BRONWYN JAMESON

IN BED WITH THE BOSS'S DAUGHTER

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Аннотация

Corporate tough-guy Jack Manning hadn't laid eyes on Paris Grantham since the night he'd rebuffed the eighteen-year-old's invitation to obliterate her virginity.He'd been more than a little tempted by the boss's daughter - and relieved the sweet seductress had retreated to London. Until now… In six years Paris had become every man's ultra-fantasy. But the former innocent now carried her pedigree like a shield - and was fighting her way into his world of billion-dollar deals.One scintillating kiss shredded her all-business demeanor - and Jack pulled up sharp on passion's reins! He'd sworn off loving this woman years ago…yet how badly he ached for her….

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“I Am Offering You A Low-Maintenance Relationship, Hot Sex Guaranteed, No Strings Attached. And You’re Turning Me Down?”

Jack nodded in response to her question, though every cell in his body screamed, Are you crazy?

“You think my father offered me this job to exert some sort of influence on you?” Paris stared at him narrow-eyed for a moment, then in several brisk strides she was out the door, but not before Jack detected the hurt in her eyes.

Her pride was hurt, he suspected. Same as six years ago. Except her offer then had been hugely different. Then she’d spoken of love. She’d wanted to gift him with her innocence and that had scared the hell out of him. Now she only wanted a quick affair to cure an old infatuation.

Well, tough.

He didn’t do one-night stands and he didn’t need to prove what he’d suspected all along—that having Paris Grantham would be addictive and way too consuming….

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the world of Silhouette Desire, where you can

indulge yourself every month with romances that can only be described as passionate, powerful and provocative!

The ever-fabulous Ann Major offers a Cowboy Fantasy, July's MAN OF THE MONTH. Will a fateful reunion between a Texas cowboy and his ex-flame rekindle their fiery passion? In Cherokee, Sheri WhiteFeather writes a compelling story about a Native American hero who, while searching for his Cherokee heritage, falls in love with a heroine who has turned away from hers.

The popular miniseries BACHELOR BATTALION by Maureen Child marches on with His Baby!—a marine hero returns from an assignment to discover he's a father. The tantalizing Desire miniseries FORTUNES OF TEXAS: THE LOST HEIRS continues with The Pregnant Heiress by Eileen Wilks, whose pregnant heroine falls in love with the investigator protecting her from a stalker.

Alexandra Sellers has written an enchanting trilogy, SONS OF THE DESERT: THE SULTANS, launching this month with The Sultan's Heir. A prince must watch over the secret child heir to the kingdom along with the child's beautiful mother. And don't miss Bronwyn Jameson's Desire debut—an intriguing tale involving a self-made man who's In Bed with the Boss's Daughter.

Treat yourself to all six of these heart-melting tales of Desire—and see inside for details on how to enter our Silhouette Makes You a Star contest.

Enjoy!

Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

In Bed with the Boss's Daughter

Bronwyn Jameson

BRONWYN JAMESON

spent much of her childhood with her head buried in a book. As a teenager, she discovered romance novels, and it was only a matter of time before she turned her love of reading them into a love of writing them. Bronwyn shares an idyllic piece of the Australian farming heart-land with her husband and three sons, a thousand sheep, a dozen horses, assorted wildlife and one kelpie dog. She still chooses to spend her limited downtime with a good book.

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One

He missed her entrance, but Jack knew she'd made one. She would have made one even without arriving fashionably late on her father's arm…and even if that man wasn't Kevin "K.G." Grantham, billionaire property developer and host of this shindig.

Paris Grantham made entrances because she was, quite simply, 180 centimeters of spectacular construction.

Jack rolled his tense shoulders, ran his tongue around his dry mouth and cursed the sudden scarcity of drink waiters. He scanned the crush for a white jacket or a tray held aloft but instead found her. Again. Dressed in something bronze and lacy, she shimmered like old gold against the backdrop of cocktail-party black, all long legs and sleek curves, as poised and graceful as a fashion model.

Except she would never cut it as a model. Not without kissing all those gorgeous curves goodbye.

Jack tugged at his collar to ease the stiff constriction of his bow tie and wished for an equally simple solution to another hot, tight pressure—the one spreading south. He blessed the appearance of a waiter and snagged a drink from his tray. Maybe the champagne would cool his blood.

Yeah, right! Maybe he should just have stayed the hell away!

All Grantham executives were expected to attend all project

launches, but Jack usually ignored that unwritten rule. He despised black-tie as much as he hated small talk and the absurd excuse for food they served at these things. He took a long sip of champagne and surveyed the sole reason he had come tonight over the top of his glass. Objectively. With his mind instead of his body.

The hair she used to wear loose was piled high in an elaborate style that accentuated the regal tilt of her head, the high angle of her chin, the way she looked down her nose…and how her fine, straight nose was custom-built for the purpose. A tiara wouldn't look out of place on that golden head.

Yeah, he snorted, K.G. should have set a tiara on his prodigal daughter's head and stood her on the spotlit dais instead of the model for Grantham's newest city-living complex. The Acacia Project wasn't the star of this show.

Jack's gaze fixed on her face, watching for some chink in that classic semibored expression favored by the born rich, something to show she'd adopted the look to fit tonight's occasion, not because she'd changed. But nothing shifted. Not a flicker of her carefully arched brows nor a waver of her glossy half smile.

And he realized the tightness in his gut had changed from heated awareness to disappointment. No. Disappointment came nowhere near describing this acid gnawing.

What had he expected?

Simple.

He'd expected a grown-up version of the Paris he

remembered, the one whose smile filled the room, whose widely spaced smoky eyes mirrored her every emotion. The one who dared wear a tiny leather skirt to a Grantham's Christmas party, who swigged Bollinger straight from the bottle and danced like she'd swallowed the music with it.

The girl-woman who'd rocked his foundations with her clear, honest proposition and then, before he could grasp the concept of the boss's daughter all grown-up and suddenly wanting him, had run away to London to live with her mother.

He'd expected to see that Paris and to declare, without reservation, the rumors false.

But this Paris looked like the kind of woman who would dump her fiancé when his money ran out. She looked like the kind of woman who would come running home to the comforting arms of Daddy's billions.

Jack drained his glass and wished he'd swallowed something harsh like tequila to match his mood. He fought the urge to wade through the sea of dinner suits and designer dresses, to grab her by the shoulders and shake her. To remind her how he'd told her to grow up, not grow into a Grantham!

Carefully he loosened his clenched fingers from the delicate stem of crystal in his hand. What did he know about Paris Grantham, anyway? For years she'd been the gangly limbed kid hanging about the edges of her father's weekend house parties, parties that were no more than business summits in casual dress with drinks. He'd noticed her, he'd felt sorry for her, he'd

encouraged her to talk to him. When she went away to boarding school, he didn't see her for two years, not until that night six years ago when she'd made her feelings for him extravagantly clear.

Feelings or intentions?

It didn't matter. At twenty-six his goal of snagging Grantham's top project-management job was so close he could taste it. At eighteen she'd been too young and too wild and too much the boss's daughter to be anything but trouble.

