

THE PRINCESS AND THE COWBOY

LOIS FAYE DYER

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Lois Faye Dyer

The Princess and the Cowboy

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Love, marriage, baby – but not in that order! When software tycoon Harrison Hunt issued a challenge – his four sons had to marry within one year, or forfeit their inheritances – Justin Hunt couldn't believe it. The family ranch was his flesh and blood; he'd do anything to keep it. Even if anything meant marriage. Now he's chasing entrepreneur Lily Spencer, the only woman who had ever come close to touching his guarded heart.But when he turns up on her doorstep, Justin finds more than an angry ex-girlfriend waiting – there's a little girl in her arms who looks a lot like him!

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The toddler had Lily's eyes. And his hair and dimple.

Justin dragged his gaze from the little girl and met Lily's. Emotions chased across her expressive features – surprise replaced by swift guilt that was quickly banished by the defiant lift of her chin.

Then she slammed the door shut.

Shock held Justin paralysed for one stunned moment before he pounded on the door panels. "Lily!"

The door flew open.

"What do you want? What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I'm in town. I wanted to say hello." He couldn't take his eyes off the little girl. "What's her name?"

"Ava." Lily gathered the toddler closer, her stance protective. "You've said hello, now I want you to leave."

"Not until you tell me about Ava. She's mine, isn't she?"

For Christine Flynn, Patricia Kay

and Allison Leigh – such good friends…

LOIS FAYE DYER

lives in a small town on the shore of beautiful Puget Sound in the Pacific Northwest with her two eccentric and loveable cats, Chloe and Evie. She loves to hear from readers and you can write to her c/o Paperbacks Plus, 1618 Bay Street, Port Orchard, WA 98366, USA. Visit her on the web at www.LoisDyer.com and www.SpecialAuthors.com.

Dear Reader,

I was delighted when I was asked to join three close friends in writing THE HUNT FOR CINDERELLA mini-series – the four of us had a wonderful time brainstorming ideas for our connected books. I fell in love with all of the brothers, but especially with the youngest, Justin, and writing his story gave me a chance to combine my favourite kind of hero – a cowboy – with a heroine from the big city.

The stories are set in Seattle, Washington, one of my favourite cities. One sunny weekend I caught a cross-Sound ferry to the Seattle suburb of Ballard, where my daughter and I browsed the shops along Ballard Avenue. I knew instantly it was the perfect neighbourhood for my heroine's Princess Lily Boutique.

I hope you'll enjoy reading *The Princess and the Cowboy* as much as I loved writing it. And come back to the Pacific Northwest next month, in *The Millionaire and the Glass Slipper* by Christine Flynn, to follow another Hunt brother hunting for his Cinderella!

Warmly,

Lois Faye Dyer

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The Princess and the Cowboy

LOIS FAYE DYER



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Prologue

Justin Hunt leaned against the library bookcase, one shoulder brushing a thick, leather-bound volume of Shakespeare. His fingers curled lightly around the narrow end of a pool cue, the heavier end of the cue resting on the floor. His Stetson lay on a nearby chair and his well-worn Levi's were faded above his dusty black cowboy boots. When he'd dressed at 4 a.m. to work cattle on his Idaho ranch, he hadn't expected he'd be summoned to Seattle for an emergency family meeting.

He tried to remember the last time he and his three brothers had gathered together here at their father's house. Had to be a month or more ago, he thought—probably on the night Harry had had his heart attack.

"Well, hell. Talk about out of practice," Gray said with disgust as he missed a shot, and the four ball rolled across the green felt instead of dropping into a pocket. "Looks like you're up, Justin."

Justin shoved away from the wall of glossy cherry-wood shelves and walked slowly around the antique pool table, gauging the position of the remaining balls. The entire room was brightly lit. A Tiffany lamp hung directly over the table's felt surface. A dozen or more sconces gleamed at regularly spaced intervals between the bookshelves lining the walls. Brass lamps glowed atop polished tables grouped with club chairs in comfortable, inviting seating areas on the oriental rugs. At the far end of the library was Harrison Hunt's mahogany desk. Cleverly recessed lighting in the boxed ceiling illuminated the glossy surface, the high-backed leather chair and the semicircle of straight-backed chairs before it. The desk faced the wall of windows and French doors that let out onto the patio overlooking the estate's private beach on Lake Washington. Across the lake, the Seattle skyline glowed against the night sky.

Justin leaned over the pool table. He'd long since grown accustomed to playing pool in the luxurious library because Harry had had the felt-covered table installed there when his sons were teenagers. His attempt to lure the boys into sharing the room with him while he worked from home had been successful but whether it resulted in a stronger parent-child relationship was up for debate.

In any event, Justin rarely noticed the opulent surroundings of his father's home. The high-tech mansion he and his brothers had dubbed "The Shack" as teenagers had been his home from the age of twelve until he'd left for college at eighteen. But tonight the familiar surroundings seemed to hold a sense of foreboding, as if the room held its breath, waiting.

"Does anybody know why the Old Man called this meeting?" Justin asked as he tapped the six ball and watched it roll smoothly into the corner pocket.

Gray, the oldest of the brothers at forty-two, shrugged his shoulders. "My secretary said he wouldn't tell her the reason."

"Harry called you himself? Me, too." Sprawled in a deep leather armchair several feet from the pool table, the lanky six-foot-three Alex was Justin's closest brother in age. At thirty-six, he was only two years older than Justin. Alex waved his half-empty bottle of Black Sheep Ale at the fourth brother, seated in a matching armchair only a few feet away. "What about you, J.T.? Did you get the message from his secretary, or from Harry personally?"

