MODERN™

ANNE McALLISTER

Hired by Her Husband

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Аннотация

Back in her husband's bed!Once Sophy and George Savas were happily married…Then Sophy woke up and realised that her blissful marriage was a sham. She's never looked back – until the day she learns her husband has been critically injured and her world is shaken…Now, though he's stubborn and proud, George wants Sophy's help. He knows she won't come willingly, so he hires her to be his wife for as long as he needs her! But playing happy families is dangerous, and soon George realises that his need for Sophy runs deep…and strong…

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George sucked in a breath.

For the first time in nearly four years he and Sophy—his wife—were face to face.

Wife? Ha.

They might have stood side by side in a New York City judge's office and repeated after him. They might have a legally binding document declaring them married. But it had never meant anything more than a piece of paper.

Not to her.

Not to either of them, George told himself firmly, though the pain he felt was suddenly different than before. He resisted it. Didn't want to care. Sure as hell didn't want to feel!

The very last thing he needed now was to have to deal with Sophy.

Hired by Her Husband

by

Anne McAllister

www.millsandboon.co.uk

Award-winning author **ANNE MCALLISTER** was once given a blueprint for happiness that included a nice, literate husband, a ramshackle Victorian house, a horde of mischievous children, a bunch of big, friendly dogs, and a life spent writing stories about tall, dark and handsome heroes. ‘Where do I sign up?’ she asked, and promptly did. Lots of years later, she’s happy to report the blueprint was a success. She’s always happy to share the latest news with readers at her website, www.annemcallister.com, and welcomes their letters there, or at PO Box 3904, Bozeman, Montana 59772, USA (SASE appreciated).

Chapter One

WHEN THE PHONE RANG that evening, Sophy grabbed it as fast as she could. She didn't need it waking Lily. Not just when her daughter had finally fallen asleep.

Lily's fourth birthday party that afternoon had exhausted them both. Normally an easygoing sunny-natured child, Lily had been wound up for days in anticipation. Five of her friends and their mothers had joined them, first at the beach and then here at the house for a cookout, followed by ice cream and cake.

Lily had been on top of the world, declaring the party, "the bestest ever." Then, in the time-honored fashion of overtired four-year-olds everywhere, she'd crashed.

It had taken a warm bath, a cuddle on Sophy's lap, clutching her new stuffed puppy, Chloe, and half a dozen stories to unwind her.

Now finally she was asleep, sprawled in her bed, but still clinging to Chloe. And, with the house a wreck all around her, Sophy didn't need Lily wide awake again. So at the phone's first shrill ring, Sophy snatched it up.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Savas?"

The voice was a man's, one she didn't know. But it was the name she heard that gave her a jolt. Of course her cousin and business partner Natalie was now Mrs. Savas—had been ever

since her marriage to Christo last year—but Sophy wasn't used to getting calls asking for Natalie at home. For a split second she hesitated, then said firmly, "No. I'm sorry. You've got the wrong number. Call back during business hours and you can speak to Natalie."

"No. I'm not trying to reach Natalie Savas," the man said just as firmly. "I need to reach *Sophia* Savas. Is this—" He paused as if he were consulting something, then read off her telephone number.

Sophy barely heard it. Her mind had stuck on *Sophia Savas.*

That had been her name. Once. For a few months.

Suddenly she couldn't breathe, felt as if she'd been punched. Abruptly she sat down wordlessly, her fingers strangling the telephone.

"Hello? Are you there? Do I have the correct number?"

Sophy took a quick shallow breath. "Yes." She was relieved that she didn't stammer. Her voice even sounded firm to her own ears. Cool. Calm. Collected. "I'm Sophia. Sophia McKinnon," she corrected, then added, "formerly Savas."

But she still wasn't convinced he had the right person.

"George Savas's wife?"

So much for not being convinced. Sophy swallowed. "Y-yes."

No. Maybe? She certainly didn't think she was still George's wife! Her brain was spinning. How could she not know?

George could have divorced her at any time in the past four years. She'd always assumed he had, though she'd never received

any paperwork. Mostly she'd put it out of her mind because she'd tried to put George out of her mind.

She shouldn't have married him in the first place. She knew that. *Everybody* knew that. Besides, as far as she was concerned, a divorce was irrelevant to her life. It wasn't as if she were ever marrying again.