Six years on, she was still the boss's daughter, although everything else about her had changed. Jack unclenched his jaw and told himself the changes should please him. This woman wouldn't mess with his head at a time when he needed it clear and focused.

But pleasure was not part of the volatile cocktail of emotions curdling his gut. He recognized intense disappointment, a sense of loss and, seething through it, an irritation bordering on anger. And he knew he couldn't leave well enough alone. He had to know why she'd left so suddenly…and why she'd come back.

Paris shook her head slightly to stop her eyes crossing, not from boredom so much as sleep deprivation. If only she could summon up a dash of the anticipation that had kept her awake through most of yesterday's twenty-four-hour flight, a skerrick of the excitement that had kept her flying sky-high long after the plane touched down.

It seemed as if her head had barely touched the pillow when

K.G. pulled the curtains wide on a bright October morning. Caroline, her latest wannabe-stepmother, couldn't wait to meet her. Caroline then insisted they shop and do lunch and that Paris mustn't sleep or her whole body clock would be out of whack.

At this moment she longed for "out of whack." It sounded a vast improvement over her current state of totally whacked. She needed to perk up before she nodded off on the lord mayor's shoulder. The thought of her mother's reaction to such a breach of etiquette brought a wry half smile to her mind if not her lips.

Lady Pamela definitely would not approve!

Up until now she'd done her mother proud. The Collette Dinnigan cocktail dress might be a tad revealing for her mother's taste, but she had accessorized perfectly…and the upswept hair was consummate Lady Pamela. Paris couldn't wait to shake it loose, but in the meantime it served a purpose. Its weight prompted her to hold her head high, which reminded her to keep her smile in check and to answer every welcome-home platitude with polite good grace. And whenever her smile slipped a smidgen, she restored it with a quick reminder of why she was here.

Because you will soon be part of the Grantham team.

Years after she'd given up trying to convince her father she had capabilities beyond the ornamental, K.G. had asked her to come home and help with a special project.

With her smile suitably restored, she allowed K.G. to steer her toward another group.

"Princess, I'd like you to meet…"

She exchanged greetings with Hugh and Miffy and Miranda and Bob—or was that Bill? Her weary brain whirled with names and faces and titles. Was there anyone here she hadn't met? In response, the crowd split as if cleaved in two and she found herself looking directly into a pair of deep, dark, angry eyes.

Of course, she'd known he was there, somewhere across the crowded reception room.

About one nanosecond after arriving, as though they had some Jack-Manning-sensing radar capabilities, her eyes had zeroed in on his broad shoulders, the narrow band of white collar above his jacket and the thicker band of very tanned neck. The changes had sizzled through her body—he's cut his hair; he's wearing a suit—before she snapped herself back to reality.

Did you think he'd go six years without a haircut? Did you think Grantham's manager of construction projects would turn up to a project launch in jeans and hard hat?

Now she could see he'd changed in other ways. He didn't wink or grin crookedly or lift his glass in greeting, and she neither recognized nor understood the fierce anger burning in his eyes. He handed his glass to someone on his left and started toward her with steady purpose.

Oh, help!

For all her anticipation when choosing a dress to knock his socks off, despite her practice of witty opening lines, she wasn't ready to face him. Not now. Not tired and fuzzy-headed.

She turned and excused her way through the crowd, but her skirt was too slim and her heels too high for a rapid escape. Finally she fell out the door into the wide and refreshingly empty lobby, but she paused only long enough to recall the resolve on Jack's face. Then she headed straight for the Ladies sign. When she pushed through the door into the anteroom, the air rushed from her lungs in a heartfelt whoosh.

Sanctuary with a plump suede lounge setting.

She slumped into the nearest chair, took off her shoes, propped her bare feet on the occasional-table, and closed her eyes.

"Hiding, princess?"

Paris jolted upright. Only one person ever applied such mocking emphasis to K.G.'s pet name for her…and he was helping himself to the seat directly opposite. Had she really thought a Ladies sign would give him pause?

"Not hiding, resting," she corrected. "My feet."

His gaze dropped to her feet, and she stared in horrified fascination as his long, dark fingers circled her ankle. She stopped breathing when his thumb traced a strap mark across the bridge of her foot. A languorous warmth stole up her leg, past her knees, into her thighs….

"No wonder your feet hurt," he growled. "Your shoes are too tight."

Abruptly he let her go, and somehow Paris managed to slide both feet from the table. She jammed them solidly on the floor

and pressed her knees together, as if that might prevent the spread of traitorous heat.

"My feet are swollen from the flight," she said archly. And it felt as if her tongue might be, too. "Which is why I'm sitting here resting them."

His eyes narrowed a fraction, but they didn't leave hers, not even for a heartbeat. "Funny. I had the impression you were running away from me."

"And why would I do that?"

He shrugged. "Beats me. Maybe running away has become a habit with you."

His mocking tone needled, but she didn't allow herself to respond. Instead she ran through her mother's checklist. Posture straight. Head up. Smile in place. Cool retort. Except she couldn't think of a cool retort. Her brain felt as foggy as a London morning.

"Nothing to say, princess? Don't you want to talk about running away?"

"I thought we'd established I was resting my feet."

"I didn't mean tonight."

Paris wished he would lean back in his chair. From this close she could feel his irritation whipping across the table and snapping at the edges of her composure. Stay cool, she intoned silently. Then, as if his meaning had only just gelled, she allowed her eyes to widen. "Surely you don't mean I ran away to London. I'd been thinking of going for ages."

“K.G. never mentioned it.”

“I hadn’t told him.”

“No?” He drew the word out so long she had time to spell skeptical.

“I hadn’t seen my mother for years. I decided to spend some time with her, to get to know her again.”

“It took six years to get to know Lady Pamela?” he asked derisively.

No. It took six years to learn the benefits of hiding my emotions and looking out for my pride. She fixed Jack with a frosty look. “Actually, it took six years to take your advice and grow up.”

“This is the grown-up Paris Grantham?” One corner of his mouth lifted in an almost sneer as his gaze slid down her body. It was obvious he didn’t care for what he saw.

“Isn’t this what you had in mind?” she asked with a defensive lift of her chin.

“No.”

His bald answer shouldn’t have hurt, but it did. Dashed expectations smarted at the back of her throat and eyes. Jet lag makes one tired and emotional, she justified as she bent to retrieve her shoes. He moved more quickly. Her shoes already dangled from his left hand.

“D’you really want to put these back on?”

Paris swallowed to ease the constriction in her throat. She seriously considered making a lunge for the shoes, but the

thought of missing and landing headfirst in his lap stopped her. She took a deep breath and glared across at him. “What do you want, Jack? Why did you follow me in here?”

“To talk, princess.”

“About ancient history?”

“One night of it.”

“We can talk if you like, but my memory’s not so good.”

No way would she ever admit how much she remembered, how clearly she remembered everything about that night. His closemouthed fury when he dragged her from the table. Her feeling of smug jubilation as she snuggled in close in the back of the taxi he hired to take her home. Her heartfelt request, his horrified rejection, her humiliation. Six years and she still remembered every feeling, every word, as keenly as if it had happened yesterday.

