



THE MILLIONAIRE AND THE GLASS SLIPPER

CHRISTINE FLYNN



*Cherish*TM

Mills & Boon Cherish

Christine Flynn

**The Millionaire And
The Glass Slipper**

«HarperCollins»

Flynn C.

The Millionaire And The Glass Slipper / C. Flynn —
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She was one in a million. Settling down was not on JT Hunt's to-do list – until his father delivered an ultimatum. Now the millionaire bachelor was suddenly shopping for a bride. But happily-ever-after came with strings attached: his prospective wife had to marry him for love. To Amy Kelton it was like a fairytale. First, she got trapped in a lift with a tall, dark and sexy stranger. Now 'Jared Taylor' had chosen her – a lowly assistant – over her beautiful, successful stepsister. Talk about being swept off your feet! But when Amy uncovered 'Jared's' secret, she had to make a choice – ignore her heart's desire or accept the dashing bachelor's glass slipper and run with it...

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He wanted more than just to hold her. Far more.

What he didn't want was to move from her.

He eased his arms from her, anyway. Reaching between them, he circled her wrists with his forefingers and thumbs. He brushed his lips to her temple. "Do you have any coffee?"

Amy blinked. Confusion masked the banked yearning in her tone. "Sure." Her brow furrowed as she looked up at him. "You want coffee?"

"No," he admitted, his breath warm on her face as he brushed his lips over hers. "It's just that we need to do something before I kiss you."

Her heart jerked in her chest. "You just did."

"That wasn't a kiss."

The longing she'd veiled threatened to surface as his smoky grey gaze moved over her face, lingered on her mouth.

"It wasn't?"

"Not even close," he murmured.

"Maybe you should show me how it's done."

CHRISTINE FLYNN

admits to being interested in just about everything, which is why she considers herself fortunate to have turned her interest in writing into a career. She feels that a writer gets to explore it all and, to her, exploring relationships – especially the intense, bittersweet or even light-hearted relationships between men and women – is fascinating.

Dear Reader,

I believe in the fairy tale.

Really.

That said, I'm not naive enough to believe every prince will be wealthy or ride in on a white horse. I've also never heard of a man who has remained consistently charming. I know too many Cinderellas who have to wipe runny noses, work weekends and do laundry. Happily-ever-after isn't a guarantee. It takes work. *I know* all that. So why do I believe in something that started out as a myth and became a children's story? It's because of what, for me, is at the core of the modern Cinderella tale: that love is often found where a person least expects to find it, and that good things happen to good, ordinary people.

I hope you believe in the fairy tale, too.

Love,

Christine

The Millionaire and the Glass Slipper

CHRISTINE FLYNN



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With thanks to Lois Faye Dyer for the premise and the invitation, to Allison Leigh and Pat Kay for being such inspirations and to all three of you for making The Hunt for Cinderella come to life.

Prologue

J.T. Hunt sat sprawled in a deep, wing-backed armchair in his father's spacious library, his head resting against the smooth leather. With a highball glass of hundred-year-old bourbon balanced on one thigh, he was trying hard to stay awake.

Beneath the long Tiffany lamp hanging over the pool table, his half brothers Justin, four years younger than his own thirty-eight, and Gray, older by six, killed time playing a game of eight ball. It was obvious from the muttering that Gray hadn't played in a while. Their other half brother, thirty-six-year-old Alex, watched from a matching armchair a few feet away.

The last time they'd all been together at the Shack, as they'd long ago christened the multimillion-dollar estate on the shores of Seattle's Lake Washington, had been a month ago. That had been when their father, Harrison Hunt, the billionaire founder of HuntCom, had suffered a heart attack. J.T. couldn't remember how long it had been for him personally before that. He tended to be the black sheep. The prodigal. Though he was more circumspect than he'd been in his youth, he felt an outsider nonetheless. He only came to the home he'd been raised in when he absolutely had to.

He supposed that was mostly because he felt he had little in common with his tech-genius father and his half brothers, other than his passion for his portion of the business. As director of real estate development and the company's lead architect, he lived, ate and breathed his work designing the structures that held everything from HuntCom's thousands of employees, to the products they manufactured and shipped worldwide. The only thing that mattered as much to him as his work was the isolated island in the San Juans his father had bought when J.T. was a teenager. Hurricane Island was the only place on the planet where he felt anything remotely resembling a sense of peace. It was too bad he couldn't stay long enough to sail out to it for a while.

"Does anybody know why the Old Man called this meeting?" Justin asked as he tapped one of the balls with his cue stick.

At six foot three, as long and lanky as the rest of them, Gray gave a shrug. "My secretary said he wouldn't tell her the reason."

Alex sat forward at that. "Harry called you himself? Me, too." He waved his bottle of Black Sheep Ale toward J.T. "What about you, J. T? Did you get the message from his secretary, or from Harry personally?"

"From Harry." Rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, he yawned and leaned forward himself. With his elbows on his thighs, he dangled his glass of bourbon between them. "I told him I'd have to cancel meetings in New Delhi and spend half a day on the corporate jet to get home in time, but he insisted I be here."

The trip made no sense to him, either. Since Harry's health didn't seem to be the issue, given the vigor in his father's voice when he'd called, J.T. couldn't imagine anything the man wanted that couldn't have been handled by phone, fax or e-mail. Harry had practically perfected the technologies. The least he could have done was use one of them.

Running his hand through his dark hair, he looked at his Rolex. With the thirteen-hour time difference between Seattle and New Delhi, at the moment he had no idea what time his body clock was on.

He'd just decided it wasn't worth figuring out when the hall door burst open. Six feet six inches tall, his black hair nearly devoid of gray, Harrison Hunt strode into the expansive room with its rich cherry wood paneling and handbound collections of books. Black, horn-rimmed bifocals framed blue eyes sharp with the intelligence that had invented the software and technology that had made HuntCom a household word.

"Ah, you're all here. Excellent." His energy totally belying the heart attack he'd suffered only a month ago, he headed for his massive mahogany desk. Four chairs faced it. "Join me, boys."

As Harry settled himself into his executive chair, J.T. watched Justin lean against the wall. Gray moved behind one of the chairs, remaining there while Alex leaned against the wall not far from where Gray stood.

Rising, J.T. stayed the farthest back, separated from them all by a long credenza defining the seating areas.

Harry frowned first at Justin. "Why don't you sit down?"

"Thanks, but I'll stand."

That frown swept them all.

With an impatient shrug, Harry muttered, "Very well. Stand or sit. It makes no difference to the outcome of this meeting." He paused, clearing his throat. "Since my heart attack last month," he began, "I've been doing a lot of thinking about this family. I've never thought a lot about my legacy, nor about 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," he said flatly. "I could die tomorrow."

He rose from his chair, leaned forward with his knuckles resting on the desktop. "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."

Absolute silence met his emphatic proclamation.

That silence stretched, lengthened.

"Right," J.T. finally muttered. Like that's going to happen, he thought.

Still leaning against the wall, Justin stifled a grin and looked over at Gray. Gray looked amused. Alex lifted his bottle and tilted it to his mouth.

Harry didn't seem at all dissuaded by their collective lack of interest.

"If any one of you refuses to do so," he calmly insisted, "you'll all lose your position in HuntCom and the perks you love so much."

Justin stiffened.

Alex lowered his bottle.