But maybe George was.

Sophy's brain abruptly stopped spinning. Her fingers gripped the receiver, and she felt suddenly cold. She was surprised to feel an odd ache somewhere in the vicinity of her heart even as she assured herself she didn't care. It didn't matter to her if George was getting married.

But she couldn't help wondering, had he finally fallen in love?

She had certainly never been the woman of his dreams. Had he met the woman who was? Was that why she was getting this call? Was this official-sounding man his lawyer? Was he calling to put the legal wheels in motion?

Carefully Sophy swallowed and reminded herself again that it didn't matter to her. George didn't matter. It wasn't as if their marriage had been real. She'd only hoped…

And now she told herself that her reaction was only because the phone call had caught her off guard.

She mustered a steadying breath. "Yes, that's right. Sophia Savas."

"This is Dr. Harlowe. I'm sorry to tell you, Mrs. Savas, but there's been an accident."

“Are you sure about this?” Natalie asked. She and her husband, Christo, had come over the minute Sophy had rang them. Now they watched as she threw things in a duffel and tried to think what else she needed to take. “Going all the way to New York? That’s clear across the country.”

“I know where it is. And yes, I’m sure,” Sophy said with far more resolution than she felt. It had nothing to do with how far she was going. It was whom she was going to see when she got there. “He was there for me, wasn’t he?”

“Under duress,” Natalie reminded her.

“Snap,” Sophy said. There was going to be a fair amount of duress involved in this encounter, too. But she had to do it. She added her sneakers to the duffel. One thing she knew from her years in New York was that she’d have to do plenty of walking.

“I thought you were divorced,” Natalie said.

“So did I. Well, I never signed any papers. But—” she shrugged “—I guess I thought George would just take care of it.” God knew he’d taken care of everything else—including her and Lily. But that was George. It was the way he was.

“Look,” she said finally, zipping the duffel shut and raising her gaze to meet Natalie’s. “If there was any way not to do this, believe me, I wouldn’t. There’s not. According to the papers in George’s personnel file at Columbia, I’m his next of kin. He’s unconscious. They may have to do surgery. They don’t know the extent of his injuries. They’re in ‘wait and see’ mode. But if things go wrong—” She stopped, unable to bring herself to voice

possibilities the doctor had outlined for her.

"Sophy," Natalie's voice was one of gentle warning.

Sophy swallowed, straightened and squared her shoulders. "I have to do this," she said firmly. "When I was alone—before Lily was born—he was there." It was true and she made herself face that fact as much as she told it to her cousin. He had married her to give Lily a father, to give her child the Savas name. "I owe him. I'm paying my debt."

Natalie looked at her doubtfully, but then nodded. "I guess so," she said slowly. Then her eyes flashed impatiently. "But what kind of grown man gets run over by a truck?"

A physicist too busy thinking about atom smashing to watch where he was going, Sophy thought privately. But she didn't say that. She just told the truth.

"I don't know. I just know I appreciate your dropping everything and coming over to stay with Lily. I'll call you in the morning. We can arrange a time and do a video call, too." She patted her briefcase where she'd already packed her laptop. "That way Lily can see me and it won't be so abrupt. I hate leaving her without saying goodbye."

She had never left Lily in four years—not for more than a few hours. Now she knew that if she woke Lily she'd end up taking her along. And that was a can of worms she didn't intend to open.

"She'll be fine," Natalie assured her. "Just go. Do what needs to be done. And take care of yourself," she advised.

"Yes. Of course. It will be fine," Sophy assured her, picking

up the briefcase as Christo hefted the duffel and headed out to the car.

Sophy allowed herself a quick side trip into Lily's room. She stood there a moment just looking at her sleeping daughter, her dark hair tousled, her lips slightly parted. She looked like George.

No. She looked like a Savas, Sophy corrected herself. Which Lily was. George had nothing to do with it. But even as she told herself that, her gaze was drawn to the photo on the bedside table. It was a picture of baby Lily in George's arms.

Lily might not remember him, but she certainly knew who he was. She'd demanded to know about him ever since she discovered such people as fathers existed.

Where was her father? she'd asked. "My daddy," she said. "Who is my daddy?" Why wasn't he here? When was he coming back?

So many questions.

For which her mother had had such inadequate answers, Sophy thought miserably now.