Thirty-eight years old and as tall and lean as the rest of them, J.T. rubbed his eyes, yawned, and leaned forward. "From Harry." Elbows on his thighs, he held his tumbler of hundred-year-old Bourbon loosely in one hand. "I told him I'd have to cancel a week of meetings in New Delhi and spend half a day on the corporate jet to get home in time, but he insisted I be here." He ran his hand through his dark hair and looked at Justin. "What about you?"

"I was at the ranch when he called. He told me the same thing he told you—I had to be here. No excuses." Justin frowned, searching each of his brothers faces in turn. "He refused to tell me what the meeting was about. Did he tell any of you why he wanted to talk to us?"

"No." Gray shook his head, as did Alex and J.T.

Before Justin could respond, the hall door burst open and their father strode into the room. Harrison Hunt's six-foot-six frame was trim, his black hair barely showing any gray. Horn-rimmed bifocals framed his blue eyes but didn't conceal the intelligence of the man who'd invented the computer languages and software that had made HuntCom a household word. His energetic pace seemed miraculous after the heart attack that had felled him so recently.

"Ah, you're all here. Excellent." Harry waved his hand at his desk and moved briskly toward it. "Join me, boys."

Justin laid the pool cue on the table, settled his Stetson on his head, tugged the brim lower and followed Harry. Neither he nor his brothers took one of the chairs facing the big desk, choosing instead to remain standing. Justin hooked his thumbs in his front Levi pockets and leaned against the wall once more. He was almost, but not quite, out of Harrison's sight.

His father frowned at them all, swiveling his chair to stare at Justin. "Why don't you sit down?"

"Thanks, but I'll stand."

Harry swept the other three with the same frown.

Gray stood behind one of the chairs; Alex leaned against the wall by Gray while J.T. was separated from them all by the long credenza separating the seating areas.

Harry shrugged impatiently. "Very well. Stand or sit, it makes no difference to the outcome of this meeting." He cleared his throat. "Since my heart attack last month, I've been doing a lot of thinking about this family. I've never thought a lot about my legacy, nor to having grandchildren to carry on the Hunt name. However, the heart attack made me face some hard truths I'd ignored—I could have died. I could die tomorrow." He stood, rested his knuckles on the desktop and leaned forward, his face grimly intent. "I finally realized that, left to your own devices, you four never *will* get married, which means I'll never have grandchildren. I don't intend to leave the future of this family to chance any longer. You have a year. By the end of that year, each of you will not only be married, you will either already have a child or your wife will be expecting one."

The silence thickened, lengthened.

"Right," J.T. finally muttered, dryly.

Justin bit back a grin and looked past J.T. at Gray, noting the amusement flashing across his brother's face. To Gray's left, Alex merely lifted an eyebrow and sipped from his bottle of ale to drink.

"If any one of you refuses to do so," Harry continued, as if he hadn't noticed their lack of interest, "you'll all lose your positions in HuntCom and the perks you love so much."

Justin stiffened. *What the hell?*

Gray's face lost all amusement. "You can't be serious."

"I'm deadly serious."

"With all due respect, Harry," J.T. spoke, breaking the brief, stunned silence, "how will you run the company if we refuse to do this?" He gestured at his brothers. "I don't know what Gray, Alex or Justin have going on right now, but I'm in the middle of expansions here in Seattle, in Jansen and at our Delhi facility. If another architect has to take over my position, it'll be months before he's up to speed. Construction delays alone would cost HuntCom a fortune."

"It wouldn't matter, because if the four of you refuse to agree, I'll sell off HuntCom in pieces. The Delhi facility will be history, and I'll sell Hurricane Island." Harry's gaze left J.T. and met Justin's without flinching. "I'll sell HuntCom's interest in the Idaho ranch." He looked at Alex. "I'll shut down the foundation if you refuse to cooperate." Lastly, his hard stare met Gray's. "And HuntCom won't need a president because there will no longer be a company for you to run."

Gray's expression went stony.

"But that's insane," Alex said. "What do you hope to accomplish by doing this, Harry?"

"I mean to see you all settled with a family started before I die." Harry's eyes darkened. "With a decent woman who'll make a good wife and mother. The women you marry have to win Cornelia's approval."

"Does Aunt Cornelia know about this?" Justin found it hard to believe his honorary aunt, the widow of Harry's best friend, was a willing partner in his father's crazy scheme.

"Not yet."

Justin felt a surge of relief. When Cornelia learned what Harry was planning, she'd pitch a fit. She was the only one Harry was likely to listen to.

"So," Justin said slowly. "Let me see if I've got this straight. Each of us has to agree to marry and produce a kid within a year…"

"All of you have to agree," Harry interrupted. "All four of you. If one refuses, everyone loses, and life as you've known it—your jobs, the HuntCom holdings you each love—will be gone."

Justin ignored all three of his brothers' muttered curses and continued. "…and the brides have to each be approved by Aunt Cornelia."

Harry nodded. "She's a shrewd woman. She'll know if any of the women aren't good wife material. Which reminds me," he added abruptly. "You can't tell the women you're rich, or that you're my sons. I don't want any fortune hunters in the family. God knows, I married enough of those myself. I don't want any of my sons making the mistakes I made." He drew a deep breath. "I'll give you some time to think about this. You have until 8 p.m. Pacific time, three days from now. If I don't hear from you to the contrary before then, I'll tell my lawyer to start looking for a buyer for HuntCom."

He rounded the edge of the desk and left the room, the door closing quietly behind him.

The four watched him go with varying expressions of anger and disbelief.

"Son of a bitch," Justin said softly, his eyes narrowed in thought. "I think he means it."

Chapter One

Lily Spencer sipped her first cup of organic green tea while standing at the kitchen island of her town house, the pages of the *Seattle Times* spread out over the white marble counter in front of her. Early-morning sun spilled through the window behind her as she read, slowly turning the pages and enjoying the peaceful, quiet moments before her daughter awoke.

