then turning away from Amy and leaving, was one of the hardest things Quint had ever done.

But it was the right thing to do. The situation with her wasn't what he'd thought, certainly it wouldn't be possible to do what Mike had said and "go with the flow," not when a child was in the picture. He sure as hell wasn't looking for anything long-term, and anything less than that would definitely affect a small child. He couldn't be part of any passing fling. A two-year-old. God, he remembered Mike at two. A child was to be protected, so a "good time" wasn't an option, at least not for him.

He felt the doors to the center whoosh shut behind him, and he kept walking before anything beyond the need to leave could settle into him. His hesitation before had brought on the kiss, and he knew how thin the ice was that he stood on when he was around Amy.

He entered the lobby where crews were starting to dismantle the temporary bar and take down the banners and reception desks. The guard standing by the front doors was the same man who had burst into the kitchen when the smoke alarm went off.

"Everything okay in there?" the man asked as Quint got close enough to him to read the name Walt on his badge.

Nothing was okay, Quint admitted to himself, but to the man

he said a simple truth that became a fact when he walked away. “Everything’s under control. Thanks for your help.”

“I’ll check it out later, just to make sure.”

“Good idea.” He stopped by the glass doors. “I don’t know if my car’s still waiting for me, or if I’ll need a cab.”

“I’ll check it out for you. What’s your name?”

“Gallagher, Quint Gallagher.”

“Quint Gallagher?”

Quint turned when someone repeated his name, and saw a middle-aged man wearing a tuxedo with what looked like a tie-dyed bow tie at his throat, striding toward him. What was even odder was the ponytail of long graying hair, a number of studs in one ear and the total lack of the “corporate smile” on the man’s face.

The man stopped in front of him. “So, you’re Quint Gallagher?”

“That’s me. And you are?” he asked as the guard went outside to find his ride.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” the man said, but didn’t hold out his hand. “I’m George Armstrong, shareholder, and I’ve got questions for you.”

“Well, Mr. Armstrong, I’m just leaving and it’s late,” Quint said, turning to look out the door and definitely relieved to see the guard motioning a limo to the curb. More corporate talk wasn’t what he wanted right now.

“Your limo?” George asked, glancing past him.

“I think so. Maybe you could call and make an appointment? I’ll be in the executive suites on the top floor, I believe, and you can contact Ms. Donovan. She’s an executive assistant, and she can—”

“I’m leaving now and I could use a ride,” George said, cutting off Quint’s offer. “And since I’m what they call a ‘major stockholder’ in LynTech, I believe, technically, that that limo is partly mine, too.” Quint wasn’t given a chance to challenge that flawed reasoning, because as the man spoke he pushed back the entry door and glanced at Quint with a lifted eyebrow. “So, would you like to join me?”

If it hadn’t been so late, Quint would have told the man to take the limo and have it drive him anywhere he wanted to go, and he’d take a taxi. But if he did that, he’d be stuck here for a while, and Amy was still in the center. And he wanted distance. “I think I will,” he said, and followed George out onto the street.

George spoke all the way to the limo, a blur of words that ran on until they were both in the back seat, then George gave the driver an address. Quint recognized it as an industrial area. “Drop me at the hotel on the way,” he told the driver.

As the limo pulled away from the curb, George started up the talk again. “I spent a great deal of time fighting what we called ‘the establishment’ years ago, until I figured out that joining them beat the heck out of fighting them from the outside. So, I found a company founded on principles and got on board.”

“And your point is?” Quint asked, trying to keep the man

focused.

“The point is, you’ve got a track record for being corporate-oriented, and, from your financial statements filed at LynTech, you’ve made, and continue to make, obscene amounts of money at what you do. But you need to know that LynTech is a special corporation, a corporation formed with vision, not avarice. Mr. Lewis was a throwback to a time when people cared.”

“Mr. Armstrong, I don’t know what you think I’m doing here, but believe me, I’m here to look after the good of the company, not to destroy it.”

“My point exactly,” George said. “And I’ve got some ideas to throw out for you to consider. A few smart things to do.”

Quint knew he’d been smart to leave when he had, and if he hadn’t taken a detour into “never-never land” with Amy, he would have been safely back at the hotel by now. Instead, he was listening to a man with a ponytail tell him what was best for the company. And all the while, all he could think of was how to forget about a stunning woman with a tiny child. That was the real “smart thing to do,” but it was damn hard to accomplish when he was almost certain he could still taste her lips on his.