But how could she explain to a child what had happened? It was hard enough to explain it to herself.

She'd done her best. She'd assured her daughter of George's love. She knew that much was true. And she'd even promised that some day Lily would meet him.

"When?" her daughter had demanded.

"Later." Sophy kept the promise deliberately vague. "When you're older."

Not now. And yet, at the same time Sophy thought the words again, another thought popped into her head: What if he died?

Impossible! George had always seemed tough, impervious, imminently indestructible.

But what did she really know about the man who had so briefly been her husband? She only thought she'd known…

And what man, even a strong tough one, could fend off a truck?

"Sophy?" Natalie's voice whispered from the door. "Christo's waiting in the car."

"Coming." Quickly Sophy bent and gave her daughter a light kiss, brushed her hand over Lily's silky hair, then sucked in a deep, desperate breath and hurried out of the room.

Natalie was waiting, watching worriedly. Sophy mustered a smile. "I'll be back before you know it."

"Of course you will." Natalie gave her a quick smile in return, then wrapped Sophy in a fierce tight hug intended, Sophy knew, to supply a boatload of encouragement and support. "You don't still love him, do you?" Natalie asked.

Sophy pulled back and shook her head. "No," she vowed. She couldn't. *She wouldn't!* "Absolutely not."

They weren't giving him any painkillers.

Which would be fine, George thought, though the pounding in his head was ferocious and moving his leg and elbow made him wince, if they would just let him sleep.

But they weren't doing that, either. Every time he fell blessedly

asleep they loomed over him, poking and prodding, talking in loud kindergarten-teacher voices, shining lights in his eyes, asking him his name, how old he was, who was the president.

How idiotic was that? He could barely remember his age or who the president was when he *hadn't* just got run over by a truck.

If they'd ask him how to determine the speed of light or what the properties of black holes were, he could have answered in the blink of an eye. He could talk about that for hours—or he could have provided he was able to keep his eyes open long enough.

But no one asked him that.

They went away for a while, but then came back with more needles. They did scans, tutted and muttered, asked more of their endless questions, always looking at him expectantly, then furrowed their brows, worried, when he couldn't remember if he was thirty-four or thirty-five.

Who the hell cared?

Apparently they did.

"What month is it?" he demanded. His birthday was in November.

They looked askance when he asked them questions.

"He doesn't know what month it is," one murmured and made quick urgent notes on her laptop.

"Doesn't matter," George muttered irritably. "Is Jeremy all right?"

That was what mattered right now. That was what he saw whenever his eyes were closed—his little four-year-old dark-

haired neighbor darting into the street to chase after his ball. That and—out of the corner of his eye—the truck barreling down on him.

The memory still made his breath catch. "How's Jeremy?" George demanded again.

"He's fine. Barely a scratch," the doctor said, shining a light in George's eyes. "Already gone home. Much better off than you. Hold still and open your eyes, George, damn it."

Ordinarily, George figured, Sam Harlowe probably had more patience with his patients. But he and Sam went back to grade school. Now Sam gripped George's chin in firm fingers and shone his light again in George's eyes again. It sent his head pounding through the roof and made him grit his teeth.

"As long as Jeremy's okay," he said through them. As soon as Sam let go of his jaw, George lay back against the pillows and deliberately shut his eyes.

"Fine. Be an ass," Sam said gruffly. "But you're going to stay right here and you're going to rest. Check on him regularly," Sam commanded the nurse. "Keep me posted on any change. The next twenty-four hours are critical."

George's eyes flicked open again. "I thought you said he was all right."

"*He* is. The jury's still out on you," Sam told him gruffly. "I'll be back."

As that sounded more like a threat than a promise, George wanted to say he wouldn't be here, but by the time he mustered

his wits, Sam was long gone.

Annoyed, George glared after him. Then he fixed his gaze on the nurse. “You can leave, too,” he told her irritably. He’d had enough questions. Besides, his head hurt less if he shut his eyes. So he did.

He may have even slept because the next thing he knew there was a new nurse pestering him.

“So, how old are you, George?” she asked him.

George squinted at her. “Too old to be playing games. When can I go home?”

“When you’ve played our games,” the nurse said drily.

He cracked a smile at that. “I’m going to be thirty-five. It’s October. I had oatmeal for breakfast this morning. Unless it’s tomorrow already.”