“You remembered the bit about growing up,” he said evenly. “I imagine you haven’t forgotten what came before.”

“I gather I made some sort of proposition, although I’d drunk too much champagne to recall what,” she countered with a dismissive shrug.

“You invited me into your bed, and it was no mindless drunken proposition.”

Paris’s heart jolted. She hadn’t expected him to pursue this, to take issue with her. As though it mattered to him.

“You said you wanted me as your first lover,” he continued, his intonation slow and deliberate.

“Like you said, I needed to grow up. Don’t read too much into it.” While her pounding heart rushed the heat of remembered humiliation into her face, Paris gathered her pride, pushed to her feet and reached for the shoes, but he swung them out of her reach and slowly rose to face her.

“You said you loved me.”

“I was young and foolish.” She stepped around the table and lunged for the shoes, but he must have moved sideways, too, because they ended up toe-to-toe.

“And what are you now, princess? Old and smart?”

“What I am is grown-up and over it!”

“Are you?” When he reached out and cupped her face in one hand, she was too surprised to react. “Is this your idea of grown-up? Wearing your hair this way?” His fingers threaded into her hair and slid slowly back toward her crown. Paris gritted her teeth to stop any sound—like a groan of pleasure—escaping her mouth. Some pins gave, and a thick swathe of hair fell free, blocking half her vision.

Now she could see only half his square whisker-darkened jaw, half the nose he’d broken in a site accident and hadn’t bothered having straightened, half the mouth that was too full-lipped and sensual for the blunt strength of the rest of his face.

But his beautiful mouth wasn’t smiling. It was set in a grim line, and his deep-set eyes weren’t the warm, molten chocolate she remembered. The laughter lines still sprayed from the corners, but he didn’t look like a man who did much laughing

these days. He looked like a man who worked more on the worry lines between his brows.

Paris did not want to smooth those lines away.

"Do you mind?" She wrenched free of his tormenting touch and glared at him through narrowed eyes. "Is there anything else you'd like to wreck, apart from my hairdo? My dress, maybe? It's part of the new grown-up me!"

Big mistake, Paris thought, the moment his eyes dropped to the dress.

"Oh, yes," he murmured gruffly. "This dress is extremely you."

His knuckles brushed across her neckline, and Paris felt the slight resistance as some rough skin caught in the georgette. He stroked a fingertip over the pulled thread, and Paris swallowed. He'd barely touched her, yet her breasts were tight and tingly, needy.

Needy?

What she needed was her head examined for responding to such a cynical touch. She drew herself up to her full height. "What's with you, Jack? I don't understand your attitude and, quite frankly, I'm sick of this…this…" Paris searched around but couldn't find any suitable description. "I've just flown halfway around the world, I've spent all day auditioning another bloody stepmother contender, and now—" she took a deep breath, because the last one had run out "—and now I have to put up with you glowering at me and pawing me and ruining my hair…

What are you—don't you da—"

His mouth descended to hers, swallowing the rest of the word and the rest of her complaints. Not that Paris remembered what they were. They fled her brain the instant his lips closed over hers. Some dim recess registered the soft thump of her shoes hitting the carpeted floor, the rough strength of his hands on her shoulders, the brush of his unbuttoned jacket against her body, the accelerated thud of her heartbeat.

For a time she managed to concentrate on the taste of frustrated anger—and then she needed to breathe. With her nose hard up against his cheek, she inhaled the scent of his skin, discovered it hadn't changed. No fancy cologne to match the fancy suit, no conservative aftershave to match the barbershop cut, just strong elemental outdoors male. She uncurled her fingers from the tight fists crushed between their bodies and gripped his jacket, anchoring herself against a sudden weakness in her knees.

His mouth eased its rough pressure, and for the barest moment Paris savored his gentled caress, the fleeting brush of his thumbs against her neck, the fullness of his lips on hers. And then those lips retreated as suddenly as they'd advanced, leaving her swamped by conflicting emotions. Shocked confusion registered in his eyes, too, but was quickly displaced by the same old fierce-eyed irritation.

Carefully Paris released her grip on his lapels. Casually she smoothed out the creases. Deliberately she coaxed her mouth

into a facsimile of a smile. “If that’s a sample of what I missed out on six years ago, I can count myself lucky,” she drawled.

His eyes glinted dangerously, and his hold on her shoulders tightened. “You want to talk samples?”

A disturbing sense of anticipation washed through Paris’s body as his head ducked and his gaze lit on her lips. Her legs wobbled, and she swore that the only thing holding her up was his grip on her shoulders, a grip that felt like a curious mix of support and restraint, holding her up and him back.

But he didn’t kiss her. Instead he slowly and deliberately ran his tongue across her bottom lip, before pulling back and rocking on his heels. He flashed a tight smile and declared, “Yep, tastes exactly like saccharine!”

Paris’s mouth fell open, then slammed shut.

“Now why do you suppose that is? Too much time with Lady Pamela or with poor old Teddy?”

“Edward’s neither poor nor old!”

“No?” He lifted one brow. “Bankrupt, but not poor. An interesting concept. Is that why you dumped him?”

Paris shook her head slowly, hoping to clear the confusion. He was mad because she’d run away six years ago? Because he didn’t like her hairdo? Because she’d dumped her fiancé?

“You think I dumped him because of the bankruptcy thing?” she asked slowly. Then she almost laughed out loud at the irony.

Yes, she had dumped “poor Teddy” because of his money troubles. Because he’d wanted her money, her father’s money,

to rescue his crumbling fortune. That was the only reason he'd wanted to marry her in the first place.

If there had been any easing of the contempt on Jack's face, she might have told him all about "poor old Teddy." But his mouth held its tight line, and his eyes brimmed with contempt, so she lifted her chin and looked down her nose at him. "I could have bought Edward ten times over."

"Your father could have bought him ten times over."

"If you want to be pedantic." She shrugged with a nonchalance she didn't feel.

"Is that why you came home? To play the heiress?"

"I don't intend playing anything," Paris said, her tone as sharp as the hurt in her chest. She'd never played the heiress; she'd never played poor little rich girl; she'd never played victim nor victor. "I came home because K.G. asked me to, because he has a job for me."

Jack snorted. "Doing what?"

Paris didn't know. She hadn't allowed herself to dwell on what use she could be in her father's corporation. It was enough that he'd asked her, that he wanted her help. But she wasn't about to admit that to the man standing before her, dripping disdain. She lifted her chin. "Maybe there's a suitable job in your department."

Something flickered in his eyes. Well, well, well…

"Come to think of it, I'd rather enjoy working in your office. I shall have to speak to Daddy about it." Paris knew she sounded

snooty, but she considered it fair payback for his playing-the-heiress crack.

For a long moment he stared at her, his eyes dark and unreadable. Then he turned on his heel and strode away, only pausing when Paris called after him, “I guess I’ll be seeing you around, Jack. At the office.”