Gray's amusement died. "You can't be serious."

"I'm deadly serious."

J.T. didn't bother getting upset. He didn't believe a word of the threat. "With all due respect, Harry," he said, fairly leaking patience he didn't feel. "How will you run the company if we refuse to do this?" Ice clinking, he lifted his glass toward his half 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 New 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."

Harry appeared unfazed. "It wouldn't matter, because if the four of you refuse to agree, I'll sell off HuntCom in pieces. The New Delhi facility will be history and I'll sell Hurricane Island."

Having just made it clear he knew full well how important that island was to J.T., his unflinching gaze settled on Justin.

"I'll sell HuntCom's interest in the Idaho ranch." His glance shifted to Alex. "I'll shut down the Foundation if you refuse to cooperate." His hard stare finally met Gray's. "And HuntCom won't need a president because there will no longer be a company for you to run."

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

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

"Does Aunt Cornelia know about this?"

Justin posed the question before J.T. could ask it himself. Personally, he hadn't had much to do with the widow of Harry's business partner. At least, not as an adult. As a kid and a teenager, the woman had seemed to be around only when he was in trouble. Where the others regarded her as something of a honorary aunt, he thought of her mostly as the woman who'd insisted to Harry that J.T. needed restrictions. She was good at calling a person on their behavior. From what he'd heard from Gray, since he was the brother he dealt with most, she was also the only person Harry ever really listened to.

"Not yet."

"So," Justin said, looking somewhat relieved by that. "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 cut in. "All four of you. If one refuses, everyone loses, and life as you've know it—your jobs, the HuntCom holdings you each love—will be gone."

"—and the brides have to each be approved by Aunt Cornelia."

"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."

Considering the history the man had with each of their mothers, J.T. had the feeling he wasn't the only one biting his tongue at that glaring understatement. He lifted his glass, waited to see who would be first to tell Harry to take a hike.

Harry drew a deep breath. "I'll give you some time to think about this. You have until 8:00 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."

With that, he moved from his desk and walked out the door.

The moment he closed it behind him, every one of them swore.

"It's not going to happen," J.T. insisted. "He'll never sell HuntCom. As for the rest of it..."

"He can't possibly be serious," Justin concluded.

Alex's scowl deepened. "Maybe he *is* serious."

From where he remained back from the others, J.T. listened to his half brothers debate whether or not Harry meant what he said. The uneasy possibility existed that he did, and none of them wanted to lose what mattered to them. Yet not one of them said he was ready to cater to the man's demands.

J.T. knew he was beyond tired when he didn't bother to mention what an insult those demands were.

Sleep, he thought. He needed sleep. "So we're all agreed?" he asked. "None of us are caving in to his crazy ultimatum?"

Justin nodded. "No question. Even if I wanted to get married, which I don't, I wouldn't do it because Harry decided it was time to settle down."

"Settling down." J.T. shook his head, shoved his fingers through his hair. "That's not happening. I'm never home long enough to have a dog. What would I do with a wife?" He set his now-empty glass on the credenza with an audible thud. "No offense, but I haven't slept since yesterday." He hadn't even caught a nap on the flight. He'd spent the entire trip trying to resolve the design problem he'd been working on when he'd been summoned. "I'm heading home to crash."

"I'll see you at the office tomorrow," Gray told him as they all moved toward the door. "We need to go over the figures for that possible plant in Singapore."

"Singapore," he muttered. "My head's still in India. Let's do it when I get back next week."

"Not a problem."

"Give me a ride downtown, will you? I took a limo here from the airport."

Gray told him he'd be glad to, then pulled his cell phone from his pocket when it rang yet again.

“It’s my secretary, Loretta,” Gray said. “She’s at the office working on the white paper for the buyout. If you don’t mind, I’ll talk to her on the way.”

Accustomed to being available at all hours himself, J.T. told him he didn’t mind at all and took advantage of the twenty-five-minute drive into the sprawling city to check his own messages, text back responses to most of them and decide what to do for a meal.

He was hungry for pancakes, which meant it must be morning, body time. Since it was night in Seattle, he phoned for takeout from Rico’s. The Italian restaurant was on the ground floor of the building where he owned a penthouse with black granite and cherry wood in the kitchen and a million-dollar view of Puget Sound from nearly every room. Rather than go through his matronly, enormously efficient assistant, Kate Cavanaugh, who was probably feeding her husband at this hour, he then called HuntCom’s chief pilot himself to let him know he’d need the plane ready for a trip back to New Delhi in the morning.

For now, he wasn’t wasting another second’s thought on Harry’s insane ultimatum.

A day later—the middle of the night where he was, midday where his half brothers were—a conference call from his brothers demanded that he rethink his position. They all agreed that had their father’s threat involved only money, they’d have collectively ignored the man’s demand. It wasn’t just money, though. It was about the things and places Harry knew mattered most to them.

Because of that, and because J.T. didn’t want to give up the island or be responsible for his brothers losing what was important to them, he agreed with what Justin proposed. Even though there were serious doubts about finding marriageable women who didn’t know who they were, and about how each man could get that woman to stay married after the deception was revealed, they would meet Harry’s terms. But only if he signed an agreement preventing him from ever blackmailing them again.

Gray wanted the agreement to be ironclad, signed, witnessed and notarized so Harry couldn’t throw out any new conditions.

What J.T. wanted as he hung up the phone and headed into his bathroom in search of an antacid tablet was to know how Harry thought something that had never worked for him should work any better for any of his sons. As far as he was concerned, no matter what happened, he’d just kissed his life as he knew it goodbye.

Chapter One

J.T. rubbed the back of his neck as he watched the numbers of the downtown office building’s elevator ascend. A run was definitely in order. Or a workout in the hotel’s gym. There was nothing like working up a sweat to lessen tension—with the possible exception of sex. Since he didn’t know any women in Portland, Oregon, and since he wasn’t into one-night stands, a workout seemed his best option for loosening the knots and easing the restiveness he could never quite shake.

His broad shoulders lowered with a long expulsion of breath.

He didn’t want to think about women just then. Aside from making him aware of a different sort of frustration, since it had been a while since he’d had the pleasure of intimate female company, thinking about women reminded him that he was supposed to be looking for one.

He still couldn’t believe the ultimatum his father had delivered two months ago. Two and a half, he mentally grumbled, reminding himself that the clock continued to tick.

His jaw worked in a slow grind as the numbers continued to climb. Justin had discovered he was a father not long after that meeting, but no one knew if he was making any progress with his little girl’s mom. As far as J.T. knew, the guy still didn’t want a wife. He knew for a fact he didn’t want one himself.

He wanted nothing to do with the whole home-and-family thing. He knew firsthand that commitment on that level simply didn’t work. He couldn’t even remember his own mother, his father’s second wife. She had bailed when J.T. was two, leaving him to a series of nannies, au pairs and the two succeeding stepmothers who’d pretty much ignored him before they’d abandoned him and their

sons, too. They'd literally taken the money and run, which had pretty much proved to him long before he graduated from high school that women could be bought.

He'd learned a couple more valuable lessons back then, too. He'd learned that women pretended to care only when they wanted something in return. And that the best way to get any attention from anyone was to get into trouble. A visit from a truant officer was usually good for at least a ten-minute audience with his father. That was often the most time the man spent with him all week.

The elevator slowed. Over the quiet drone of the Muzak, a refined ding announced his floor.