“It is,” she told him.

“Then I can go home.”

“Not until Dr. Harlowe agrees.” She didn’t look up while she checked his blood pressure. When she finished she said, “I understand you’re a hero.”

George squinted at her. “Not likely.”

“You didn’t save a boy’s life?”

“I knocked him across the street.”

“So he wouldn’t get killed by a truck,” the nurse said. “That qualifies as ‘saving’ in my book. I hear he just got a few scrapes and bruises.”

“Which is what I’ve got,” George pointed out, about to nod

toward the ones visible on his arm. “So I should be able to go home, too.”

“And you will,” she said. “But head injuries can be serious.”

Finally, blessedly, she—and all her persistent colleagues—left him alone. As the hours wore on eventually the hospital noises quieted. The rattle of carts in the halls diminished. Even the beeps and the clicks seemed to fade. Not the drumming in his head, though. God, it was ceaseless.

Every time he drifted off, he moved. It hurt. He shifted. Found a spot it wasn’t quite so bad. Slept. And then they woke him again. When he did sleep it was restlessly. Images, dreams, memories of Jeremy haunted his dreams. So did ones of the truck. So did the grateful, still stricken faces of Jeremy’s parents.

“We might have lost him,” Jeremy’s mother, Grace, had sobbed at his bedside earlier.

And his father, Philip, had just squeezed George’s hand in his as he’d said over and over, “You have no idea.”

Not true. George had a very good idea. There were other memories and images mingling with those of Jeremy. Memories of a baby, tiny and dark-haired. A first smile. Petal-soft skin. Trusting eyes.

She was Jeremy’s age now. Old enough to run into a street the same way Jeremy had…He tried not to think about it. Tried not to think about her. It made his throat ache and his eyes burn. He shut them once more and tried desperately to fall asleep.

He didn’t know how much sleep he finally got. His head

was still pounding when the first glimmers of dawn filtered in through the window.

He'd heard footsteps come into the room earlier. There had been the sound of a nurse's voice speaking quietly, another low murmured response, then the sound of the feet of a chair being moved.

He hadn't opened his eyes. Had deliberately ignored it all.

All he'd thought was, please God they would go away without poking him or talking to him again. He didn't want to be poked. He didn't want to be civil.

He wanted to go back to sleep—but this time he didn't want the memories to come with it. The nurse left. The conversation stopped. Yet somehow he didn't think he was alone.

Was that Sam who'd come in? Was he standing there now, staring down at him in silence?

It was the sort of juvenile nonsensical thing they'd done as kids to try to psych the other out. Surely Sam had grown out of it by now.

George shifted—and winced as he tried to roll onto his side. His shoulder hurt like hell. Every muscle in his body protested. If Sam thought this was funny…

George flicked open his eyes and his whole being—mind and body—seemed to jerk.

It wasn't Sam in the room. It was a woman.

George sucked in a breath. He didn't think he made a noise. But something alerted her because she had been sitting beside his

bed looking out the window, and now as he stared, dry-mouthed and disbelieving, slowly she turned and her gaze met his.

For the first time in nearly four years he and Sophy—his wife—were face-to-face.

Wife? Ha.

They might have stood side by side in a New York City judge's office and repeated after him. They might have a legally binding document declaring them married. But it had never meant anything more than a piece of paper.

Not to her.

Not to either of them, George told himself firmly, though the pain he felt was suddenly different than before. He resisted it. Didn't want to care. Sure as hell didn't want to feel!

The very last thing he needed now was to have to deal with Sophy. His jaw tightened involuntarily, which, damn it, made his head hurt even worse.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. His voice was rough, hoarse from tubes and dry hospital air. He glared at her accusingly.

"Irritating you, obviously." Sophy's tone was mild, but there was a concern in her gaze that belied her tone. Still, she shrugged lightly. "The hospital called me. You were unconscious. They needed next of kin's permission to do whatever they felt needed doing."

"You?" George stared in disbelief.

"That's pretty much what I said when they called," Sophy

admitted candidly, crossing one long leg over the other and leaning back in the chair.

She was wearing black wool trousers and an olive green sweater. Very tasteful. Professional. Businesslike, George would have said. Not at all the Sophy of jeans and sweats and maternity tops he remembered. Only her copper-colored hair was still the same, the dark red strands glinting like new pennies in the early morning sun. He remembered running his fingers through it, burying his face in it. More thoughts he didn't want to deal with.