His hand flattened against the back of the door for no more than a second before he pushed through without a backward glance or a final word, leaving Paris itching with dissatisfaction. She wanted to stalk out the door after him, to hurl something at his retreating back, even if it was only a demand that he come back and finish their argument.

Not that she had a clue how to conclude an argument that had no point.

With an exasperated sigh she turned, and when she caught sight of her disheveled image in the full-length mirror she almost laughed out loud, although the laughter would have been harsh and humorless. She looked like an illustration of how her evening had gone.

She looked a mess.

So much for all her mother’s lessons in poise. So much for the slick, sophisticated image. So much for her expectations for tonight. Expectations based on adolescent dreams, she decided with a rueful shake of her head. For in her dreams Jack still had laughing eyes the color of milk chocolate and a quick grin that made her heart flip-flop and her throat squeeze tight.

Had she really expected that four years as K.G.'s righthand man wouldn't have changed him? No. She had expected changes, and she had feared those changes…and the likelihood they would make no difference: that she would meet his eyes across the room and feel the same earth-shifting connection she'd felt at that party six years ago; that she would fall headlong in love with a man as work-focused as her father. Her worst nightmare.

She swung away from the mirror and lifted her chin. The man Jack Manning had become deserved neither her dreams nor her expectations. What he deserved was to walk into his office on Monday to find her working alongside him.

Nice fantasy, Paris.

The chances of K.G. giving her the job she requested were about on a par with her chances of finding a man who would love her for herself. Nada, zilch and zero.

Two

Jack answered his mobile phone on the first ring, then crooked it between shoulder and ear to pull on his second running shoe.

"Glad I caught you," K.G. said without preamble. "Thought you'd be in that sweatbox of a gym by now."

"I slept in."

"That'll be the day. You coming into the office this morning?"

"Briefly."

"Good." The word wasn't much more than a grunt. "My office at ten."

Jack scowled at the dead phone for a moment, then tossed it onto his bed.

No Can you fit in a meeting?

No Does ten o'clock suit you?

Jack shook his head in disgust, dragged on a sweatshirt and headed for the front door. By ten o'clock he should be midway through a meeting with Dan Lehmann, the electrical contractor on the Milson Landing Project. Rescheduling would muck up Lehmann's day, and the day was Saturday, theoretically part of the weekend. And as he jogged down the driveway he asked himself, not for the first time, why he put up with his boss's high-handedness.

The answer used to be simple. K.G. had given him all the breaks he deserved and then some. Where else could a kid who'd

left school at the minimum age make it to a corner office on the eighteenth floor? Who else would put a tradesman without a fancy business degree in charge of multimillion-dollar projects?

He lived with K.G.'s peremptory attitude because the son of a b…knew the construction business like no one else, and ever since he'd taken Jack under his wing, he'd been free with that knowledge. In return he expected hard work and loyalty. Jack gave him both and then some…but not for much longer.

A matter of a few short months—less, if he was lucky—and he was gone. The leaving came two years later than he'd planned, and there would be no more K.G.-manipulated delays. It was time to get back to the blueprint for Jack Manning's life.

At the end of his long driveway he turned left onto the deserted early-morning road and set off at a steady lope. He would rather be at his "sweatbox of a gym" pounding a punching bag instead of the tarmac, but this morning he'd slept through his internal alarm. He didn't much enjoy running, but he owed his body the exercise, and he always fulfilled his obligations. He ran, and he thought about the satisfying thud of leather against leather and the even more satisfying release of frustrated energy.

Yeah, pounding a punching bag would feel real good this morning. Much more satisfying than pounding his pillow the way he'd done for the two nights since the Acacia bash, since Paris Grantham sashayed back into his life with her nose stuck in the air and her plastic smile and her cool eyes.

And her leg warming your hand through the smooth silk of

her stocking, and her fingers gripping your jacket, and her lips soft and yielding under yours….

Jack swore and punched out at the crisp morning air with a left-right combination.

Why the hell had he kissed her? What had he been thinking?

Simple.

He hadn't been thinking; he'd been reacting. To deep-seated disappointment, to long-term frustration, to an intense desire to wipe that synthetic smile from her lips.

He'd reacted to the futility of a memory he could no longer brick in behind that carefully constructed retaining wall in his mind, a memory that haunted his dreams and stole his sleep. A dream-memory where she danced on a table in a tiny skirt and knee-high boots, watching him through her wild tangle of hair with eyes not steel cool but smelter hot. And while the crowd yelled encouragement, she unbuttoned her shirt, her eyes fixed on his, daring him to stop her.

He did.

He dragged her from the table and felt her body mould itself to his, soft and pliant and accepting. Dream memories of her lips, wide and smiling, against his neck. Her soft laughter, warm and sweet against his skin. Her words, her honesty, his inability to absorb it all.

He'd been pinning some kind of loopy expectations on a six-year-old memory. What a fool!

He jabbed at the air again, but without much conviction. After

all, she was a Grantham, and the more like her parents she turned out to be—cold like her mother, manipulative like her father—the easier it would be to remember she had no place in his life.

As he topped the long uphill rise and lengthened his stride toward the intersection, he tried not to think about her parting thrust and K.G.'s early-morning phone call, or the fact that the two might be related.

He told himself the queer feeling in his gut was hunger. K.G. wouldn't do it. Milson Landing was too big a project, its success too important to the company's bottom line to risk on a whim, even if that whim belonged to his precious only daughter.

Jack slowed to take the corner into Sycamore Road and automatically started scanning for the Ridleys' deranged fox terrier.

There was no connection between K.G.'s summons and her threat to seek out a job in Jack's office.

The foxy came out of the shrubs at the front of lot nine, but Jack dodged the open jaws with ease and sprinted out of range. The mutt didn't even get close.

He kept up a punishing pace for another two Ks, until the sweat ran freely down his back and the breath rasped harsh in his throat. Only then did he slacken off.

The uneasiness in his stomach didn't.

Three hours later it churned like a cement mixer when he caught sight of the woman crossing Grantham's car park. Not because of her long-legged stride or the skirt that drew attention

to it, but because it was Paris Grantham.

Jack bent to pick up the keys he'd dropped and told his stomach not to jump to conclusions. Two people arriving at the same building at the same time didn't necessarily mean they were there for the same meeting. Could be coincidence.

On a Saturday morning, with the car park all but empty? Yeah, right!

He pocketed his keys and headed for the lift bay, where she waited in her little yellow dress, smooth bare legs and strappy high heels. But when she turned and smiled, the action was quick and not quite smooth, as if driven by nerves.

"Fancy meeting you here," she said brightly.

Jack punched the lift button and decided he'd been way off beam about the nerves. She looked too cool and polished to be nervous. His cement mixer switched to turbo.

"Princess," he greeted her evenly. "Looks like you've got the jet lag beat."

"Yes. And my feet are back to normal size."

This time her smile was real and ripe with early-summer sunshine. It took Jack a count of three to control his light-headed dizziness, and he jibbed himself about sunstroke in a dim basement. It was more likely a result of terminal tiredness. To avoid that smile, he looked down at her feet. They arched inside her sexy shoes, and the way his body reacted, she might as well have arched them right over his….