He didn't cause problems now. At least, not the kind that involved threats of expulsion or fines for speeding tickets. He'd refined his talent for trouble into a tendency to merely break or bend any rule that didn't suit his purpose. His opinion of women, however, hadn't changed much. His father's rules for the Bride Hunt were that the women not know who they were or anything about the family wealth. When he got around to looking for a woman, which he was still in no rush to do, his personal requirements would be more specific.

The woman would have to have good genes. Preferably, in a tall, leggy blonde sort of way. She couldn't come with any emotional or familial baggage. And she needed to have a career she wanted to keep so she'd have interests of her own. His father had said that the woman had to fall in love with him—not that he had to fall in love with her. Not that he believed for an instant that his father's demands could be met—which was why he was about to implement Plan B.

The elevator doors slid open. Stepping into a wide hall, vaguely aware of the sounds of construction coming from a floor below, he noted the plaque on the wall indicating the direction of the suite he was looking for.

Plan B was to have everything in place to open his own architectural firm so he'd have something to fall back on when his father sold out. He figured that would happen in nine and a half months, when the time for the hunt expired. The logistics of that new venture became the sole thoughts on his mind as he opened the door marked Kelton & Associates.

A spacious reception area of white walls, gray industrial carpet and a wide mobile of what looked like stainless steel boomerangs greeted him. Beneath the slowly moving mobile sat a large amoeba-shaped Lucite secretarial desk. A state-of-the-art computer monitor and telephone system, lines ringing, occupied the short side of the curved L.

He'd chosen to interview this particular marketing firm because of its reputation for being cutting edge, and its relatively small size. Small meant fewer people who might recognize him. It was also half an hour away by air and two and a half to three hours by car from Seattle, which meant that it operated outside the sphere of core support businesses HuntCom used in the Seattle area. To avoid the publicity that would come if news of his endeavor got out, he wanted to keep everything under wraps until implementing it became absolutely necessary.

His first impression of the ultramodern decor was that it echoed the firm's cutting-edge hype. His second was that there was no one manning the reception desk. There wasn't a soul in sight.

Or so he was thinking when a totally preoccupied young woman in a gray sweater and skirt barreled around the corner from a hallway. Her dark head was down, her arms loaded with files. Judging from her direction and her speed, her destination was the ringing telephone on the desk. Before he could do anything more than think about stepping from her path, she walked right into him.

Her startled gasp met the rustle of papers and the soft plop of files hitting the carpet. Of the dozen thick folders she carried, half of them hit the floor. The other half she clutched to her chest as she dropped to her knees.

"Ohmygosh. I'm so sorry." Flushing to the roots of her barely chin-length, chopped brown hair, she grabbed a file. "Our receptionist isn't in today, so I thought I'd work out here so I could get the phone..." She shook her head, flushed. "Never mind. Please," she murmured, clearly embarrassed as he crouched beside her and picked up a file. "I'll get these. You don't have to help."

Ignoring her insistence, he reached past her for another file. Closer to her now, her scent drifted toward him. Something fresh, faintly herbal and unexpectedly, inexplicably erotic. Caught off guard by the quick tightening low in his gut, he jerked his focus to the delicate lines of her profile. As he did, she looked up—and went still the instant her dark eyes met his. A quick, deep breath, a quicker blink, and her glance fell away.

Young, he thought. That was how she looked to him as he scanned the fine lines of her profile once more. Pretty. A little self-conscious. And impossibly...innocent. As edgy as he'd felt lately, he figured her to be about a lifetime shy of his own admittedly jaded thirty-eight years. The thought made him feel older, and edgier still.

Her focus remained on her task. "Please tell me you're not Jared Taylor."

The name caught him momentarily off guard. To protect his plans, he'd made the appointment using his full first name and his mother's maiden name. He needed to remember that. "Sorry," he replied, "but that's me." He handed her another file as his eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't be Candace Chapman, would you?"

Still looking a little flustered, she took the file, reached for another. She had a beautiful mouth. Full. Unadorned. Kissable.

With a frown, he reminded himself that she also didn't look a day over twenty-two. Not exactly jailbait, but not fair game for a man who preferred women who held as few illusions as he did when it came to the opposite sex.

"No. I'm...no," she repeated. "I know you have a one-o'clock with her, though. I can get these. Really," she insisted, her focus on the transparencies and computer disks she quickly pushed back into a folder. She reached past him for another disk. Bumping his knee with her forearm, she pulled back, apparently deciding that disk could wait. "If you'll have a seat, I'll let her know you're here."

He handed her the disk and another file, then watched her snatch up the rest and start to rise. Snagging her upper arm, rising, too, he helped her to her feet.

"Thank you," she murmured, and aimed an apologetic smile at his chin before she reached across the desk to punch a button on the ringing phone.

Her tone totally professional, she answered with a brisk, "Good afternoon, Kelton & Associates," as she dumped the files on the desk.

His glance ran over the curve of her narrow hips, down to where her slim skirt ended modestly at the back of her knees. Her slender legs were covered with dark gray tights. The black ballet flats she wore spoke of comfort and practicality. Nothing about the way she dressed could be remotely construed as provocative. Yet he found himself thinking her body looked as taut as the muscles in her arm had felt, when a tall, leggy blond in killer heels and a lipstick-red suit rounded the corner into the reception area.

"I'll need ten copies of this report, too, Amy. And when you get a chance—" she continued, only to cut herself off when her head snapped up and she saw him standing there.

The young woman at the desk immediately transferred the call she'd answered and put another on hold. "This is Mr. Taylor," she informed the blonde with a nod in his direction. "He just arrived. Ten copies," she repeated, and slipped into the secretarial chair to straighten the files she'd dropped while telling whoever was on the line that the person he wanted to speak with wasn't in but that she'd be happy to transfer him to her voice mail if he wanted to leave a message.

The thirty-something ad executive in the red power suit gave him an easy smile as she extended her perfectly manicured hand. In that same moment, she managed a blink-of-an-eye once-over that somehow managed to take in everything from his Italian leather shoes to the quality of his open-collared dress shirt and hand-tailored sport coat and the neat cut of his dark, slightly graying hair.

"Jared Taylor. I'm Candace Chapman." Eyes the pure blue of a summer sky held his. Expertly applied makeup turned her strikingly attractive features flawless. "I've looked forward to meeting you. It's always exciting to be in on the birth of a new company." She tipped her head to one side,

the motion causing her shining, shoulder-length hair to shimmer in the overhead lights. She snagged it back with her left, noticeably ringless, hand.

“Hold my calls, will you please?” she asked the young woman now heading into another hallway with the report she’d been handed. “Would you like coffee?” Candace asked him.

His attention diverted as much by the woman speaking to him as his reason for being there, he replied, “Please. Black.”

“And two coffees?” she called after her infinitely more nondescript subordinate.

“So, tell me, Jared,” she continued, only to quickly pause. “May I call you Jared?”

Since he’d been J.T. all his life, “Jared” would definitely take getting used to. “If I can call you Candace.”

“Of course.” The charming smile was back. “Anyway,” she continued, leading him past offices with employees at drafting tables, “you mentioned on the phone that you’re new to the Portland market. Are you planning to offer your architectural services only in Oregon, or all of the Northwest?”