She skimmed the business articles and flipped the page to the Seattle Life section. A photo of a jogger at Green Lake was prominently featured at the top of the page.

Lily caught her breath, the gently steaming mug held motionless halfway to her lips. She narrowed her eyes and stared, trying to make out the man's features. But his face was partly turned away from the photographer.

Still, she knew with gut-deep conviction that the jogger was Justin Hunt. A gray tank top with a University of Washington logo left his broad shoulders and upper arms bare, the muscles of his thighs and long legs powerful beneath the hem of his black jogging shorts. Sunlight gleamed off sweat-dampened tanned skin.

She skimmed the brief caption beneath the photo, confirming her guess. The jogger was indeed Justin Hunt, in town for meetings the reporter speculated were important, since all four of the Hunt brothers had been seen in Seattle over the last twenty-four hours.

Lily leaned over the counter, her fingertips brushing the photo.

Then reality intruded and her lips firmed, compressing into a frown. She set her mug on the counter with a distinct clunk.

So he's back in town. So what?

She'd stopped jogging at Green Lake after Justin had dumped her. The wide asphalt track that circled the lake had been her favorite spot to run, but the possibility that she might see him, either alone or with another woman, wasn't one she cared to chance. Nowadays, she jogged along the waterfront, timing her visits to avoid the arrival of the cross-sound ferries and the wave of traffic from the passengers and vehicles they brought with them.

The baby monitor sitting on the counter next to the toaster crackled, followed by the subtler sound of rustling bedclothes.

Lily glanced at her wristwatch and smiled. Right on time, she thought.

"Ma-ma. Ma-ma." Ava's voice came clearly over the monitor.

Lily folded the newspaper and left the kitchen for her daughter's bedroom. Ava looked up the moment Lily opened the door. She grinned with obvious delight and held up her arms to her mother.

"Good morning, sweetie." Lily picked up the one-year-old toddler and cuddled her close. "Did you sleep well last night?"

Ava responded with a string of sounds interspersed with several "mamas," chortling when Lily nuzzled her downy cheek.

Lily carried Ava downstairs, tucked her into her highchair and shook a handful of Cheerios onto the tray. As Ava carefully picked them up, one by one, and tucked them into her mouth, Lily switched on the kettle for her daughter's morning oatmeal.

Justin is ancient history, she thought. *He's probably in town for a meeting at HuntCom, an*d *will be gone soon*.

She picked up the newspaper and dropped it into the recycling bin, determined to forget the photo.

And Justin Hunt, as well.

Twenty-four hours after the meeting with Harry, Justin drove away from his aunt Cornelia's home in Queen Anne, dialed his cell phone and waited to be connected to his brothers. His conversation with Cornelia had convinced him there was a strong possibility Harry's threat to sell the company was real. Cornelia was growing increasingly worried by Harry's demeanor since the heart attack. Without prodding from Justin, she'd confided that Harry seemed uncharacteristically introspective. On several occasions, Harry had told her he wanted his sons to marry and have children. Cornelia was afraid Harry felt a need to right his wrongs, and that he was getting his fiscal and emotional affairs in order, preparing to die.

Privately, Justin thought the Old Man was too damned stubborn to die, but he didn't tell Cornelia that. She was one of the few women he actually respected, and she genuinely cared for Harry.

Of course, he thought, she'd known Harry since they were kids. They had years of history between them.

"Justin? What's up?" Gray spoke over a muted background of conversation and music.

"I've just left Cornelia's. I think we should take the Old Man's deal," Justin said bluntly. "Here's why." With a few brief words, he told his brothers what Cornelia had told him. "I own sixty percent of the ranch and I want the rest of it. I'm not willing to chance Harry selling the other forty percent to anyone else."

"You're willing to let him choose your wife?" Alex's tone was pure disbelief.

"No. Cornelia convinced me the Old Man's heart attack might have scared him enough to believe he has to force us to marry and have kids for our own good," Justin said. "I'm willing to tell him that's what's happening until we've had time to figure a way around this, or he realizes how crazy his demand is. But in the meantime," Justin added, "I'll do what's necessary to keep him from selling the ranch. If that means looking for a wife, that's what I'll do."

"He's bluffing. He'd never sell the company," Gray said with conviction. "Even if he does hold the controlling interest."

Which is a damn shame, Justin thought. He and his brothers, together with Cornelia and her four daughters, all sat on the board, but even if they voted as a block, they couldn't override Harry.

"I don't see it happening," J.T. agreed. "He spent his life building HuntCom. We all know the company is more important to him than anything else, especially us. I don't believe he'd sacrifice it just to see us all married with babies." Derision laced his words.

"We're in the middle of a buyout," Gray said. "There's no way he'd consider selling the company until it's finished, and that might be months away. He's bluffing."

"How can you be sure?" Alex asked. "What if you're wrong? Do you want to chance losing everything you've worked for over the past eighteen years? I know I sure as hell don't want to see the foundation shut down…or run by someone else."

"The only baby Harry's every cared about is HuntCom. There's no way he won't do what's ultimately best for the company," Gray said. "He always does."

"I sure as hell hope you're right," Justin muttered. "Where did he get the idea it was time we all went hunting for brides?"

"A Bride Hunt," J.T. grinned. "Sounds like one of those reality shows."

"Yeah," Alex put in dryly. "A really bad reality show."

"You know this won't work unless all of us are in," Gray said.

"And it won't work for any of us unless we come up with a contract that ties Harry's hands in the future," Justin added. "We have to make sure he can never blackmail us like this again."

"Absolutely," J.T. put in. "If he thinks he can manipulate us with threats, he'll do it again in a heartbeat."