Don't even think about it, he told himself, lifting his gaze

quickly. “Is there any reason why you wear those things?” he growled, annoyed with himself as much as her.

Her smile dimmed, and irritation sparked in her eyes. “They match my dress.”

He noted how the dress was perfectly plain apart from the bright color and the fact that it skimmed every curve of her body and ended a good six inches above her knees. His gaze kept on sliding downward, and about halfway to her ankles he decided the legs were a perfect match for the dress, forget the shoes!

And then he remembered why she was here and why he was here, and his eyes snapped back to hers. “Are you here to see your father?” he asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. He asked me to come in. It’s about this job he has for me.” The elevator pinged its arrival, and she ambled past him, holding the doors when he didn’t follow. “Coming?”

He stepped into the lift, and she pressed the top button—K.G.’s floor. Jack swore beneath his breath. “Tell me you’re working for your father.”

“God, I hope not!”

Their eyes met and held, hers wide with mock horror—or maybe not so mock. No one wanted to work directly with K.G., not even his daughter. A wry smile tugged at Jack’s lips, then her eyes slid down to his mouth, and as quickly as that the mood shifted.

He wondered if she was thinking about the other night,

about how he'd kissed her in anger and frustration. Heat closed around him, along with the drift of her perfume, something unexpectedly soft and warm. He badly needed to loosen his tie, and usually that didn't happen for at least two hours.

Floor fifteen, he noted. Still four to go.

Why was this lift so damned slow?

He made a mental note to speak to the building manager about having it serviced. Eyes trained on the indicator, he returned to the question she'd so neatly sidestepped. "What is this job, exactly?"

"He didn't exactly say…"

Eighteen.

"…although he did mention a special PR project."

Nineteen.

Ping.

Jack knew, without a shadow of a doubt, which project. He'd petitioned K.G. for weeks about appointing a PR person to Milson Landing, with no response. He hadn't wanted to believe K.G. would do something this shortsighted, this foolhardy.

Taking the three steps out of the lift required enormous effort—maybe it was the weight of all that cement in his belly.

Paris flicked her hair back and started down the corridor, even though Jack was slow to follow. She wanted, so badly, to ask why he was here, what this was all about, but she didn't want to let on how little she knew. K.G. had done his don't-you-worry-your-pretty-little-head thing when she'd pressed him for details, and

her hopes of earning his respect through a working relationship had plummeted.

Everything with Jack might have changed in six years, but nothing with K.G. had changed a bit.

She didn't know why he'd asked her to come home, but it wasn't because he'd suddenly recognized her true worth. The bad feeling in the pit of her stomach intensified. K.G.'s reasons involved Jack—they must, or why was he following her down the corridor? She knew he was there because the back of her neck prickled with awareness, even though the thick carpeting muted their footfalls. On this floor everything was muted, beige, restrained, as if subdued by her father's personality.

Despite it being Saturday, K.G.'s secretary sat guarding the portals of power. Evelyn inspected Paris over the top of her glasses, her eyes beetling over the yellow dress, her mouth pursing at its length. Evelyn's disapproval dated back to the day she'd caught Paris feeding papers from her father's briefcase into the shredder.

Paris's seven-year-old reasoning had been simple. If there were no papers, then her father would have no work, thus he would come to her ballet concert. Of course Evelyn hadn't understood her reasoning, and she doubted her father had, either. He'd laughed and indulgently scrubbed her hair, but he hadn't come to her concert.

Paris lifted her chin. "He's expecting us," she stated imperiously as she breezed toward K.G.'s door.

Evelyn bounded out from behind her desk and took charge of the door handle, effectively stopping any unannounced arrival.

"How about you let him know we're here, Evelyn?" Jack suggested with a lopsided grin that seemed to render the middle-aged secretary witless.

Paris took advantage of Evelyn's distracted state to push past.

"Good morning, princess." K.G. came out from behind his desk, and as she offered her cheek for the obligatory kiss, Paris wished her father wouldn't call her princess in that indulgent tone. She opened her mouth to tell him so, but he was busy shaking Jack's hand and ushering him to the conference area at the side of his office. Paris shut her mouth and helped herself to a seat.

"I won't be here long enough to sit," Jack said. "I'm due down at the Landing." He might as well have said, get to the point; that was what he meant.

"Good. You can take Paris with you. Show her round."

Jack's lips tightened, but he didn't even glance her way. "No," he said evenly. "I can't do that."

"Why not?"

A moment's pause. "She's not dressed appropriately."

What? Paris blinked and sat up straight. She started to object, but K.G. laughed over top of her. "One thing you'll learn about my daughter is she never dresses appropriately."

Paris narrowed her eyes, lifted her chin and wished she'd worn her red slip-dress. Now that little number reeked of inappropriate!

“I don’t intend learning anything about your daughter.”

Jack’s dismissive tone set her blood to slow simmer, but K.G. slapped his thigh, obviously highly entertained. “No? I distinctly remember you asking me to find you a PR rep for the Landing.”

“I need an experienced PR person.”

“Lucky for you my daughter’s been doing public relations work in London.”

“Really?”

Paris’s simmering blood turned cold with K.G.’s announcement, then surged with indignation at Jack’s reply. PR wasn’t quite what she’d been doing in London, but with Jack looking at her like she was incapable of spelling PR, let alone doing it, it was close enough. She looked coldly down her nose at him. “Is that so hard to believe?”

One eyebrow rose to a leery angle. “Who were you working for, princess?”

“I worked in my mother’s business.”

“That being?”

“My mother does parties,” she replied archly.

The eyebrow rose higher. “Drinks for a few close friends?”

“A few hundred. We put together corporate functions and product launches, fashion parades and charity balls—”

“And I’m sure you did them very well,” Jack cut in. He turned back to K.G. “I don’t need a party planner. I need someone with media savvy.”

Paris’s indignation morphed into anger. She was sick of being

treated like she wasn't in the room. She leaned forward and speared Jack with a steely eyed gaze. "Unless you've been living on another planet, you should know I've been media savvy since birth." She shifted focus to her father and smiled sweetly. "Which magazine had exclusive rights to my christening, Daddy? Southern Society, I think." She switched back to Jack and dropped the smile. "I'm on Christmas-card terms with every society columnist in Sydney and London—and half their editors—and while I suspect titillating snippets of gossip isn't your job's focus, I'm sure my contact network could stretch to find the odd serious journalist."

The room was silent for a count of four before K.G. rubbed his hands together and announced to the room in general, "That's settled then. Perfect."

"Perfect…how?" Jack's delivery was dangerously slow.

"I trust you to look after her, keep her out of trouble."

Paris swore she heard Jack's jaw click into inflexible mode. "I don't have time to baby-sit your daughter."

"Rubbish," K.G. boomed. "Lew needs more responsibility. Start delegating. Besides, you'll fit in with Jack's schedule, won't you, princess?"

Baby-sit? Fit in with his schedule?