"Apparently you never got around to divorcing me." She looked at him as if asking a question.

George's jaw tightened. "I imagined you would take care of that," he bit out. Since she had been the one who was so keen on it. Damn, but his head was pounding. He shut his eyes.

When he opened them again it was to see that Sophy's gaze had flickered away. But then it came back to meet his. She shook her head.

"No need," she said easily. "I certainly wasn't getting married again."

And neither was he. He'd been gutted once by marriage. He had no desire to go through it again. But he wasn't talking about that to Sophy. He couldn't believe she was even here. Maybe that whack on the head was causing him to hallucinate.

He tried shutting his eyes again, wishing her gone. No luck. When he opened them again, she was still there.

Getting hit by a truck was small potatoes compared to dealing

with Sophy. He needed all his wits and every bit of control and composure he could manage when it came to coping with her. Now he rolled onto his back again and grimaced as he tried to push himself up against the pillows.

"Probably not a good idea," Sophy commented.

No, it wasn't. The closer he got to vertical, the more he felt as if the top of his head was going to come off. On the other hand, he wasn't dealing with Sophy from a position of weakness.

"You should rest," she offered.

"I've been resting all night."

"I doubt you had much," Sophy said frankly. "The nurse said you were restless."

"You try sleeping when they're asking you questions."

"They need to keep checking, you have concussion and a subdural hematoma. Not to mention," she added, assessing him slowly as if he were a distasteful bug pinned to paper, "that you look as if you've been put through a meat grinder."

"Thanks," George muttered. Yes, it hurt, but he kept pushing himself up. He wanted to clutch his head in his hands. Instead he clutched the bedclothes until his knuckles turned white.

"For heaven's sake, stop that! Lie down or I'll call the nurse."

"Be my guest," George said. "Since it's morning and I know my name and how old I am, maybe they'll finally let me sign myself out of here and go home. I have things to do. Classes. Work."

Sophy rolled her eyes. "You're not going anywhere. You're

lucky you're not in surgery."

"Why should I be?" He scowled. "I don't have any broken bones." He was half-sitting now so he stopped pushing himself up and lifted his arm to look at his watch. His arm was bare except for the intravenous tube in the back of his hand. He gritted his teeth. "Damn it. What time is it? I have a class doing an experiment tomorrow. I need to go to work." *I need to get away from this woman—or I need to grab her and hold on to her forever.*

Sophy rolled her eyes. "Like that's going to happen."

For a terrible moment, George thought she was responding to the words that had formed in his concussed brain. Then he realized she was talking about him going to work. He sagged in relief.

"The world doesn't stop just because one person has an accident," he told her irritably.

"Yours almost did."

The baldness of her statement was like a punch to the gut. And so was the sudden change in Sophy's expression as she said the words. There was nothing at all light or flippant about her now. She looked stricken. "You almost died, George!" She even sounded as if she cared.

He steeled himself against believing it, making himself shrug. "But I didn't."

All the same he knew the truth of what she said. The truck was big enough. It had been moving fast enough. If he'd been

half a step slower, she would likely be right.

Would they have called Sophy if he'd died? Would she have come and planned his funeral?

He didn't ask. He knew Sophy didn't love him, but she didn't hate him, either.

Once he'd even thought they actually stood a chance of making their marriage work, that she might have really come to love him.

"What happened?" she asked him now. "The nurse said you got hit saving a child."

He was surprised she'd asked. But then he realized she might want to know why they'd tracked her down and dragged her here. It didn't have anything to do with caring about him.

"Jeremy," George confirmed. "He's four. He lives down the street from me. I was walking home from work and he came running down the sidewalk to show me his new soccer ball. He dropped it so he could dribble it, but then as he got closer he kicked it harder—at me. But it—" he dragged in a harsh breath "—went into the street."

Sophy sucked in a breath.

"There was a delivery truck coming…"

Sophy went very white. "Dear God. He's not…?"

George shook his head, then instantly wished he hadn't. "He's okay. Bruised. Scraped up. But—"

"But not dead." Sophy said it aloud. Firmly, as if to make it more believable. She seemed to breathe again, relief evident

on her face. “Thank God.” And her gaze lifted as if she was in prayer.

“Yes.”