"So we need an iron-clad contract that controls the situation." Justin could tell from J.T. and Alex's tones that they were considering whether to join him. He wasn't so sure about Gray. "If all Harry threatened us with was loss of income, I'd tell him to go to hell, and walk. But I'm not willing to lose the ranch. Nor do I want to be the cause of another heart attack that might kill him. What about the rest of you?"

The brief silence that followed his question was finally broken by Alex. "If it was just money, I'd tell him to go to hell, too. But it's not, is it?"

"It's about the things and places he knows matter most to us." J.T. sounded grim.

"Part of Harry's demand was that the brides not know our identity until after we're married. How are you going to find an eligible woman in Seattle who doesn't know you're rich, Justin?" Gray asked.

"I've been out of state for most of the last two years, plus I've never been as high profile as the rest of you."

"Yeah, right," J.T. scoffed. "There isn't a single one of us who hasn't had our picture in the paper or in a magazine."

"But not as often as Harry," Gray said thoughtfully. "He's the public face of HuntCom. I've got to give the Old Man credit, he's deflected as much publicity from us as he could."

"True," Justin agreed. "So, how about it, Gray? Are you in?"

"Face it, Gray," Alex said. "Harry holds all the cards."

"He always has." J.T. sighed audibly.

"Okay, fine," Gray finally said. "But the only way to tie the Old Man's hands is by outvoting him in the boardroom. I'm not agreeing to *anything* without an iron-clad agreement, *in writing*, that he'll transfer enough voting shares to each of us so that he can't pull this again the next time he gets some wild hair. If we can't back out, neither can he. Nor can he start adding on more conditions just because he feels like it. The only thing he's ever understood is HuntCom. Once he's no longer squarely in the driver's seat, *then* I'll start believing he's really concerned about us passing on the family name—no matter how concerned Cornelia seemed."

Justin rang off, dropping the cell phone onto the seat next to him. He'd never wanted to get married, let alone have a kid.

If Harry expected hearts and flowers with some sappy version of true love along with Justin's cooperation, the Old Man was in for a rude awakening. Hell, Harry's threats and demands were downright bizarre.

The morning after the conference call with his brothers, Justin woke early. Just before 6 a.m., he carried a mug of coffee, a writing pad and a pen out to the deck. Several streets below, sunlight sparkled on the waters of Puget Sound. An ocean freighter lumbered slowly through the deep water

toward the Port of Tacoma to the south. Its ponderous size and speed made the boxy white-and-green Washington State ferry appear sprightly and swift as it neared Colman Dock on the Seattle waterfront.

Much as he loved his Idaho ranch, Justin couldn't deny the Pacific Northwest was stunningly beautiful on this sunny July morning. He tipped his chair back, propped his bare feet on the seat of a neighboring chair, ankles crossed, and wrote a name in capital letters at the top of his potential-bride list.

Lily Spencer.

She probably never wants to see me again, he thought, remembering the Tiffany bracelet she'd returned the morning after he'd broken off their affair. The box was unopened, his note still sealed in its envelope. The messenger who brought back the items had told his secretary Lily herself had written Return To Sender in black script across the front of the envelope.

Justin had left Seattle the next day and had rarely returned over the following two years. Long days spent in punishing physical labor had exhausted his body but hadn't stopped his mind from thinking about her. Finally, after months of pain, the ache in his chest where his heart was went numb. He figured that meant he was finally over her.

But you haven't stopped thinking about her. You haven't forgotten her.

He tuned out the small voice in his head and went back to his list-making, forcing himself to write despite the distaste he felt for the task.

He jotted down the names of three unmarried women before he stopped abruptly, frowning at the list. Every one of them was a business connection he'd met through HuntCom. They all knew he was billionaire Harry Hunt's son.

How the hell am I going to find a bride if they can't know who I am?

Despite equating the Bride Hunt with any other project he'd done for HuntCom, Justin felt a distinct reluctance to make the very personal details of Harry's demand known outside the family.

I suppose I could use a pseudonym and join an online dating service. Almost immediately, he dismissed the thought. *Too time-consuming*.

He stared at the rooftops—marching in neat blocks down the hill between him and the waterfront—while he considered the problem.

He drank his coffee and watched the marine traffic on the waterfront, his thoughts drifting back to Lily Spencer. He ended his relationship with Lily when he'd realized she was a woman who wanted marriage and a family. Neither of those two commitments were in his future. He'd walked away from her so she could find what she needed.

He punched in the phone number for her shop, frowning as he realized he still remembered it, even though he hadn't dialed it in years.

"Good morning, Princess Lily Boutique. How may I help you?"

"Is Lily in?"

"May I ask who's calling?"

"Justin Hunt."

"One moment, please."

Justin paced impatiently, listening to the murmur of female voices and occasional laughter in the background.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hunt." When she finally came back on the line, the feminine voice was distinctly cooler than before. "Ms. Spencer isn't available."

"When do you expect her?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," she said politely. "May I take a message?"

"No message." Justin hung up, convinced the woman was lying.

He suspected Lily was somewhere in the shop or in her workroom one floor above, but had refused to take his call.

When he'd abruptly ended their three-month affair, Lily hadn't cried or called him names. Unlike other women he'd dated and broken things off with, Lily hadn't made a scene at the restaurant. Instead, she'd carefully folded her napkin, stood and walked out without a word.

Maybe that was another reason he needed to see her—maybe he wanted her to yell at him and tell him what a rat he was for dumping her. Then he could apologize, and if he was lucky, she'd forgive him. At least then she wouldn't hate him for the rest of her life.

With sudden decisiveness, he grabbed his keys from the counter and left the apartment. Ten minutes later, he parked the Escalade on Ballard Avenue and jogged across the brick street, dodging traffic.