She exploded out of her chair and fixed on the first thing that came into focus out of her apoplectic blur. "My name isn't princess, it's Paris. I don't know why you didn't choose something easy like Jane or Kate, but you chose Paris. Please use it!"

K.G. roared with laughter. “Well said, princess.”

She felt like screaming with frustration, but it would do no good. For twenty-four years her father had indulged her, but he’d never listened to her. Why would he start now?

He pushed to his feet and slapped Jack on the back. “I’ll leave you two to sort out the details.”

“Hang on a minute.” Jack looked as stunned as Paris felt. “Nothing’s settled. You can’t leave this—”

“Have to,” K.G. said, checking his watch. “Caroline’s picking me up. We have a flight to catch.”

“Where are you going?” Paris couldn’t believe he intended walking out with nothing settled.

“The Coast. I’ve meetings on the new casino project all next week, but we might stay on, take a break. Head farther north if we feel like it.”

“You’re taking a holiday?” Paris couldn’t have been more surprised if he’d said he was taking an acid bath.

“Have to take one now or I mightn’t get another chance.” He glared at Jack. “Can’t trust just anyone to look after this place, you know.”

Paris didn’t know. She had no idea what the little side play was about, although it obviously meant something to Jack. His eyes narrowed, as if with sudden comprehension. “Is that what this is all about? Some form of punishment?”

K.G. rubbed his jaw. “You consider looking after my daughter a punishment? Shame on you, Jack.”

Both K.G.'s parting words and the echo of his self-satisfied laughter after the door closed behind him convinced Jack he'd called it right. This was some sort of payback for his impending departure and the latest sign of K.G.'s refusal to accept his resignation in good grace.

First he'd delayed Jack's departure by offering him sole management of the Landing Project…if he saw it through to completion. Then he insisted on keeping the pending resignation a secret until he'd decided on a successor, a move he still hadn't made. Jack had concurred, because although Grantham's good word might not make a lick of difference to the success of his new business venture, his bad word could destroy it.

For the same reason, he now found himself saddled with the last person he wanted alongside him as the most important project of his career reached its culmination.

He had to accept it, but he didn't have to like it.

His right hand fashioned a fist, but he didn't punch the door that had closed in K.G.'s wake. He squeezed tight around his frustration, containing it within that fisted hand. Then he turned to face her.

"You asked him to give you this job, didn't you?"

She gave a perplexed little shrug. "How could I ask for a job I didn't know existed?"

"Come off it, Paris! You asked your father for a job in my office because of the other night, and K.G. didn't even stop to consider whether you're suitable or not."

“What makes you so sure I’m unsuitable?” she asked, and there was something about the way she looked at him, all high and mighty, that really riled Jack. That and the way she totally ignored his mention of the other night. “If you like, I can supply you with a list of my credentials.”

“One, your surname’s Grantham. Two, you have contacts in some dubious sections of the media. Not much of a list.”

Her eyes flared with the impact of his direct hit, but she simply lifted her chin higher and spoke with cool, crisp diction. “Why don’t you tell me what this job entails, and I will tell you if I can do it?”

“The question isn’t whether you can do the work but if you can work with my staff. Frankly, I don’t think you have what it takes to be a team player.”

“What does it take?” she asked with infuriating calm.

“Everyone pulls their weight. There are no servants to run errands for you. You want something done, you do it yourself. We don’t work nine-to-five, we work whatever it takes to get the job done, and I mean done. No half measures.”

“I don’t have any problem with that.” She smiled.

Jack snorted. “You have no idea. You won’t last a week.”

“Why, Jack,” she drawled, “that sounds like a challenge.”

“No. It’s the simple truth.”

She raised one brow. “Based on which facts?”

“The fact that you’re twenty-four years old and still living out of your father’s pocket.”

That stung. He could see it in her eyes, in the infinitesimal lift of her chin and the sudden tightness of her smile. “In my bag is the key to the apartment I’m moving into this afternoon. I won’t be living in anyone’s pocket, especially once I receive my first paycheck. When will that be, Jack?”

He recited the payroll procedures, because that gave him something to concentrate on other than his steadily growing irritation and the haunting trace of hurt in her eyes.

When he’d finished, she asked, “Are there any other procedures I should know about?” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and folded her arms across her chest. Both actions drew his attention to the sunshine-bright, curve-hugging dress…and the body inside it.

“There’s a dress code,” he decided.

“I don’t usually get complaints about my fashion sense.”

“We’re not talking fashion. We’re talking suitability in the workplace.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You want me dressed in one of those drab gray suits like Evelyn wears?”

“Sounds perfect.”

“With my coloring? You must be joking!” She punctuated the remark with a dismissive little laugh, and Jack’s irritation indicator shot off the clock.

“Is that the attitude you’re bringing to this job?” he growled before he could stop himself.

“Hey, I was joking. Haven’t you any sense of humor?”

“Not where this job is concerned,” he snapped.

She took a step closer and touched him on the arm. “Lighten up, Jack. All that hostility can’t be healthy.”

He pulled away with what he hoped passed for indifference, though there wasn’t an indifferent cell in his body. He hated how readily he responded to that one fleeting touch of her fingers, that elusive scent, the mocking smile. Her mere presence. His head steamed at her words, while his body…his body ached to eat them right off her tongue.

“This isn’t hostility. This is right royal pi—” He stopped himself. Reminded himself about not letting her get under his skin and into his head. He lifted a hand and rubbed at the tension that ached in the back of his neck. “Look, I’m under a ton of pressure at the moment. I don’t have time—”

“For baby-sitting,” she cut in softly, and there it was again. That surprising touch of vulnerability in her eyes.

Jack forced himself to ignore it. “Damn right!” he growled.

She took one small step away, and she looked for all the world as if she’d stepped back behind that regal facade. The transformation was that quick. “Believe me, I’ve got the picture,” she purred, all cool disdain. “Why don’t you show me to the crèche and I’ll see if there’s anything there to keep me amused?”

Three

Paris had to wait until Monday before being introduced to her "crèche." For the rest of the weekend her mood alternated between near-paralyzing attacks of insecurity—What was I thinking? I have no idea how to handle a major PR assignment!—and restorative bouts of anger brought on by replaying any snippet from Saturday's confrontation. Terms like baby-sit and dubious media contacts still caused her eyes to cross and her blood to bubble, as did the curtness with which he dismissed her.

"I have more important places to be. I'll see you in my office Monday morning. Eight sharp," he'd said.

And here she was in the reception area outside his office, forty minutes after "eight sharp." She didn't, not for one of the fifty minutes she'd been sitting here, expect he'd forgotten her. Oh no, this was a deliberate snub…or a test. He probably hoped she would tire of waiting and leave, or behave like the spoiled princess he thought her and throw a tantrum.

She would do neither. She would calmly pick up the annual report from the coffee table, and she would use however long he made her wait to bone up on the company's latest achievements. And every time the report trembled in her hands because of the giant butterflies doing loop-the-loops in her stomach, every time she felt this overwhelming need to bolt for the door, she would close her eyes and imagine the satisfaction on Jack Manning's

face when he found her gone.

No way would she grant him such easy gratification.