She and the agency knew exactly how to make an impression. The first thing he noticed when she led him into her corner office at the end of the hall was an expansive view of the city, its river dividing east side from west and several of the dozen bridges linking them together. Then there were the industry and civic awards on and above a black-lacquered credenza behind the matching executive desk. Photos in sleek frames of Candace and an older woman who looked much like her shaking the hands of presumably important personages graced the opposite wall.

Rather than sit in the executive chair behind the desk, she headed for the end of the room and one of four barrel chairs spaced around a low cube-shaped coffee table.

“I’m not limiting myself,” he replied, as they settled themselves. “I’ll go wherever the client wants.”

She crossed her long legs, carefully adjusted her skirt and balanced a yellow legal pad in her lap. “And your market will be business developers?”

“And companies looking to build new facilities. I can handle anything from a single-level building to multilevel campuses with subterranean access and egress.”

“So we’ll need saturation in trade and financial magazines,” she concluded. “Do you mind if I ask what sort of advertising you do now?”

He told her he did none himself, then danced around the nature of his present situation by explaining that he was with a company that designed industrial complexes in Europe and Asia. He didn’t say a word that wasn’t true, he just omitted a lot as he went on to tell her that his partners didn’t yet know he was leaving. No one in the company did. Because of that, because he was striking out on his own, confidentiality was imperative.

It was as he was speaking of the need for discretion that he realized the associate she’d addressed as “Amy” had entered the room. With his back to the door, he didn’t see her until he noticed Candace give her a nod and she moved to his side.

Holding the small tray she carried low so he could take his cup, she accepted his “Thanks,” with a quiet “You’re welcome,” then set the tray with the other mug soundlessly on the cube.

The gaminelike woman was the antithesis of the chic advertising executive with the obvious business savvy and not-so-subtle sexuality. Even as the girl in gray slipped back out, her motions quiet, efficient, the woman across from him shifted to cross her legs the other way.

The motion immediately drew his glance to the length of her shapely calves. A man would have to be drawing his last breath not to notice legs like hers.

“No one outside the offices of Kelton & Associates will know of your plans until the time comes to unveil them,” Candace assured him. “Everyone from our assistant,” she said with a nod toward the now empty doorway, “to our graphic artists knows it would hardly be to our advantage to ruin the impact of an advertising campaign or alienate a client.”

“Just so we understand each other.”

She touched her pen to the corner of her glossy red mouth. “I’m certain we do. So,” she said, “talk to me about your vision. Do you have a mission statement?”

She asked intelligent questions, took notes, and spent the next ten minutes having him do the talking to get as much information as possible. He spent the next ten letting her impress him with previous work they’d done for their clients and confirming what he’d learned about the agency in his research. By the time Candace gave him a tour of the place and started introducing him to the various people on the agency’s creative team, she was well on her way to convincing him that Kelton & Associates was the firm he needed to launch his new venture.

It also became enormously apparent that Candace Chapman hadn’t a clue that he was Harrison Hunt’s son—and, unless he was totally misinterpreting her subtle cues, that she might be interested in something more than designing him a company logo and getting that logo recognized in the right circles.

The last thing he’d expected to find when he’d walked in the door was a possible candidate for the Bride Hunt. But he couldn’t deny the possibility staring him in the face. While she reminded him of any number of other beautiful, sophisticated women he’d known over the years, as ambitious and career driven as she seemed, she might well meet his criteria for a wife.

Because of that, and because of his father’s rules, he surreptitiously pocketed his Rolex on his way out of the graphics department. On his way into Film Media where he met Sid Crenshaw, their techno and art wizard, he made a point of claiming that every penny he had was going into his new business, so he really needed whatever campaign they designed to work. He wanted Ms. Chapman and the entire KA team, as she called them, to think him an average, modestly successful architect who lived part-time in Seattle, presently worked mostly overseas and wanted to open his own firm in the Northwest so he could return to living in the States.

He handled the logistics of paying the retainer without writing a check or otherwise exposing his identity by claiming to be in the process of setting up a separate account for his new firm. Candace didn’t bat a single lush eyelash when he said he’d return the contract she would send him with a cashier’s check for five thousand dollars to cover their preliminary work. She’d simply said that would be fine, and offered him her hand to seal the deal after they’d entered the reception area, where he found himself glancing around for the young woman who’d run into him when he’d first arrived.

“So we’re agreed,” Candace said, as he absently withdrew his hand. “We’ll have a preliminary presentation for you next week.” She tipped her head, her blue eyes steady on his. “If you have any questions or ideas in the meantime, call me. If you’re in town, I’d be happy to meet and discuss them.”

A faint smile tugged at his mouth. Not “we’ll talk on the phone.” Rather, “we’ll meet.” He had to give her points for being direct. He liked that in a woman. It took the guesswork out of the whole dating thing.

Thinking he’d give her a call to meet for a drink after he looked at his schedule, he reached for the door. “I’m sure I’ll be in touch,” he assured her, and found himself taking one last glance toward the empty Lucite desk.

He was looking for her assistant. Not sure why, even less certain why he felt a twinge of disappointment at not seeing her, he moved into the hall, headed for the elevator and punched the down button.

He was in the process of dismissing that disappointment as being totally irrelevant when the elevator dinged, the door slid open and he heard a feminine voice down the hall call “Hold that, please?”

The missing assistant hurried toward him with an armload of manila envelopes, stacks of letter-size white ones and a half-dozen Express Mail packs.

He stepped inside the empty elevator, blocked the closing sensor with his arm.

“Oh, thank you,” she murmured, and stepped inside herself.

Moving to a back corner, she aimed a smile toward his chest. She said nothing else, though, as the doors closed and he glanced from his corner to where she stood hugging the mail. The overhead light caught faint hints of gold in her baby-fine brown hair as the elevator began its descent. A few of the wisps that fell beneath her eyebrows had caught at the corner of her long, dark eyelashes.

With her arms full, she pulled her focus from the descending floor numbers, ducked her head and lifted her shoulder to dislodge the strands. She'd yet to meet his eyes. Wondering if that was because she still felt flustered from their first encounter or if she was just preoccupied, he started to ask if she always moved at a run.

The lights flickered just as he opened his mouth.

An instant later, the lights went out as the elevator jerked to a stop.

Chapter Two

Amy couldn't see a thing. In the darkness of the stalled elevator, she couldn't hear anything, either. No Muzak. No mechanical grind and whir that might indicate a frozen pulley motor. The construction noise from the tenth floor that had tormented the building's tenants all week was gone. Except for a terse, "What the...?" seconds ago, even the big man next to her remained silent.

As far as she could tell, Jared Taylor—all six-foot-two, beautifully masculine inches of him—didn't move from his corner. Neither did she as she waited a handful of seconds to see if anything else would happen.

Nothing did.

"Are you claustrophobic?" she heard him ask into the dark.

"I haven't been before." She drew a cautious breath. The way her day was going, however, discovering a new phobia was entirely possible. So far, she'd overslept, which meant she'd missed her bus so she'd had to take her car to work. She'd dented her fender pulling into the parking garage because she'd been in such a hurry, then arrived late to find that the receptionist had quit. She'd then nearly knocked over the firm's newest client because she'd been worrying about a call she received last night from her grandmother and hadn't been paying attention to where she was going. Now, the Fates had pulled the plug on the power. "But there's a first time for everything," she conceded. "How about you?"