The mannequins in the bowfront display windows of Lily's shop wore white lace bustiers and garter belts, and were posed against draped black satin. Justin stepped inside, the shop's interior an Aladdin's cave of jewel-tone colors and sexy silk and lace women's underwear. The air had a subtle floral scent, and the designs and textures of the lingerie were extravagantly feminine.

The door eased shut behind him and he paused, searching the room. Everywhere he looked, he was reminded of Lily.

Several women browsed the racks and shelves. All of them gave him curious glances. He ignored them, scanning the shop, hoping to find Lily. She wasn't there.

"May I help you, sir?" The willowy redhead behind the counter left a customer sifting through a basket of lacy thongs and approached him.

Justin recognized her voice; she was the woman he'd talked to on the phone earlier.

"I'm looking for Lily."

The redhead's eyes widened, her smile disappearing. "I'm sorry, sir. She isn't in."

"When do you expect her?"

"I'm not sure. Would you care to leave a message?"

"Yeah, sure." He took a card from his pocket and jotted his cell-phone number on the back, followed by the words *call me*.

The salesclerk took the card and glanced at it. "No other message?" Her expression was sharply curious.

"No."

"I'll make sure she gets the card."

"Thanks," Justin drawled, suspecting his card would hit the trash can as soon as he left the shop. He wondered if Lily was upstairs in her workroom, avoiding him.

Short of forcing his way through the Employees Only door behind the counter and climbing the stairs, he couldn't be sure. And he didn't want to go there—there were other ways to reach her.

Tonight he'd drive to Lily's town house and knock on her door unannounced. He'd apologize for ending their affair, make sure she was having a happy life, ask her to forgive him and leave.

He left the shop and waited for a break in traffic before crossing the street to his SUV.

Not being able to contact Lily easily had made him even more determined to see her.

Justin drove back to his apartment and forced himself to wait until evening, giving Lily plenty of time to go home before he sought her out.

Lily lived in Ballard, an older but upwardly mobile community edging the waters of Puget Sound just north of downtown Seattle. The newer brick-and-wood building was split into six town houses, each with a small square of grass out front.

Rush hour and dinnertime were past and the neighborhood was quiet, with only an occasional jogger accompanied by their dog, or a young couple pushing a stroller along the sidewalk passing by.

The walkway to Lily's home was swept clean and edged with flower beds filled with red Martha Washington geraniums and green ferns. Justin rang the doorbell, idly noting the small, tidy porch with its wicker bench and the dried herb wreath that hung on the wall above it.

The minutes dragged by. Impatient, he pushed the button again, the ring of the chimes muted through the thick door.

Maybe she's not home. Disappointed and frustrated, Justin half turned to search the quiet street, but saw no one. In a last attempt before leaving, he turned back and pushed the bell one more time.

The door opened abruptly.

"What?" The single word was filled with annoyance. A frown veed sable brows above green eyes that widened, flaring with shocked surprise as Lily stared at him.

Deep inside Justin, something that had been unsettled calmed, the emptiness that had been his constant companion for months eased and filled. His memory hadn't betrayed him. The green eyes, high cheekbones and lush mouth, with its full lower lip, were exactly as he'd remembered. Lily's shoulder-length hair was tousled, the sunlight glinting off streaks of blond in the dark brown mane. His gaze moved lower and, belatedly, he realized she wasn't alone.

A little girl perched on Lily's hip. Her tiny shoulders and arms were bare above the blue towel wrapped around her torso and her chubby little legs and feet left damp spots on Lily's shorts. The toddler's coal-black hair clung to her cheeks and nape in damp curls. Her green eyes were framed with thick black lashes, and when she smiled at him, a dimple flashed in her cheek next to a rosebud mouth.

The toddler had Lily's eyes. And his hair and dimple.

He dragged his gaze from the little girl and met Lily's. Emotions chased across her expressive features—surprise replaced by a swift look of guilt that was quickly banished by the defiant lift of her chin.

Then she slammed the door shut.

Chapter Two

Shock held Justin paralyzed for one stunned moment before he pounded on the door panels. "Lily!"

"Go away!"

"Open the door or I'll keep this up until your neighbors call the cops."

The door flew open. "What do you want?" she demanded.

"Let me in."

"No."

"Do you really want to have this conversation on your doorstep?" he asked grimly.

Her gaze flickered over his shoulder and a small, forced smile lifted the corners of her mouth. She waved. "Hi, Mrs. Baker. Nice evening, isn't it?" She stepped back and held the door wide. "Come in," she hissed at Justin.

The moment he stepped over the threshold, she closed the door and quickly moved farther into the room to put space between them.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I'm in town. I wanted to say hello," Justin said almost absently, shock still gripping him. He couldn't take his eyes off the little girl. "What's her name?"

"Ava." Lily gathered the toddler closer, her stance protective. "You've said hello, now I want you to leave."

"Oh, no." He shook his head. He wasn't sure of much, since his brain felt as if it had been scrambled by a bolt of lightning, but he did know he wasn't leaving. Not yet. "Not until you tell me about Ava. She's mine, isn't she." It wasn't a question. He was convinced he knew what Lily's answer would be, but he wanted, needed, to hear her say the words.

"No, she's not yours. She's mine."

"Mama." Ava patted Lily's cheek, demanding her attention. "Mine Mama."

"Yes, sweetie, I'm your mama. And you're my very best girl, aren't you."

Ava threw her arms around Lily's neck and hugged her enthusiastically. Then she laid her head on her mother's shoulder and smiled beatifically at Justin.

His heart stuttered and he couldn't help smiling helplessly back at her.

"She's mine," he said softly, but with rock-solid conviction.

"You contributed DNA, but that doesn't make her yours."

Lily's vehement words were more denial than confirmation, but Justin's heart leapt just the same. He'd felt numb for the last two years, and the pound of his heart in his chest after so long was startling.