Her eyes were closed the second before a Helena Bonham Carter lookalike bounced in, regarded her with open curiosity and asked if she could help.

"I'm waiting for Jack." Paris smiled back.

"Does he know you're here?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure he does."

The huge brown eyes regarded Paris for a moment longer, as if trying to place her, before she disappeared into Jack's office. Paris smoothed the skirt of her brand-new Armani suit and gave up trying to focus on the report. Ten minutes later the brunette reappeared. Without the inquisitive smile and wide-eyed friendliness, she didn't resemble Helena Bonham Carter at all.

A wave of comprehension washed over Paris. All wrapped up in Jack's reaction, she hadn't considered how other staff members would feel about the boss's daughter sauntering into such a plum position.

Oh, they're just going to love you, Paris. Especially when they realize how poorly qualified you are.

Her stomach hollowed as further implications sank in. Was there someone more experienced who'd been promised the job or who deserved such a promotion?

Paris glanced across at the brunette now seated behind the reception desk, studiously avoiding eye contact. She smoothed

her skirt again, checked her smile hadn't frozen in the suddenly chill atmosphere and approached the desk.

"Good morning." She glanced at the name plaque. "Julie, is it? I gather Jack has told you who I am?"

"Yes. Welcome to Grantham's, Miss Grantham." Except she didn't look very welcoming. She barely glanced up from the appointment book in front of her.

"If you call me that, I'm not likely to answer."

Julie's surprised gaze skittered up, and Paris took the opportunity to smile and extend her hand across the desk.

"I'm Paris."

The handshake was unavoidable but, at best, Julie's smile could only be termed polite.

"I gather you know why I'm here?"

Julie's expression frosted over. "Jack told me you have the PR job on Milson Landing. Congratulations."

Somehow Paris didn't feel as if she'd just been congratulated. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but have I taken this job from someone else?"

Before she'd finished the last words, an almost-familiar awareness warmed the back of her neck and crept down her spine. She knew, even before Julie's focus shifted to somewhere beyond her left shoulder, who had joined them.

"Having a belated conscience attack, princess?"

She turned slowly, annoyed by the little leap in her pulse and the warmth spreading through her torso. How long would it

take till her body caught on that she didn't like Jack Manning anymore?

"It's not too late to step aside," he challenged.

She lifted her chin and met his hard, dark eyes. "You would like that, wouldn't you?"

He tapped the papers he held in one hand against the palm of the other, drawing her attention to those big hands, their deep tan a stark contrast to the pale blue of his shirt cuffs. The warmth seeped deeper, looking to take purchase.

"This is an important job. It deserves to be treated accordingly, not handed out as a feel-good gift."

His curt words whipped her attention back to his disapproving face, and those warm dark places instantly turned cold and hollow. "Who did you have in mind for the position?" she asked.

"A professional consultancy."

"Then why didn't you employ one?"

His expression tightened. "I made the mistake of running it by K.G."

"I see," she replied slowly, although she didn't see at all, not without asking more questions. Had Jack discussed the job with K.G. before or after his phone call asking her to come home? Why had her father wanted her in this particular position? Had he read beyond her casual questions about Jack? Her heart thudded heavily against her ribs as she considered and rejected the implications.

No. No way.

She shook her head emphatically and looked up in time to see Jack's mouth set in an even tighter line, and she wondered what he'd read into her head-shaking. Most likely her refusal to give up the feel-good job K.G. had given her.

He slapped the papers against his palm one last time as he crossed to Julie's desk. "I've signed these. They can go out with the budgets Lew's working on." Then he turned to face Paris with Saturday's scowl firmly etched in his brow. "I gather you two have met?"

She nodded. Standing this close, the force of all that scowling energy made it difficult to concentrate on choosing words.

"Good. When Julie can spare the time, she'll show you around."

He pushed away from the desk and strode to the door, freeing her brain from the numbing influence of his proximity. It immediately cried foul! She couldn't allow him to walk out that door without some objection. "I'll just wait here, then, as I've been doing for the last hour."

He turned, and his eyes skimmed over her. She wondered if he'd finally noticed her suit. She lifted her chin defensively. "I took your advice."

"On?"

"The corporate uniform. The business suit." The cinnamon Armani wasn't exactly that, but it was the closest thing she would be wearing in this lifetime.

His gaze returned to her face, his expression unreadable. "If

that's a business suit, why aren't you wearing a shirt under it?"

"Because I prefer a shell top. Or a silk camisole," she countered easily. "They feel soooo much nicer against my skin."

A flicker, barely that, registered in his eyes. Gotcha, Paris thought, with a satisfied little smile. But he made no comment. Just a crisp "I'll show you to your office on my way out."

Such sacrifice! Her smile faded as she followed him out the door.

Her office was on the same floor, although about as far away from Jack's suite as could be arranged. But that cynical thought evaporated when she walked through the door and took in the huge desk and executive chair, the filing cabinet and bookshelves, the telephone and facsimile machine and a computer.

There had to be some mistake. Her gaze swung back to Jack's. "This is your office," he said, as if he understood the question in her eyes.

Your office.

His words whispered over and over in her head, setting up a sibilant fizz that bubbled along her nerve endings. With reverent fingers she stroked the highly polished surface of the mahogany desk, then plopped down in the chair when her legs started to wobble. "This is much more than I expected. Thank you."

"Don't thank me, thank your father."

Paris bit her lip rather than biting back. She didn't want another confrontation, another reminder of how little he thought of her.

“Julie is available if you have any questions or need help. She knows as much about what goes on around here as anyone. She’s digging out the necessary background information on Milson Landing for you. While you’re waiting, you can familiarize yourself with the computer.” He gestured at the machine sitting on the other half of her L-shaped desk.

Assuming she could find the on-off switch. Paris couldn’t contain her nervous laughter. “I’m afraid I don’t speak the same language as computers.”

He stared in silent condemnation for all of ten seconds before muttering, “Why does that not surprise me?”

Under the force of his cold glare, Paris turned her chair and pretended to inspect the computer. The look in his eyes said it all—she didn’t deserve this job, and at this moment she believed him. All she had to do was open her mouth and admit it. But as she searched for the right words, she closed her eyes and placed her palms flat on the glossy desk and felt that same tingling sense of empowerment as when she’d first walked into the room.

She didn’t want to go home to the empty apartment K.G. had supplied her with, or to the meaningless life she’d done nothing to change. It didn’t matter that K.G. had given her this job for reasons of his own, or that she’d taken it through sheer cussedness. She wanted to stay, to take this chance to prove herself worthy of respect—both K.G.’s and Jack’s.

When she opened her eyes, he had gone.

Thirty minutes later Julie arrived to take her on the grand tour

of Grantham House. Her attitude wasn't precisely unfriendly. She even smiled at Paris's first attempt to break the ice, although she clammed up again after the second attempt went awry.

How was she to know his personal assistant presided over the Jack Manning Appreciation Club?