"The only thing that bothers me right now is not knowing why we're stalled." He paused, listening. "I don't hear a fire alarm. If someone had tripped one, the elevator should have gone straight to the first floor and opened. It must be something else."

The mail she'd hugged landed on the floor. "There's a phone by the doors."

She had absolutely no desire to stand there conjuring scenarios. Apparently, neither did he. Even as she reached out to find the brass panel to the right of the elevator doors, she felt him moving beside her.

She reached the panel first. Groping over it in the dark, she felt his arm bump her shoulder as he reached past her.

His palm landed on the back of her hand. Since her hand wasn't covering what they were both looking for, she pulled her fingers from beneath his and patted farther to her right. As she did, his sleeve brushed her cheek. Or maybe her cheek brushed his sleeve. Whichever it was, she could feel his big body at her back. His heat permeated her sweater as his hand, or maybe it was his elbow since he seemed to be reaching over her, bumped a spot above her temple.

He must have heard her quick intake of breath.

"Sorry," he muttered, his deep voice above her. "What did I hit?"

"The side of my head."

She thought she heard him swear. She knew for a fact that she felt his hands curved over her shoulders and ease along the sides of her neck. As if feeling for the point of impact, his palms slid up and cupped above her ears.

"Where?"

She barely breathed. “My temple.”

“Which side.”

“Right.”

His left hand fell to her shoulder, the fingers of his right eased into her hair as if feeling for a knot.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Her heart was already doing double-time. The feel of his big hands should have put it into overdrive. Yet, his touch, the concern in it, the gentleness, seemed almost...calming. Or would have had she let herself truly consider it.

“I’m...fine. Really,” she murmured. “You didn’t hit that hard.”

The disquiet in her tone had changed quality. J.T. heard it as certainly as he’d felt her go still the moment he’d touched her. Realizing he was the reason for both, aware that he’d reached for her without thinking, he eased his hands away.

“There’s an emergency button by the phone.” Urgency returned to her voice. “Below it, I think. Here. I’ve got it.”

She must have pushed the button. Or someone trapped in one of the other two elevators had just as anxiously sent the emergency signal. Somewhere in the shaft below them, an alarm began ringing.

Conscious of that distant sound, more conscious of the lingering feel of her soft hair against his fingers, he took a step back to give her room when she said she’d found the phone.

“Joe, is that you?” she asked after half a minute went by. “This is Amy from the twelfth floor. I’m stuck in the elevator with a client. I’m not sure,” she said after a moment. “Somewhere around the ninth or tenth floor, I think.

“We’re okay,” she continued. “We’d just like to know what’s going on.

“Will do,” she finally murmured. “Thanks.”

J.T. heard a patting sound as she searched for the receiver’s cradle. It was followed by the click of plastic against metal when she found it and hung up.

“The power’s out in the whole building. Something tripped the main breaker.”

The construction, he thought. He remembered hearing the distant sound of a power saw when he’d first come in. “Did he say anything else?”

“Just that we’re not supposed to panic. If the power doesn’t come back on soon, they’ll call the fire department to come get us.”

“Are you okay with that?” A heavy hint of masculine caution laced the deep tones of his voice. “The not panicking part?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’ve never been stuck in a dark elevator before.”

Thinking she sounded okay for now, hoping she’d stay that way, J.T. leaned against the elevator’s back wall. “Who’s Joe?”

“The building’s maintenance supervisor. He’s been here forever.”

A moment ticked by. Another. From a few feet away, he heard her draw in a long, deep breath.

“These things don’t just fall down the shaft,” he told her, “if that’s what you’re worried about. There are redundant systems in place to keep that from happening.”

“How many?”

“Aside from the static brake, there’s at least one safety and a governor. Since we’re nowhere near being over weight capacity, that system should keep us right here until the power comes back on.”

“You know that for certain?”

“I do.”

“How?”

“Because I’ve read the specs when I’ve designed these things into buildings. Different companies have different features, but they all have the basic safety elements.”

A considering silence preceded her quiet “Oh.”

Silence intruded once more. Within seconds Amy could practically feel it echoing off the walls. Or maybe, she thought, crossing her arms tightly around herself, what she felt was the disturbing combination of nerves and the memory of the heat that had shot through her when she'd first met his eyes. They were the color of old pewter, the deep silver gray of a cloudy sky. But that was all she'd noticed before that odd heat had caused her to look away.

She'd never really felt that disturbing, intriguing sensation before. That...electricity, she supposed. She'd heard about it. Read about it. Tried to imagine it. But not once in her twenty-five years had she actually experienced the jolt that had made her heart feel as if it had tightened in her chest and darted warmth straight to her belly.

She'd felt the sensation again when he'd curved his hand over her shoulder and slipped his fingers through her hair. Only, then she felt something else, too. Something she hadn't even realized she'd craved until she'd felt his compelling touch. Simply to be cared for, to be cared *about*.

"So," she said, too uneasy with the elevator situation to refute the wholly unwanted admission. Not that what she'd felt with him mattered, anyway. Men like Jared Taylor, tall, dark and gorgeous men with ambition, sophistication and drive paid no real attention to her. Certainly, not the sort her beautiful, equally sophisticated stepsister received. She'd seen the way he'd straightened when Candace had walked in, caught the way his eyebrows arched ever so slightly as his glance moved along the length of her body. She'd seen the quick, reciprocating interest, too, as Candace had checked out his left hand. He hadn't been wearing a ring. Amy had noticed that herself when he'd helped her pick up the files that had scattered at their feet. If the guy was single, odds were that Candace would have him asking her out by the end of their next meeting.

Silence had intruded again, heavy, uncomfortable. Later, she could wonder if she'd ever find a man who would look at her with that unmistakable, purely male interest. Right now, she just needed for him to talk to her. Or to talk herself. That silence did nothing but let her too active imagination head in directions she really didn't want it to go.

"So, Mr. Taylor," she began again.

"It's Jared," he corrected. "And you're...Amy...?"

An introduction seemed totally reasonable under the circumstances.

"Amy Kelton," she replied, and would have offered her hand had she any idea where to find his.

"Kelton? Are you any relation to the Kelton in Kelton & Associates?"

"Mike Kelton was my father. He owned the agency before he passed away."

"He did?" He seemed to hesitate on a number of levels. "I mean, I'm sorry. About your father."

"Thanks. Me, too." It had been nearly five years, but the shock of her dad's sudden death and its unsettling aftermath still caught her off guard at times. Mike Kelton had been a man in his prime. Or so everyone had thought when he'd gone out one morning for his usual run, and promptly suffered a massive coronary.

"The firm went to his wife," she explained, her tone matter-of-fact. This man was a client, after all. As long as the firm bore her father's name and she was part of the team, she would protect its members—no matter how ambivalent she personally felt about some of them, or how invisible she usually was herself. "She was his business partner. Jill Chapman Kelton. She's Candace's mom. You would have met her, but she's touring a client's plant today."

J.T. frowned into the sea of black that prevented him from seeing features he remembered mostly as being delicate. Her eyes were dark, long-lashed and shot with flecks of gold, though why he remembered that from the few seconds she'd actually made eye contact with him, he had no idea.

From the nearness of her voice, the young woman who apparently held more interest in the firm than he would have ever suspected, remained by the wall a couple of feet away.