"I want you to leave," Lily said quietly.

"We need to talk."

"No, we don't. There's nothing to discuss. Ava and I have a life. You're not part of it. Go away." Her voice was a shade less quiet, and a faint tremor shook her.

Ava's smile disappeared. She looked from Justin to her mother, then back again, her little face concerned. "Mama?"

"Please go. This is upsetting Ava."

"All right, I'll leave." Justin kept his voice even, his tone mild. "But we have to talk. I'll call you at the shop in the morning."

She didn't answer. Instead, she merely nodded, then walked to the door and held it open, closing it silently behind him.

Lily stared at the door. She was shaking, tremors of shock and anger rippling in waves from her midsection through to her arms and into her fingertips. She'd never expected Justin to show up on her doorstep. He must have known Meggie was lying to him when he'd telephoned and then dropped by the shop.

There had to be dozens of women listed in his little black book who would be delighted to take his calls. Why did he have to come looking for her? If she'd thought there was any possibility he wouldn't move on to greener pastures after he was unable to reach her earlier, she would have been more careful. She certainly wouldn't have opened her front door with Ava in her arms.

Lily squeezed her eyes shut, trying to erase the image of him standing on her doorstep. He wore polished black cowboy boots, and worn Levi's covered his long legs and powerful thighs. His pale blue cotton shirt screamed designer-label and she was sure the gold watch on his wrist was a Rolex. When he'd smiled at Ava, dimples dented the tanned skin of his cheeks. With his coal-black hair, piercing blue eyes and muscled body, honed by jogging and long hours working on the Idaho ranch he loved, Justin Hunt was every woman's dream.

Except mine, she thought fiercely. *Justin Hunt is my own personal nightmare*. And contrary to her assumptions, he seemed entranced by Ava. The possibility that he might have wanted to know she'd become pregnant with his baby was unacceptable. And frankly terrifying. She shuddered, unwilling to consider that she might have misjudged him.

Ava wiggled, babbling a protest, and Lily realized she was clutching her too tightly.

"I'm sorry, honey," she crooned, brushing a kiss against the toddler's quickly drying curls. "Mama didn't mean to scrunch you." She shifted Ava higher, the little body a warm, reassuring weight against her chest. "Let's go put your jammies on and find a book to read before your bedtime, okay?"

Ava responded with her own babbled version of English, her unintelligible sentences liberally sprinkled with "Mama."

Lily distracted herself with Ava's nighttime rituals of donning pajamas and reading two Sandra Boynton books with Lily, then she dimmed the lights for fifteen minutes of cuddling in the rocking chair before tucking the sleepy little girl into her crib.

But when she went back downstairs, the house quiet about her, there was no escaping the flood of memories Justin's visit had caused.

One rainy evening a little over two years ago, Justin had walked into a florist's shop in downtown Seattle. She'd been there, ordering flowers to cheer a hospitalized friend. While he'd waited to give the clerk his order, they'd chatted. The attraction between them was instant and mutual. They'd flirted, then went next door to share dinner, after which she'd refused his offer of a ride and driven herself home. It wasn't until the next day that she'd made the connection between his name and the huge HuntCom corporation that was a Seattle household word.

When he'd called and asked her out that afternoon, she'd told him she wasn't sure she should date one of the playboy Hunt brothers, but he'd laughed and charmed her into agreeing to meet him.

With Justin, she'd broken every rule she'd ever had about caution with men in relationships. She'd let her heart overrule her head and had swiftly fallen head over heels in love with him. He was handsome, sexy, charming and very, very rich. But she'd never indulged in casual sex. Nevertheless, he'd quickly overwhelmed her reservations and within a week, they were sleeping together. Once in his bed, she was committed. When he'd abruptly broken off their relationship, she'd been devastated.

The night he told her goodbye over dinner, she'd been so stunned by his words she hadn't responded, had been incapable of speech. She'd managed to stand, leave the restaurant and catch a cab for home.

She didn't leave her house for a week, grappling with heartbreak. Then she'd gone back to work, determined to put her life back together.

And I did. Lily pulled herself out of memories, shaking off the sadness that always accompanied remembering those dark days after Justin left. *He broke my heart once. I don't want him in my life again. I don't need Justin Hunt*.

She walked into the living room, bending to pick up several of Ava's toys scattered across the rug and tossing them into the wicker toy basket beneath the window.

Her life was organized and on track, she reminded herself firmly. Because she had her own shop, she could take Ava to work with her, and she'd turned an empty office space into a nursery. She spent most of her time in the second-floor workroom with Ava nearby, working on the design and production phases of her business, while trusted staff ran her boutique below. Business was booming, and only last month, an article in the *Seattle Times* about the local fashion industry had called her a rising star, and dubbed her a true "Princess" Lily.

It's taken a long time to get my life back on track. The last thing I want is to let Justin disrupt it again.

Except—he's Ava's father.

The thought brought her to a standstill, motionless in the center of the cozy living room, with a stuffed teddy bear in one hand and a doggie pull-toy in the other.

What if he wants to take Ava? She'd never considered the possibility that Justin might want custody. But she'd recognized the smile he'd given Ava. She suspected she had that same love-struck expression when she looked at her daughter. Smitten, she thought. He'd looked hopelessly smitten.

While she could understand why anyone would fall in love with her precious daughter, the possibility Justin had done so was not to be contemplated. His obvious interest in her little girl opened whole new vistas of worry.

Not only was Justin wealthy in his own right, he also had access to power through his billionaire father.

She dropped onto the sofa cushion, frowning unseeingly at the forgotten toys in her hand. She needed a professional opinion, she decided. She'd call her attorney first thing in the morning.