AMY SANK slowly down to the floor as Quint walked away, her back against the fake tree. Then the doors closed and Quint was gone, leaving her stunned. That she’d let him kiss her was beyond reason, and that he was the one who had drawn back first was humiliating. She scrubbed her hand over her mouth, trying to rid herself of that feeling of his lips against hers. She didn’t

want it.

She reached for her shoes that had fallen to the floor and started to put them on, cursing the fact that her hands were so unsteady that she had trouble redoing the buckle on the strap. She was lonely, and she hated Quint Gallagher for showing it to her so clearly with a careless kiss. That sense of loneliness that she'd avoided like the plague was almost unbearable at that moment.

She hurried with her shoes, trying to kill an anger in her that made no sense. Anger at a stranger. Anger at herself, and anger at Rob for dying. Stupid, stupid, foolish things to have anger over, and she fought against it.

It was as irrational as letting that stranger kiss her. It was as irrational as the fact that she hadn't slapped the man. And as irrational as the tears that burned behind her eyes. A night that had started with such promise had spiraled out of control completely, topped by Quint's appearance in the center.

"Damn you," she muttered, not sure who she was damning at that point in time.

She pulled herself to her feet, swiped at her tangled hair, then pulled out the remaining pins. She took several deep breaths, the need to see her daughter almost choking her. She wanted to hold on to Taylor and make all of this confusion go away. As she turned, she felt her shoe strike something and saw a man's wallet skittering across the carpeting.

She crouched by the wallet and picked up the soft black leather folder. She stood as she flipped it open and saw a New York State

driver's license. Quintin Luther Gallagher, six foot tall, a hundred and seventy-five pounds, and a birthday on January first. His next birthday would make him fifty. She looked at the picture, and saw a man with raw attractiveness, a bit less gray in his hair and mustache—and those eyes. Even in the picture, the eyes seemed able to see right through anything and anyone.

She looked away from it, at a side slot with credit cards, then she opened the back to find money. One-hundred-dollar bills, about a thousand dollars. She closed it, then looked at the door and hesitated. Go after him, she told herself, just take it to him. But something held her in place. An uneasiness at seeing him right then, of meeting his gaze again.

“You fool,” she muttered and knew exactly who she was berating. It wasn't Quint's fault that he took her off balance and kept her there, or made her feel uneasy with the feelings that his look could suggest.

She clutched the wallet and headed toward the doors and in a few seconds, she was out in the lobby where the festivities were almost a memory. Just the beautiful tree still stood there. The rest had been cleared away. The only person she saw was the guard, Walt. He spotted her, smiled and called out, “The building isn't going to burn down, is it?”

She tried to smile and found the expression was easy enough to produce for this man. He certainly didn't bother her, or set her on edge. She crossed to him. “No, thank goodness.”

He looked at the wallet in her hands, then up at her. “What's

going on?”

“I was looking for Mr. Gallagher, tall, gray hair...?”

“I know him. He went out two or three minutes ago with another man.”

She looked out the windows at the street with its garlands on the light posts and potted plants by the doors strung with multi-colored lights. “He’s out—”

“He’s gone. He left in a limo.”

She looked back at Walt. “The company limo?”

“No, ma’am, one of those rentals.”

“I need to contact him. Is there any way to get a phone number for the limousine or find out where it took him?”

“I guess so, from the rental company, but I wouldn’t know which one he used or where he’d be going. What do you need?”

She looked at the wallet. “This fell out of his pocket, and he probably doesn’t even know.” She looked at Walt. “Can you get into the safe?”

“Oh, no, I can’t. I can put it in a desk drawer back there, and that locks, but it’s hardly secure.”

She couldn’t take that chance with the credit cards and a thousand dollars. “I’ll keep it, and if Mr. Gallagher calls or comes back, tell him I have it and...tomorrow, I’ll put it in the company safe. He can pick it up there.”

“Okay, no problem.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “It’s getting late. Aren’t you ready to leave yet?”

“I’m on my way out,” she said.

“I’m heading off for my rounds, so why don’t I walk you out? That parking garage is pretty empty this time of night.”