He knew the agency was a mother-daughter enterprise from his own quick research into the firm and Candace's recitation of the firm's hierarchy a while ago. She'd even pointed out the classy, silver-haired version of herself in the photos on her trophy wall. What Candace hadn't mentioned

was that her assistant was her stepsister, and that her mother had inherited the firm from Amy's dad. Not that she'd had any reason to mention it, he admitted to himself. He hadn't asked anything about the company that would have given her reason to bring it up.

"So you're interning," he concluded, thinking it the only way to explain the younger stepsister's subordinate position. "You're in college and learning all the jobs on the way to becoming a partner yourself."

"Actually...no. I'm Jill and Candace's assistant, the bookkeeper and gofer for just about everyone else."

"You're not going to be part of the agency?"

"Not in any way other than I already am. The company belongs to Jill." Candace would become a partner in a few months, though. Her mother had promised her a quarter interest when she turned thirty. If Candace wanted to tell him that, she could. It wasn't her place. "My only financial interest in it is in what she pays me."

"Are you okay with that?"

A shrug entered her voice. "I have to be."

He hadn't expected the acceptance in her response. Or maybe it was the resignation. Baffled by whatever it was, his basic sense of fair play insisted that she should have shared the ownership of what appeared to be a very successful operation, not merely been there to support the women now running it.

"Why do you have to be?"

"Because I need the job to help support my grandmother," she admitted, too concerned about being trapped to care that he was so blunt. They were talking. That was all she cared about just then. "Jill pays me too much to go anywhere else."

"Do you live with your grandmother?"

"No, I... No," Amy repeated, and promptly told herself she really should shut up. At the very least, she should change the subject. She couldn't begin to deny the unease she felt knowing she was ten stories up, trapped in a box with nothing but whatever mechanical wizardry he understood but she didn't to keep it from dropping to the basement. She just wasn't in the habit of sharing her problems with people she knew, much less with a stranger she'd be faced with again when he returned for his next appointment.

"Then, she lives with you," he concluded.

"She's in an assistant living facility."

"What about your stepmom?" he asked, before she could move on. "Why isn't she supporting her?"

"Because Grandma Edna is my responsibility. She's my mom's mom and the only real relative I have left," she allowed, though she might not have added the latter had she not been where she was. If the elevator fell, there wouldn't be anyone to see that the increasingly eccentric older woman was properly cared for. Edna could be a handful. Jill couldn't stand her.

"Can we talk about something else, please? Tell me about your company," she suggested, desperately wanting not to think about falling down the shaft. "You must be excited about pulling it all together. Is having your own firm something you've always wanted?"

J.T. didn't know which caught him more off guard just then; her obvious resignation to her position in the company, the abrupt change of subject, or her assumption that he felt any excitement at all about his possible venture.

She'd also just confronted him with the sudden need for an acceptable explanation for his own circumstances.

He could hardly tell her that the idea of starting his own company had nothing to do with realizing a dream. It had simply been the logical thing to do, given what his father had thrown at him. He couldn't tell her, either, that once he'd decided what he had to do, that he'd approached the task

with the same methodical, get-it-done attitude he intended to tackle in his pursuit of Candace-the-potential bride. There had been nothing resembling excitement involved.

The thought gave him pause. Standing there with the dark masking his disquiet, he couldn't honestly say he felt energized, eager or enthusiastic about much of anything he did anymore. Even his last climbing trip in the Swiss Alps had left him oddly dissatisfied and restless. It almost had been as if pushing himself to conquer yet another mountain was no longer enough.

He didn't care at all for that unexpected thought, or the strange, empty sensation that came with it. Certain both were there only because he was being pushed to do things he didn't want to do, he dismissed the matter as inconsequential—and simply told her what he could of the truth.

“I didn't start thinking about my own firm until a couple of months ago. It just seemed like it was time.”

“To break out on your own?”

“Something like that.”

“Then, this isn't a goal you've worked toward for a while.”

He hadn't been prepared for the conclusion in her voice. Or, maybe what he hadn't expected was her insight.

A hush fell between them, long seconds passing before her soft voice finally drifted toward him.

“I'm sorry.”

“For what?”

“Overstepping myself. I didn't mean to pry.” Sympathy joined the apology in her tone. “I just assumed that starting your own firm was something you'd wanted to do.”

She clearly recognized that it was not.

For a moment J.T. couldn't think of a thing to say that wouldn't sound like confirmation—or like too much of a protest. He handled his life the same way he played poker. Straight-faced and close to the vest. He wasn't given to showing his hand. Yet, in a matter of seconds, this quietly unassuming woman had recognized his ambivalence and pretty much called him on it.

Feeling exposed, not caring for the sensation at all, he dismissed her perception as a fluke. At least, he did until he considered what he'd learned about her job and realized she might well be wrestling with her circumstances, too. The inherent unfairness in her situation did strike a vaguely familiar chord.

“What would you do if you didn't have to work for the agency?”

Amy shifted against the wall, uncomfortable with having trespassed onto sensitive ground. She wasn't usually so straightforward with a client. Not that Jill had her deal with any of them directly very often. Most of her contact was over the phone or by mail. It was just that this man's vague responses had left her with the feeling that his new venture had been precipitated by something unexpected. A divorce, perhaps. Or a problem within the firm he now worked with. Personality problems within the partnership. Cutbacks.

Whatever the reason, he didn't seem to her to be at all enthused about striking out on his own. She'd simply responded to that. Much as she'd responded to his touch moments ago, and the tension she sensed in him now.

That faint tension seemed to reach toward her, wrap itself around her, increase her own.

Not at all sure what to make of her reactions to him, she tried to ignore them all. “If I could do anything...”

A faint thud sent her heart into her throat.

Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“It sounded like something hitting metal.”

“Might have been a door. Is the stairwell near the elevators?”

“It's just around the corner.”

“They’re probably evacuating the building. Go on,” he coaxed, sounding far less concerned than she felt. “You’d... what?”

The elevator doors were too thick to hear much of anything else going on beyond them. It was also possible that they were stuck between floors, which meant they were further insulated by the six or so feet of crawl space and whatever else existed between the building’s various levels from anyone who might pull the doors open from the outside.

Thinking of how big he was, how quietly powerful and confident he seemed, she inched closer to his voice. “Get a degree in marine biology,” she said, “find a research position, then tackle the rest of my life list.”

More concerned with being stuck while everyone else was leaving than with the list she’d barely begun to complete, she strained to see if she could hear anything else.

All she heard was the curiosity in Jared’s voice. “Life list?”

“It’s a list of things I want to do before I...” *die* wasn’t a word she wanted to use just then. “Before I’m too old to get around,” she concluded.

“Getting your degree is at the top of it?”

“At the top was to buy my own home.” Having her own home had been at the top of her list ever since her father had married Jill and sold the one she’d grown up in. She’d promised herself then that she’d someday have a home no one could take from her. “I did that a few years ago,” she told him, ever grateful for the down payment allowed by the modest insurance policy her father had kept for her.

Trying to stay focused, she thought about the next item on the old piece of blue notepaper she kept tucked in her nightstand drawer, and skipped right over it. Admitting her hope—her need—to have a family of her own felt far too personal, especially since he was undoubtedly only trying to distract her from thoughts of where they were.