Fighting the urge to pack her bags, bundle Ava into her car and flee Seattle, she rose and finished picking up the scattered toys before retreating to her workroom just off the kitchen. She spent the next few hours trying to focus on an exclusive design for a client in Hollywood.

She thought she'd dealt successfully with Justin's sudden reappearance in her life. But when she went to bed just after ten-thirty, she couldn't fall asleep. She spent the next eight hours alternately turning, tossing and infrequently dozing.

He was haunting her dreams once again.

Justin drove home in a daze.

He'd had to force himself to walk down the sidewalk and get in the SUV. Every instinct in him demanded he stay with Lily and the little girl she held in her arms.

He had a daughter. The concept shook him to the core.

He never would have guessed that one look at a dainty little female with her mama's eyes and his own black hair would have knocked him off balance.

"I'm a father." Even spoken aloud, the words seemed surreal. He'd walked away from a relationship with Lily to keep from harming her, but he'd left her to have his baby alone. *Bad move. Really bad move. I should have made sure she was okay*, he thought, filled with self-anger and disgust. *I should have protected her*.

He didn't know a damn thing about kids, let alone babies. And he knew even less about being a father. His mother had hooked up with several men during the twelve years he'd lived with her. None of them had been interested in being a father-figure. At best, they'd ignored him. At worst, he'd earned curses and slaps. He'd learned early to avoid the ones who used their fists. They'd taught him plenty about survival but nothing about being a good parent.

At least Harry had never hit him or his brothers, he thought. The Old Man had been absorbed with HuntCom, sometimes to the extent that Justin wondered if he remembered he had sons in the house. But he never purposely abused or neglected them. There was always food on the table, adults hired to keep track of them and clean clothing without holes.

All in all, Harry hadn't been such a bad father. Just…not really *there*.

Harry. What the hell am I going to do about Harry and his rules for the Bride Hunt? The thought shocked him out of his musings, and he realized he'd driven from Ballard to downtown Seattle on autopilot. Seeing Lily with Ava had changed everything, he realized.

Beyond talking to Lily in the morning, he wasn't sure what his next step would be. One thing he did know—he had to put his part in the Bride Hunt on hold.

The sun had set and streetlights winked on as he reached Second Avenue and turned south toward his penthouse apartment above a HuntCom building in Pioneer Square. The roar of a capacity crowd watching the Mariners play baseball in Safeco Field reminded him he'd left the quiet of his Idaho ranch behind.

A half block from his building, he hit a button on the dash, and by the time he'd turned into the underground parking lot, the gates were open. They eased silently shut behind him. Moments later, he stepped off the elevator and into the company apartment he called home whenever he was in Seattle.

He flicked on the television, removed his boots and dropped onto the sofa, propping his feet on the coffee table.

The Seattle newscaster warned motorists about the usual traffic backup on Interstate 5. Justin switched channels, clicking absentmindedly through the cable offerings, barely registering them.

He was unable to concentrate on anything beyond the mind-numbing news that he and Lily had a daughter. He turned off the TV and paced the high-ceilinged area of the big loft, but his mind continued to spin.

He'd never planned to marry or have children for very good reasons. There was no way a man with his background would make a competent, solid husband or father. He'd never been exposed to normal family dynamics, and had no clue what to do to create them.

That's why he'd broken off his relationship with Lily in the first place. Justin slid open the glass doors and stepped out onto the wide deck that ran the length of the apartment. He walked past the

hot tub and the teak patio table and chairs, all covered with white canvas. The summer night was balmy, and he sat on the wide brick balustrade.

He couldn't stop thinking about Lily and Ava.

And about the unlikely odds that a man with his past wouldn't end up harming them both.

He'd come to live with Harry in Seattle when he was twelve, but Justin had always preferred the far-flung acres of the ranch in Idaho. He'd lived all over the world with his mother and an ever-changing series of her men friends until he was eight. Then she'd dumped him at the ranch with his grandfather, who was the foreman of the sprawling property. When the elderly man died four years later, his wife contacted Harry, and within twenty-four hours, the billionaire had arrived with his eldest son, Gray. Justin didn't want to leave the only stable home he'd ever know, and when Harry told him to pack his belongings to return to Seattle, he'd disappeared into the mountains on horseback. He'd planned to outwait the businessman, but Harry sent Gray with a ranchhand to find him, making an offer he couldn't refuse. He'd left Idaho for the Hunt family compound in the exclusive Seattle suburb of Medina with the guarantee that someday he'd own the ranch, free and clear.

It was a promise Harry had kept—at least partially. Justin now owned sixty percent of the land he loved, having worked, invested and bought the acres from Harry.

Harry's sudden interest in marriage and grandkids didn't make sense, especially since his own marriages had been disasters of near Biblical proportions. He'd married four beautiful women, and every one of them had turned out to be interested only in his money. Justin's own mother had told him she'd married Harry because of his billions, and then purposely gotten pregnant. She'd planned to collect millions in return for granting Harry full custody, as his earlier wives had done. Unfortunately, Harry hadn't believed she was pregnant, and after a furious argument, she'd walked out. She was so vengeful that she'd kept Justin's existence a secret from Harry for twelve years. Long enough for his mother's lifestyle of rich men and wild parties to leave an indelible mark on Justin's life.

None of which makes any difference now, Justin thought. Except, given Harry's history with women who'd turned out to be disasters as wives and mothers, Justin couldn't help wondering why his father would want any of his sons to marry.

Not to mention the fact that Harry himself hadn't been anyone's candidate for father of the year, Justin thought. Running a software company that grew at the speed of light, coupled with the hours Harry spent developing software innovations, pretty much ate up the waking hours of each day. There had been no Beaver Cleaver family moments in the Hunt household, no father and son bonding while tossing a football or baseball in the backyard. Harry rarely made it to school conferences or sporting events. Fortunately, when her girls were little and the Fair-childs were in town, Cornelia and her four daughters were faithful attendees at every public event.