“Thanks,” she said and headed back to the center with Walt following her. Stopping at the climbing-frame tree, she looked up at the mistletoe, then at Walt. “Can you reach that and take it down?” she asked, pointing to the plant.

“No problem.” The man reached, jumped slightly and grabbed the mistletoe, tugging it free. He held it out to her.

She took the mistletoe gingerly, holding it between her thumb and forefinger. “Thanks,” she muttered as she turned and went back to her office. She dropped the plant in the trash, grabbed her purse and pushed the wallet into it, then turned to get on with her life.

QUINT STOPPED listening to George somewhere between his tirade against the lumbering industry and his involvement in some demonstration in Washington, D.C. Quint’s mind wandered but always came back to that moment under the mistletoe when he’d thought, “What the hell,” and done what he’d thought about from the first glimpse of Amy’s lips. The kiss.

“Well, that went quickly,” George was saying as he touched Quint on the arm.

The limo was stopping, and Quint looked out the tinted windows at the hotel, a towering, glittering glass structure in the Houston night. The driver was at his door, opening it.

“We’ll talk more,” George was saying. “I’ll drop by your office, and we can hash out the resource problem.”

Quint didn't know what the man was talking about, but got out and turned to look back in the limo. "You do that and we will," he murmured, taking the hand George was offering. The man's handshake was strong and sure, then Quint stepped back.

"Merry Christmas, Quint," George said with a smile and a familiarity that Quint had no idea had formed between them.

"Merry Christmas," he echoed and swung the door shut.

He didn't wait for the limo to leave before he turned and went past the valets into the lobby of the hotel, a vast space with not one, but three Christmas trees, two on either side of the reception desk and one huge tree dead in the middle of the marble floor. Quint strode past the middle tree toward the elevators, but at the last minute he saw the bar and veered off toward it.

Going to his room to work had been his plan ever since he'd left the reception, but now that didn't sound very good to him. He needed a drink. He needed to refocus. He slipped onto a high-backed stool in the pub-like bar and ordered a Scotch straight up. A sip of the fiery liquid got his attention, and he exhaled harshly. It was time to head up to the room.

He reached for his wallet, slipping his hand inside the tux jacket. His cell phone was there. The wallet wasn't. He patted the jacket front and didn't feel it. He'd had it earlier. He remembered making the decision to carry it and the cell phone. He'd had it when he'd left the executive suites, because he could remember patting his pocket and feeling it there. And he'd probably had it until the day-care center and all of the calamities there, from the

rat fiasco to the smoke in the kitchen.

He looked at the bartender and motioned him over. “I need a phone for a local call.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said and reached below the bar to produce a corded phone that he placed on the bar in front of Quint. “Just dial nine, then your number.”

Quint dialed information and got a general number for security at LynTech. He punched in the number, heard it ring five times, do a quick double ring, then it was answered. “Olson, maintenance.”

“Maintenance? I was trying to reach security.”

“Sorry. Security isn’t available. They reroute to me at this time of night. Can I help you with something?”

“This is Quint Gallagher. I’m just start—”

“Yes, sir. I’ve heard about you.”

“Okay, I misplaced my wallet tonight, and it’s either there, at LynTech, or in the limo that brought me back to my hotel. I don’t suppose you know the number for the limo service?”

“No sir. But if you tell me where you were tonight, I could take a look around here for it.”

“I’d appreciate it.” He gave Olson a general rundown of his movements. “I remember having it on the twentieth floor, in the hallway by the elevators, and that’s it.”

“I’ll let security know, and if you give me a number where I can reach you, I’ll take a look and get back to you.”

He started to tell Olson to call the hotel, but he was stopped

by the man saying, “Sir, could you hold for a minute?”

“Sure,” Quint murmured, and he heard a muffled conversation for a moment, then the man was back on the line.

“Good news. Mrs. Blake in the day-care center has your wallet.”

Relief was there, but so was a certain tightness in his chest. “What?”

“She told Walt, the security guard, that she’d found it, and if you called, to tell you that she’ll bring it in tomorrow and put it in the security safe. You can get it from there.”

There wasn’t anything he couldn’t live without until tomorrow, but he should probably call her anyway. “Do you have a phone number for Mrs. Blake?”