Then she lowered her gaze and looked at him. “Thank George.”

There was a sudden flatness in her tone, and George heard an unwelcome edge of finality, of inevitability. Almost of bitterness.

His teeth came together. “What? Did you want me to let him run in front of a truck?”

“Of course not!” Sophy’s eyes flashed. A deep flush of color rushed into her pale cheeks. “How could you say such a thing? I was just…recognizing what you’d done.”

“Sure you were.” He gave her a hard look, an expectant look, waiting for her to say the words that hung between them.

She wet her lips. “You saved him.”

He almost expected it to be an accusation. She had certainly made it sound that way when she’d flung the words at him the day she’d said she didn’t want to be married anymore.

“That’s what you were doing when you married me,” she’d cried bitterly. “You married me to *save* me!”

He had, of course. But that wasn’t the only reason. Not that she would believe it. He hadn’t replied then. He didn’t reply now. Sophy would think what she wanted.

George stared back at her stonily, dared her to make something of it.

But whatever anger she felt seemed to go out of her. She just looked at him with those wide deep green eyes for a long moment, and then she added quietly, “You are a hero.”

George snorted. “Hardly. Jeremy wouldn’t have been out there running down the street at all if he hadn’t seen me coming.”

“What? You’re saying it’s your fault?” She stared at him in disbelief.

“I’m just saying he was waiting for me.” He shrugged. “We kick the ball around together sometimes.”

“You know him well, then? He’s a friend?” Sophy sounded surprised, as if she considered it unlikely.

“We’re friends.” Jeremy with his dark hair and bright eyes had made him think about Lily. He didn’t say that, though.

Sophy’s brows lifted slightly, as if the notion that he knew who his neighbors were surprised her as well. Maybe it should. He hadn’t known any of their neighbors during the few months they’d been together.

But he hadn’t had time, had he? He’d been too busy finishing up the government project he was working on and trying to figure out how to be a husband and then, only weeks later, a father. The first had been time-consuming, but at least in his comfort zone.

Marriage and fatherhood had been completely virgin territory. He hadn’t had a clue.

Now Sophy said, “I was surprised you were back in New York.” It wasn’t a question, but he assumed that she meant it as one.

“For the past two years.”

“Uppsala didn’t appeal?”

Ah, right. Uppsala. That was where she thought he’d gone—the job he had supposedly been up for—at the University of Uppsala in Sweden.

He couldn’t have told her differently then. He hadn’t been permitted to talk about it. And there was no point in talking about it now.

“It was a two-year appointment,” he said.

That much was the truth. And though he could have continued to work on government projects, he hadn’t wanted to. He’d agreed to the earlier one before he’d ever expected to be marrying anyone. And if things had worked out between him and Sophy, he would have bowed out and never gone to Europe at all.

When their marriage crumbled, he went, grateful not to have to stay in the city, grateful to be able to put an ocean between him and the reason for his pain.

But after two years, he’d come home, back to New York though he’d had several good offers elsewhere. “This one at Columbia is tenure track,” he told her.

Not that tenure had been a factor. He’d taken the job because it appealed to him. It was research work he wanted to do, eager graduate students to mentor, a freshman class to inspire and a classload he could handle.

It had nothing to do with the fact that when he took it he’d thought Sophy and Lily were still living in the city. Nothing.

Sophy nodded. “Ah.”

“When did you leave?” he asked. At her raised brows, he said, “I did drop by. You were gone.”

“I went to California. Not long after you left,” she said. “I started a business with my cousin.”

“So I heard. My mother said she talked to you at Christo’s wedding.”

“Yes.” Then she added politely, “It was nice to see your parents again.”

George, who knew exactly what she thought of his father, said drily, “I’ll bet.”

He’d been invited to Christo’s wedding, too. He hadn’t gone because he had had no clue who his cousin Christo was marrying and no interest in flying across the country to find out. To discover later that Christo’s bride was a second cousin of Sophy’s blew his mind. He wondered what would have happened if he’d gone to the wedding, if they’d run into each other there.

Probably nothing, he thought heavily. There were times and places when things could happen. It had been the wrong time before. And now? Now it was simply too late.

Yet even knowing it, he couldn’t help saying, “What about your business? My mother said it’s called Rent-a-Bride?”