“Next is to dive off the coast of Australia,” she added, thinking her odds of accomplishing any of that roughly equal to acquiring a fairy godmother. She had neither the prospects, the time nor the money her dreams required. Given her present obligations, she wouldn’t for a very long time. “And in the Bahamas and Hawaii.” It was also a wish list, after all.

The curiosity in his voice remained as he asked how long she’d been diving. She told him her dad taught her when she was eleven, but that she hadn’t done much in the past couple of years. “No time,” she explained, thinking she’d love to be on any of those islands just then. Anywhere to be away from where she was.

Maybe she was a little claustrophobic after all. Or maybe the unease she felt was fear of falling.

She didn’t realize she’d spoken her last thoughts aloud. At least, not until she felt him move closer and his hand touched her arm.

The moment it fell away, she realized what he’d done.

He’d let her know he was right there, close enough to reach, if she needed him.

“You’re doing fine,” he assured her.

“Do you think we should try to get out?”

“Doing anything other than staying where we are for a while would probably just get us into bigger trouble. They know we’re here,” he reminded her.

“In the movies, they show people going through the little door up there.”

“What they don’t show in those movies is that the hatch is usually bolted from the outside. Even if this one isn’t, I’d rather not crawl around on top of this thing trying to find a way out in the dark.” J.T. didn’t mind an adrenaline rush. He’d hang off a cliff face suspended by ropes and gladly spend the time working out his next move and enjoying the view. But that kind of risk was different from hanging onto greased cables while standing on a box that would start moving the instant the power came back on. He’d have little control in that situation. Being in control was what his life had been about for as long as he could remember.

“I wouldn’t have a clue where I was in relation to anything else,” he admitted, willing to bet the best Bordeaux in his cellar that she didn’t really want to crawl around up there, either. “I have a thing about wanting to know my next move.”

“So we forget the hatch,” she murmured. “What about prying open the doors?”

“The problem there is if we’re between floors and one of us is crawling out when the power comes back on.” Had he been alone, he probably would have already tried that. He’d risk his own neck. He didn’t care to risk anyone else’s. “The car will move. The floor remains stationary. It’s too easy to get crushed.”

He thought she shuddered.

“And you know these things because you’ve worked with elevator companies,” she concluded flatly.

“Call it a perk.”

Amy swallowed. “Thank you for sharing.”

He liked her bravado. Most of the women he knew would be in need of major hand holding by now. “Let’s give them a while. If we start needing food and water, I promise, we’ll come up with something.”

“So,” he continued, thinking it best to move on from the scenarios he’d planted in her head. With the time being wasted just standing there, he would have thought he’d rather be anywhere else at the moment, too. Almost. “Why diving?”

It wasn’t often that he met anyone he found particularly intriguing, much less anyone who truly surprised him. Never would he have imagined her wrestling air tanks and weight belts to play tag with eels off the Great Barrier Reef. As docile as she’d first seemed, he wouldn’t have thought there was an adventurous bone in her slender little body.

“Because I like the way I feel when I’m doing it.”

“How’s that?”

“Free,” Amy said easily. She no longer cared what he asked her while they waited. She was just grateful for the distraction he offered, and for his solid presence. Had she been trapped there alone, she might well be huddled in a corner by now. “I don’t feel that anywhere the way I do in the water. There are no restraints. It’s just you and this whole other world. It’s all just so...different. So...natural.” *So peaceful*, she started to add, only to go silent as awkwardness abruptly crept through her.

Describing the abandon she felt in all that unhurried quiet didn’t seem as simple as telling him about goals that probably weren’t extraordinary at all to someone who seemed as urbane as this man did. Even in the dark, she ducked her head. “It’s hard to explain to someone unless they’ve been there themselves.”

Moments ago she’d moved closer. Not by much, J.T. thought. Just close enough that every breath he drew now brought her subtle scent with it. He couldn’t figure out what it was. It seemed too light to be perfume. Her shampoo, maybe. Body wash.

Already more aware of her than he wanted to be, he thought about moving himself. She was clearly growing more uncomfortable, though, and trying her best to mask it. So he stayed where he was. Despite whatever discomfort or awkwardness she felt, she also seemed to feel safer near him.

“You don’t have to explain it to me.” He offered the assurance as he turned from the back wall, edged to the wall adjoining it. She was right there, presumably with her back against the panels. With his arms crossed, he let his jacket sleeve rest lightly against her upper arm. She could move closer if she wanted. Or away, if she chose. “I know what you mean.”

Though he sensed hesitation, she stayed where she was.

“You do?”

“I haven’t been diving in years,” he admitted, wondering if he hadn’t just felt her relax a little. He preferred to be on the water, pushing for speed and battling the wind for control. “But I sail for the same reason.” Especially to an island that I want to build a home on someday, he thought, and

overlooked the agitation that came with the idea of potentially losing access to it. “I haven’t had time to indulge myself lately, either.”

“Did your father teach you?”

That agitation seemed determined to be felt. She couldn’t possibly know that his relationship with his father bore no resemblance whatsoever to what she’d apparently shared with hers. He just wasn’t about to tell her how many times Harry had raised his preteen hopes about them doing something together, only to attend a meeting instead. How many times he’d fallen asleep outside his dad’s office to show him something he’d made or a paper for which he’d received an exceptional grade only to have a housekeeper wake him and tell him his dad had left. Old Harry had been far too busy building his technological empire to bother with anything so mundane as what might matter to a kid.

“I learned with a friend. We borrowed his brother’s boat and basically taught ourselves.”

He’d been grounded for a week when Cornelia had discovered what he’d been doing and told his father about it. He’d been grounded for another week for risking his neck because Cornelia had insisted they could have capsized the boat and drowned. He’d never been worried, though. By the time she’d found out what he’d been up to, he’d become a pretty good sailor.

“How old were you?” he heard Amy ask.

“Twelve.” He hadn’t thought back so far in years. “I decided then that I’d have my own sailboat someday.”

“How long was it before you bought one?”

The smile in her voice seemed to say that she didn’t doubt his determination for an instant. Drawn by that, he might well have told her about the series of boats that had led to the forty-foot sloop he currently kept docked in Seattle. But even as he opened his mouth he remembered that he needed her and everyone else in the ad agency to think him a relatively average guy. He had no idea what she and her stepsister did or didn’t share with each other, but he didn’t want to say anything he wouldn’t want repeated. He strongly suspected that a modestly successful architect wouldn’t trade-in million-dollar sailboats the way most men did cars.

Grateful once more for the dark, he told her only that he bought a small one when he was eighteen. He wasn’t sure why he was telling her any of this as it was. He wasn’t in the habit of talking about his childhood to anyone. There’d been good parts and bad. He’d survived it. End of story. But he was spared having to wonder at how easily the young woman beside him had drawn him out when the elevator jerked.

Amy’s breath caught as she grabbed for him. Jared’s hands clamped around her upper arms. In the awful seconds while she waited for whatever would happen next, she didn’t know if he pulled her to him to keep her from losing her balance, or if he was simply bracing them both. All she knew for certain was that he’d pulled her into his arms, that his body felt as solid as steel, and that she could do nothing but hang on.

With her heart battering her ribs, she buried her head against his chest.

Beneath her feet, the floor remained still long enough for her to become conscious of being surrounded by his heat—an instant before the elevator started to descend. Slowly. The way it always did.

Her pulse still racing, she opened her eyes, drew a quick, decidedly cautious breath. The scents of citrus aftershave and warm male filled her lungs as she blinked at the strip of cashmere between the soft wool lapels fisted in her hands.