“Oh, no sir. That’d be in personnel and I don’t have any access to that. But she’ll bring it in, and they’ll put it in the safe. Just ask at the front desk and they’ll tell you where to go.”

He wouldn’t have to see her again. He should be relieved by that, but instead he found himself muttering, “Thanks, that’s great,” hanging up and motioning to the bartender to refill his drink. He didn’t have a clue why he felt vaguely let down and restless. He’d put another drink on his tab, then he’d go up and work.

“MAMA,” the child’s voice, edged with a whine, said, getting Amy’s attention immediately. She was on her feet, hurrying into the bedroom where she found Taylor in her crib, standing, arms out to be picked up.

Amy scooped up the child and cuddled her to her chest as she walked back out into the living room of the tiny apartment. She avoided the only mirror in the room, a small square over the desk by the door. She didn't need to see herself to know she looked like death warmed over. No makeup, her hair in a ponytail and dark circles under her eyes from being up half the night with a sick child. That night after her fiasco with Quint had been followed by a day of waiting in the pediatrician's office, picking up medicine and trying to comfort Taylor.

"She's fine, Mrs. Blake, just teething and a bit of a cold, but nothing serious," the doctor had told her, a doctor who had been through this before with the two of them.

When Taylor got sick, Amy overreacted and she knew it. She sank down in the old rocking chair, felt Taylor snuggle in with her, and she rested her head on the back of the chair. As she closed her eyes, she caught a red flash out of the corner of her eye and turned to see the message light blinking on the answering machine.

She hadn't even thought to check messages today. She maneuvered Taylor to her other arm and reached to press the Play button.

"Amy, it's Jenn." Jenn, Rob's sister, was the only relative she or Taylor had, and Jenn worried about the two of them. "Thanks for letting me know what the doctor said. If you two aren't up for Christmas tomorrow, we can postpone. Tay-bug won't know the difference if we put it off for a day or two until she feels better. I'll

call or drop by later to check on you two. Love you both.” There was a beep, then a date/ time stamp that showed the message had been left almost four hours ago. Another message started.

“This is Quint Gallagher.” She must have started at the sound of that deep drawling voice, because Taylor whimpered slightly, then resettled in her arms.

“I was told you had my wallet and would be bringing it back to LynTech today, but I haven’t been able to track you down or find my wallet. Could you call and let me know what’s going on?” He left a number and an extension that she knew was on the top floor in the executive suites. “I’ve got a dinner appointment, and I’d appreciate a call before five. If not, call this number.” He gave another number, then there was a hesitation before he ended with, “I’ll be waiting for your call.”

The beep came, then a date/time stamp and she looked at the wall clock by the tiny kitchen alcove. Six o’clock now and he’d called about two hours ago. She should have checked the messages, but she seldom got any that were important. And she hadn’t called LynTech because this was normally vacation and anyone she might have talked to, was gone. The wallet was in the bottom of her purse and she hadn’t even thought about it.

She kept rocking, then knew that she had to try and contact Quint. She eased Taylor more onto her right arm, grabbed the phone with her left hand and caught the receiver between her ear and shoulder. Awkwardly, she dialed the company number, then the extension, but it clicked over, said that the person hadn’t

set up a voice mail system yet, then it clicked off. She hung up, dialed the second number and it rang at the same time as her doorbell sounded.

“Great,” she muttered, trying to get to her feet, balance a now-sleeping Taylor on one arm and the phone with the other hand. “Just a minute,” she called out, wishing that Jenn would just use her key. “I’ll be right there,” she called again, as she crossed to the couch and gently put Taylor on it. The baby rolled onto her side and pulled her knees up to her tummy, then Amy reached for a juice bottle she’d put there earlier and gave it to her. Taylor held it, but didn’t drink it as she settled back into sleep.

The phone at her ear rang one more time, then was answered. “Gallagher.”

She hesitated with her hand on the coldness of the doorknob and had to swallow once to find her voice. “This is Amy Blake,” she began and tugged back the door.

“So it is,” Quint said, over the phone, but he was right in front of her in her doorway. Dressed in a dark blue business suit that set off his tanned skin and graying hair, he had a cell phone pressed to his ear and that shadow of a smile playing around his lips.

Startled, she lost her grip on her phone and it fell to the floor between them.

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