“Rent-a-*Wife,*” Sophy corrected. “We do things for people that they need a second person to cope with. Things wives traditionally do. Pick up dry cleaning, arrange dinner parties, ferry the kids to dental appointments and soccer games, take the

dog to the vet."

"And people pay for that?"

"They do. Very well, in fact." She met his gaze defiantly. "I'm doing fine."

Without you.

She didn't have to say the words for him to hear them. "Ah. Well, good for you."

Their gazes locked, hers more of a glare than a gaze. Then abruptly she looked away, shifted in her chair and tried to stifle a yawn. Watching her, George realized she must have had to fly all night to get here from California.

"Did you sleep?"

She bit off the yawn. "Some." But her gaze flicked away fast enough that he knew it for the lie it was. And he felt guilty for her having been called for no reason.

"Look," he said roughly, "I'm sorry they bothered you. I'm sorry you felt you had to drop everything and fly clear across the country to sign papers. It wasn't necessary."

"The doctor said it was."

"My fault. I should have updated the contact information."

"To whom?" Her question was as quick as it was surprising. And was she actually interested in his answer?

George shrugged. "My folks. My sister, Tallie. She and Elias and the kids live in Brooklyn."

"Oh. Right. Of course." Sophy shifted in the chair, sat up straighter. "I just wondered. I thought—" But she stopped, not

telling him whatever it was she'd thought, and George didn't have enough working brain cells to try to guess. "Never mind."

"I'll get it changed as soon as I get out of here," he promised.

"No problem." Sophy's easy acceptance was unexpected. At his blink of astonishment, she shrugged. "You were there for me. It's my turn."

He frowned. "So this is payback?"

She spread her hands. "It's the best I can do."

"You don't need to do anything!"

"Apparently not," she said in a mild nonconfrontational tone that reminded him of a mother humoring a fractious child.

George set his teeth. He didn't want to be humored and he damned well didn't want Sophy patronizing him.

"Fine. It's payback. So consider your debt paid," he said gruffly. He'd had enough. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get some rest. And," he went on for good measure, "as you can see, I'm conscious and I can sign my own papers now. So thank you for coming, but I can take care of things myself. You don't need to hang around taking care of me. You can go."

As the words left his mouth he knew he heard the echo of almost the exact words she had thrown at him nearly four years ago: *I don't need you! I'm not a mess you need to clean up. I can take care of myself. I don't need you doing it for me. So get out of here! Leave me alone. Just go!*

And from the expression on her face, Sophy knew it, too. She looked as if he'd slapped her.

"Of course," she said stiffly and stood up, pulling her jacket off the back of the chair and putting it on.

George watched her every move. He didn't want to. But, as usual, he couldn't look away. From the first moment he'd seen her on his cousin Ari's arm at a family wedding, Sophy had always had the power to draw his gaze.

She didn't seem to notice. Something else that hadn't changed. She zipped up her jacket and picked up her tote from the floor by the chair. Then she stood looking down at him, her expression unreadable.

George made sure his was, too. "Thank you for coming," he said evenly. "I'm sorry you were inconvenienced."

She inclined her head. "I'm glad you're recovering."

All very polite. They looked at each other in silence. For three seconds. Five. George didn't know how long. It wasn't going to be enough. It never would be.

He couldn't help memorizing her even as he told himself it was a stupid thing to do. And not the first, he reminded himself grimly, where Sophy was concerned.

She gave him one last faint smile and turned away.

Her name was out of his mouth before she reached the door. "Sophy."

She stilled, glanced back, one brow lifting quizzically.

He'd thought he could leave it at that. That he could simply let her go. But he had to ask. "How's Lily?"

For a moment he thought she wouldn't answer. But then the

smile he hadn't seen yet suddenly appeared on her face like the sun from behind a bank of thunderheads. Her expression softened. And she was no longer supremely self-contained, keeping him determinedly outside the castle walls. "Lily's fine. Amazing. Bright. Funny. So smart. We had her birthday party yesterday. She's—"

"Four." George finished the sentence before she could. He knew exactly how old she was. Remembered every minute of the day she was born. Remembered holding her in his arms. Remembered how the mantle of responsibility felt on his shoulders—unexpected, scary, yet absolutely right.

Sophy blinked. "You remembered?"

"Of course."

She swallowed. "Would you…like to see a picture of her?"