The lights had come back on.

“Are you okay?”

His voice came from above her, the rich sounds of it a quiet rumble beneath the strains of the Muzak once again filtering through the speakers.

Looking straight ahead, all she could see was the wall of his very solid chest. She didn’t want to move. For that unexpected, too-fleeting moment, she felt very safe where she was. Sheltered.

Protected. She hadn't felt anything remotely resembling that alien sense of security since long before her father had died.

The feeling vanished with her next heartbeat.

Glancing up, her eyes met his. With her head tipped back, she was close enough to see shards of silver in cloud gray eyes, the carved lines bracketing his beautiful mouth. Already aware of the compelling feel of his arms, she nearly forgot what he'd asked.

He'd gone as still as stone. Or maybe it was she who failed to move as his glance skimmed her face and settled on her parted lips.

For one totally surreal instant, it seemed as if he was about to close the negligible distance between them. Yet, even as her heart nearly stalled at the thought of his mouth on hers, a muscle in his jaw jerked. His hold on her eased.

Releasing her grip on his lapels, she stepped back just as he did.

It was only then she remembered that he'd asked if she was all right. Considering the knotted state of her nerves, she most definitely was not.

"I'm...yes, of course," she murmured, jamming awkwardness beneath a thin layer of composure. He was watching her, rather curiously from the feel of his eyes on her as she scooped up her stack of mail while the elevator continued its descent. "I'm...fine. I'm just sorry you had to wander under the little black cloud that's been following me around all day. That's probably why I nearly ran you over in the office, and why you got stuck in here with me now." Refusing to consider what else could go wrong, she aimed a commendably calm smile at the cleft in his chin. If she'd learned anything from her years in advertising, it was that perception was everything. If you appeared in control, everyone thought you were. "The good news is that it's me, not you, and that bad days get better."

"What about bad weeks?"

"Those are the ones that build character." Or so her grandma said.

"Bad months?" he asked, and watched as her smile made it to her eyes. Something knowing shifted in those doe-brown depths.

"That's when you need to find something to do that takes you away from your problems for a while. Whatever you're dealing with won't go away," she warned him, "but for that hour or that day, you've taken away its power over you."

The elevator stopped. Even as her smile fell away, the doors opened to a lobby crowded with office workers. Before J.T. could ask what sort of thing she would suggest as an escape, or what else had happened to her that day, she'd slipped into the mass of people grumbling about having had to walk the however-many flights they'd taken to get to the ground floor, only to now have to wait for an elevator to go back up.

He moved into the crowd himself, stopping a lawyer-type in a three-piece suit to ask what had happened to the power. The man told him that one of the building's floors was being gutted and remodeled. A worker had apparently shorted an electrical line and tripped the building's main breaker.

J.T. had barely thanked the guy before he glanced back to see if he could catch a glimpse of short and shining brown hair. He saw no one familiar, though, as he moved through the surge of people and out the building's tall glass doors.

Frowning at himself, he stepped out into the early fall air. He was on the brick-paved transit mall. MAX, the commuter train, rattled by on its light-rail line. A bus idled at the light on the corner. He couldn't believe how close he'd come to kissing her. With her mouth inches from his, her scent and the feel of her coltish little body drawing him closer, he'd come within a heartbeat of seeing if she tasted as sweet as she looked.

Sweet. He'd never met a female he would have described that way.

He shook his head, plowed his fingers through his hair. He really needed to focus here. He fully intended to get to know her stepsister. Even if Candace hadn't seemed to be an excellent candidate

for the hunt, Amy wasn't at all the sort of sophisticated, worldly female that normally attracted him. The sort of woman who'd developed a certain cynicism about the opposite sex herself. When he entered the game, he preferred an equal playing field. The young woman he'd just spent the past hour with probably didn't even know there *were* rules. One of which had always been that a woman not get too close.

It occurred to him, vaguely, that the way he'd played for years might need to change. For now, though, all he cared about was that he'd caught himself before he'd done anything foolish. Circumstances had pretty much thrown her into his arms was all. With his first priority being to save his position at HuntCom, he had more to worry about than a young woman who possessed far more insight about his feelings for his backup project than he was comfortable with.

Amy hurried past a curved, Plexiglas bus kiosk, her arms wrapped tightly around her bundle of envelopes as she glanced back over her shoulder. She saw no sign of Jared Taylor on the tree-lined sidewalk. As tall and imposing as he was, he would stand out in any crowd, but he'd already disappeared.

She could still almost feel the strength in his hands when he'd helped her to her feet back in the office—right after she'd plowed into him and scattered files at feet. Just as she could almost imagine that same warmth filling her whole body when he'd held her in the elevator—moments after she'd practically crawled inside his jacket when the elevator had lurched. When he'd let go of her, the way his broad brow furrowed had made it abundantly clear that he'd wondered what on God's green earth he'd been doing. At least he'd been gentleman enough to pretend nothing unusual had happened while she'd rattled on about having had a bad day.

She turned the corner to the post office, trying to shake off the entire unsettling encounter. She just hoped he wouldn't say anything about her to Candace. She especially hoped he didn't let it slip that she'd mentioned having to take care of her grandmother or make a comment about her having had a less-than-stellar day. The last thing she needed was to give Jill's admittedly beautiful, undeniably well-intentioned daughter any reason to caution her about maintaining professionalism with their clients, or to give her a pep talk about what she needed to do when things weren't going right.

Candace's solution for everything was either a new man or a shopping trip. While Amy loved to hit sales, the home where her grandma lived had raised its rates so her budget had become tighter than ever.

As for finding herself a man, she was beginning to think she might be in the home herself before that ever happened. It seemed as if every female she knew was married, engaged, involved or on the mend from a broken relationship and had sworn off for the duration. Candace always had a man in her life. She went out more in a month than Amy had in the past two years. It was just that Amy's obligations to Jill, the agency and her grandma—and the fact that her frequent visits to Edna seemed to be a turnoff for some men—had kept her from getting beyond a few first dates and casual friendships. Then there was what Candace called her totally naive belief in happily-ever-after instead of happy-enough-for-now.

She'd always wanted the fairy tale. She wanted a man she loved who loved her back. She wanted family to be as important to him as it was to her. She wanted to have children with him, to share with him, to grow old with him. As long as she was thinking about it, it also would be nice if the guy made her feel what she'd so fleetingly experienced with Jared Taylor. Even the pleasant sensations she'd felt from a couple of the more charming frogs she'd kissed hadn't touched her in as many ways as just being held by that man.

For now, though, she'd just take care of the mail, hurry to the printers to pick up the copies of the family photos she'd had made for Edna with the hope of jogging her failing memory—and promise herself that the next time she saw Jared Taylor, she wouldn't let preoccupation with her personal concerns embarrass her again. It had been worry about her grandmother distracting her when she'd so unceremoniously plowed into him by the reception desk.

Unfortunately, a little over a week later, that same concern had just compounded itself. She just didn't have time to deal with that worry at the moment. Fifteen minutes before he was to arrive for his preliminary presentation, she received a reply to her latest e-mail request for a routine credit check on their newest client. Like the other companies from which she'd requested information, this one claimed no credit, employment or academic history available on an architect named Jared Taylor. Professionally, the man didn't seem to exist.

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