There's no getting around it, Justin thought grimly. *I haven't got a clue how to be a husband or father. The learning curve to become barely competent has to be ninety degrees straight up from where I am.*

The wail of a sax drifted up from the jazz club a block away. The song was one of Lily's favorites. They'd danced to its slow, seductive rhythm at the same club a dozen or more times during the three months they'd spent together.

The sultry music stirred memories of those unforgettable nights. Justin felt as if Lily's soft, seductive hands were stroking his bare skin with every pulse of the music.

Abruptly, he left the deck to head inside for bed.

Lily dressed with extra care the next morning, changing her mind a dozen times before she settled on a cream linen business suit with a silk green tank top, three-inch sling-back pumps and a chunky gold watch and earrings.

She'd reached her attorney at 8:30 a.m., and their phone conversation had confirmed her worst fears. Justin had a legal right to be involved in Ava's life, should he wish to do so. She could choose whether she wanted to fight him in court or voluntarily attempt to work out a reasonable solution.

The attorney had strongly advised her to seek an amicable agreement, especially given that the man involved was Justin Hunt.

Despite her resolve to never let Justin into her life again, it seemed she had no choice. But no matter what, she had to protect her little girl.

A little before ten, she left Ava in her nursery just off the workroom, playing happily with one of the seamstresses. Lily opened her umbrella and quickly walked down Ballard Avenue and crossed the wet brick pavement to the restaurant where she'd agreed to meet Justin for coffee. She was determined to remain calm, businesslike and focused on Ava.

She'd purposely chosen to meet him midmorning in hopes the breakfast trade would have left and the lunch crowd wouldn't start arriving for another hour or more. The restaurant was one where she often met clients for lunch meetings, and she was familiar with its semiprivate seating. While she certainly wanted a measure of privacy, she didn't want the intimacy of seeing Justin at either of their homes. The restaurant seemed a good compromise.

Justin had arrived before her and he stood as she neared the table.

"Hello, Lily."

"Good morning." Unfortunately, her determination to remain distant and unaffected disappeared the moment she saw him. He wore a long-sleeved shirt, the perfect fit obviously custom-tailored. The cuffs were turned back, the white cotton a stark contrast to his tanned skin at his forearms and collar. A silver-buckled black belt was threaded through the loops of his jeans, and polished black cowboy boots covered his feet. Raindrops dampened the shoulders of his shirt and gleamed in his dark hair. Unlike her, he apparently hadn't bothered with an umbrella.

He held her chair and she caught the subtle hint of his cologne as she took a seat. The familiar male scent brought with it a wash of unwanted memories. Her heart stuttered and she drew in a silent deep breath.

"I spoke with my attorney this morning," she said, determined to set a brisk tone to the meeting, as he took his own seat across from her.

"Did you?" he said, his face inscrutable as he surveyed her.

"Yes." She waited until the waiter had filled their cups and left a carafe of coffee before she continued. "Evidently, ours is not an unusual situation."

"It is to me," he replied. "I've never had a child before Ava."

"I meant the circumstance of having a child together without being married," Lily said evenly. "He's handled a lot of cases for couples with this issue."

"I see." Justin sat easily in his chair, his non-commital expression giving no indication as to what he was thinking. "And what advice did your attorney give you?"

"He recommended we focus on Ava and what's best for her."

"And you agree with that?"

"Yes, of course." Lily wished she knew what he was thinking. She lifted her cup and eyed him over the rim. "Do you agree?"

"Absolutely." His reply was prompt, with no hesitation.

"Good." She smiled with relief. "I'm delighted to hear that."

She hesitated, gathered her courage, and cut to the heart of the matter. "Now that you know you have a daughter, Justin, what do you plan to do about it, if anything?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. I think we should start with my getting to know her."

"You mean, you want to visit?"

"I suppose 'visit' is as good a term as any." He leaned forward. "I want to spend time with her. I've missed the first year of her life, Lily. Don't you think getting acquainted is long overdue?" A faint hint of anger surfaced.

"The night you ended our…affair, you made it very clear you weren't interested in marriage or children." She met his gaze without flinching. "Don't try to make me the bad guy here, Justin. It

never occurred to me you'd want to know I was pregnant or that we had a daughter. In fact, just the opposite. Your words were very convincing—I believed you. If you didn't mean them, you shouldn't have said them."

He stared at her for a long moment before he shrugged. "You're right. I should have made it clear that if you learned you were pregnant, I wanted to know. When did you find out?"

"A few weeks after we broke up. I thought about telling you, but then I remembered your breakup speech. It seemed very clear to me that you had no interest in any commitment, including having a child."

"I didn't, then."

Lily searched his face. "And now?"

His eyes darkened. "Kids were never in my plan, Lily. But seeing Ava with you last night…" He paused, as if searching for words. "Let's just say she's changed all the rules. I'm her father. That means something to me, something important. I want to be a part of her life."

"Just how involved do you want to be?"

"Can't we start out slow? I'd like to spend time with her. Do you have any objections?"

A million, she thought. Remember what the attorney said, Lily told herself. If you refuse to let him visit Ava, he can sue you for visitation, or custody. "I can live with you getting to know her," she said, carefully evasive.

"Good." Justin appeared relieved. "When can we start?"

Lily wanted to name a date weeks away but knew she shouldn't delay the inevitable. *The sooner he's exposed to toddler-world reality, the faster he's likely to get bored and bow out of our lives.* "How about tomorrow? We're usually home by four o'clock andAva goes to bed between seven and seven-thirty. If you'd like to come by around four-thirty, you can read to her while I make dinner."

"I'll be there. Can I bring anything?"

"Just your patience," she said dryly.

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