With those limpid eyes turned killer-wolf fierce, Julie informed her that Jack worked harder than anyone in the building, was scrupulously fair and never lost his temper. By all accounts, an all-round champion boss. Paris decided it wouldn't be politic to disagree, but despite her best conciliatory efforts, Julie didn't smile again.

She remained polite as she conducted the rest of the tour, explaining such essential information as photocopier protocol and how to work the coffee machine—Paris made a mental note to locate the nearest half-decent coffee shop—but when they arrived back on floor eighteen she was quick to leave Paris to her own company…without any of the promised background information on Milson Landing.

When the files hadn't arrived by ten the next morning, Paris suspected Jack of failing to pass that instruction on. A phone call quickly put paid to her theory.

"I haven't had a chance to get to that," Julie informed her in the kind of offhand tone that indicated she wasn't likely to get to it in the next week.

"I could come and collect them, if that's any help."

"It would help if I had the files here, but some are downstairs

and I'm busy at the moment. I'll let you know when they're ready for collection."

Clunk.

Paris regarded the disconnected phone with a mixture of disbelief and dismay. She hadn't expected Julie to warm to her within twenty-four hours, but neither had she expected such blatant unhelpfulness.

Her options were narrow. Two came immediately to mind, but she quickly discarded the first—as much as this office turned her on, she needed something to do in it. There were only so many ways of twiddling one's thumbs, after all. Which left option two: she needed to start helping herself. On a last second whim she turned right outside her door instead of left and headed for the elevator and Guido's, the better-than-passable coffee shop she'd found next door to Grantham House.

Armed with two lattes, she made it to the corridor outside Julie's office before second thoughts brought her to a halt. What if the other girl saw it as a bribe, a shabby attempt to buy her friendship? What if she didn't drink coffee or took it black? The only employees Paris knew were K.G.'s cronies in senior management, hardly the types you could ring and ask about a secretary's taste in beverages!

On the verge of dumping the coffee in a nearby potted plant and scampering back to the sanctuary of her own lair, Paris's hands trembled, and coffee shlooshed over the rim of each mug. The sticky warmth she felt seeping down her right leg was the

last straw.

"Get over yourself!" she admonished forcefully, and with a deep breath she breezed through the door into Julie's office… and found it empty.

The anticlimax wrung a bark of laughter from deep in her chest. "Oh, this is priceless," she muttered as she crossed the room and deposited the mugs before she spilled any more. As she reached across the desk for a tissue to wipe her hands, the vision on Julie's computer caught her attention.

"Milson Landing," she read out loud. She leaned closer for a better look at the screen.

"Can I help you?"

Paris jumped backward and sideways at once. One hand automatically flattened against her chest as if it might still the erratic leap of her heart. "You scared the life out of me," she declared unnecessarily.

But Julie's attention had been diverted to something on her desk, something that caused her eyes to widen with horror as she rushed across the room. Paris turned back just as the rich brown pool of coffee spilled over the ledge of the high reception desk and cascaded down onto the papers below. The desperate grab of Julie's hand came a second too late.

"Oh, my God…I'm so sorry!"

Julie's expression brimmed with censure. "Why is there coffee on my desk?"

Paris didn't think "Because I spilled it" was the answer Julie

sought. “I brought you coffee,” she supplied as a weak substitute.

The other girl stared back. “Why?”

Paris shrugged and laughed nervously. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” Oh, why didn’t I listen to those second thoughts? Before, she merely suspected my ineptness. Now I’ve gone and proven it.

“I don’t drink coffee at work,” Julie stated coldly.

“Well, I don’t blame you. The stuff in that coffee machine tastes like potting mix.”

“You’ve tasted it?”

“Potting mix? No way,” Paris grimaced. “I just assume it tastes like that instant caterer’s brew.”

“I meant the coffee.” Julie’s long-suffering look indicated she wasn’t amused by Paris’s attempt at lightening the moment. “I imagined you’d get your coffee sent up from Guido’s.” She glanced tellingly at the one mug still standing, its ornate gold logo glinting under the fluorescent light. Then, with a last coldly antagonistic glare, she pulled out her chair and sat down.

Paris’s chin rose in a reflex action. She knew she’d been summarily dismissed, but she refused to slink off like a naughty child. “I didn’t have the coffee sent up, I collected it myself.” When the other woman didn’t respond, irritation needled Paris into continuing. “I can understand why you didn’t welcome me with open arms. You don’t have to like me being here but, please, could you give me a fair chance to do my job?”

“The job you got through fair means?” Her tone was mild

enough, but Julie's brown eyes sparked with resentment, and Paris wondered if she had a personal agenda.

"I didn't ask for this particular job, my father did. Please don't hold that against me."

A quick flush stained Julie's cheeks, but she didn't answer. Instead she started to sort through the coffee-splattered papers, fanning them out on the desk in an unspoken indictment of Paris's incompetence.

"Did you want this job?"

Julie's hands stilled, but her startled gaze flew to meet Paris's. "Good heavens, no. Whatever gave you that idea? I love my job." She looked down at the papers in her hand, sighed resignedly. "Jack is already working too many jobs. He needed someone to take work off his shoulders, not to add to his workload."

The same old argument, Paris thought, with an irritated shake of her head. But then something about the heat in Julie's defense of her boss caused her thoughts to back up a step. And before she could censor those thoughts, she blurted, "Do you have something going with Jack?"

Shock, swift and immediate, widened Julie's eyes. "Good heavens, no." She blew out a disbelieving gust of breath. "I mean, he is the most wonderful boss, but there's no way we could, that I could…" She shook her head, apparently speechless.

"Because he's your boss?"

"Because he's not the least bit interested in me." She glanced at Paris, and a small glint of unexpected humor danced in her

eyes. “And if he was, Warren would break every bone in his body.”

“Warren?”

“My boyfriend. He’s a little possessive.” The look in her eyes indicated that she didn’t mind Warren’s possessiveness one bit.

Paris smiled back because she couldn’t help herself. Her heart felt lighter—because Julie had shared something personal, not because that something had any special ramifications, she told herself.

But as quickly as they’d connected, Julie seemed to pull back. Her smile faded. “I suppose you want those Landing files. I told you I’d call when I had them together.”

“And I wanted to help.”

Julie looked at the papers spread before her. “I wish you hadn’t.”

For the first time Paris took a good look at the pages. “They’re ruined, aren’t they?”

“Pretty much.” Julie shrugged. “They’re all on computer. I can reprint them.”

“Can I help?” Paris offered impulsively.

Julie considered the offer for a long moment. “I guess you could. That would give me time to get you those files.” She peeled one letter from the desk and held it up for Paris to see. “This reference number…here…corresponds to the file name in my computer. They’re in different directories, but you can find them by doing a search.” She looked up and must have caught

the bewildered look on Paris's face. "You do know how to find a file, don't you?"

"I could learn."

Julie turned away. "It will be quicker if I do it myself."

This time Paris did feel like slinking away. Only the thought of spending another day doing nothing stopped her. "There is one other thing." Julie's expression was so put-upon that Paris lifted her chin automatically. "I want to arrange a meeting with the real estate agents who are marketing the Landing. Do you have their names?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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