Would he? George nodded almost jerkily. Sophy didn't seem to notice. She was already opening her purse and taking out her wallet. She fished out a photo and came back across the room to hand it to him.

George took one look at the child in the photo and felt his throat close.

God, she was beautiful. He'd seen some snapshots that his mother had given him from the wedding so he had an idea of what Lily was like. But this photo really captured her.

She was sitting on a beach, a bucket of sand on her lap, her face tipped back as she laughed up at whoever had taken the photo. It was like seeing a miniature Sophy, except for the hair. Lily's was

dark and wavy and, in this photo, wind-tossed. But her eyes were Sophy's eyes—the same shape, the same color. "British sports car green," he'd once called them. And her mouth wore a little girl's version of the delighted, sparkling grin that, like Sophy's, would make the world a brighter place. Her fingers were clutching the sides of the sand pail, and George remembered how her much tinier fingers had clutched his as she'd stared up at him in cross-eyed solemnity whenever he held her.

He blinked rapidly, his throat aching as he swallowed hard. When he was sure he could do it without sounding rusty, he lifted his gaze and said, "She's very like you."

Sophy nodded. "People say that," she agreed. "Except her hair. She has y—Ari's hair."

Ari's hair. Because Lily was Ari's daughter. Not his.

For all that George had once dared to hope, like her mother Lily had never been his.

They both belonged to Ari—always had—no matter that his cousin had been dead since before Lily's birth. Some things, George found, hurt more than the pounding in his head. He ran his tongue over his lips. "She looks happy."

"She is." Sophy's voice was firm and confident now. "She's a happy well-adjusted little girl. She's actually pretty easygoing most of the time. Once she got over the three-month mark, she stopped having colic and settled down. I managed," she added, as if it needed saying.

He supposed she thought it did. She'd had something to prove

when she'd told him to get out. And she'd obviously proved it.

Now he took a breath. "I'm glad to hear it." George took one last look at the picture then held it out to her.

"You can have it," she said. "I can print another one. If you want it," she added a second later, as if he might not.

"Thanks. Yes, I'd like it." He studied it again for a long moment before turning slowly in an attempt to set it on the table next to the bed.

Sophy reached out and took it from him, standing it up against his water pitcher so he could see it if he turned his head. "There." She stepped back again. "She can…watch over you." As soon as she said the words, she ducked her head, as if she shouldn't have. "You should get some rest."

"We'll see."

"No 'we'll see.' You should," she said firmly.

He didn't reply, and she seemed to realize that was something else she shouldn't have said, that she had no right to tell him what he should or shouldn't do. "Sorry," she said briskly. "None of my business." She turned toward the door again. "Goodbye."

He almost called her back a second time. But it would simply prolong the awkwardness between them. And when you got right down it, there was nothing else.

It had been kind of her to have come—even if it was simply "payback" on her part. Still, it was more than he would have expected.

No, that was unfair.

She might not love him, but she was tenderhearted. Sophy would do the right thing for anyone she perceived to be in need—even the man she resented more than anyone on earth.

He didn't need her, he reminded himself. He'd lived without her for nearly four years. He could live without her for the rest of his life. All he had to do was end things now as he should have done four years ago.

"Sophy!"

This time she was beyond the door and when she turned, she looked back with something akin to impatience in her gaze. "What?"

He made it clear—to both of them. "Don't worry. It will never happen again. As soon as I get out of here, I'll file for divorce."

Chapter Two

OF COURSE GEORGE would get a divorce.

The only surprise as far as Sophy was concerned, was that he hadn't got one already. But even accepting the fact, Sophy felt her knees wobble as she walked away from George's room.

She moved automatically, going to fetch her duffel, which one of the nurses had allowed her to leave in a storage area near the nurses' station. But when she got there, her hands were shaking so much that she nearly brought down a load of paper supplies while trying to pull the duffel's handle out.

"Here. Let me help you." The nurse who had let her put it there in the first place took the duffel's handle, slid it out and pulled it easily out of the storage space. She tipped it toward Sophy, then looked at her closely. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, sure. Fine. Just…tired." Something of an understatement. "It's all right," Sophy murmured. "I'm fine. Truly." She did her best visibly to pull herself together so the nurse could see she was telling the truth. She shoved her hair away from her face and tried to smile. "I just need some sleep."

"Of course you do. It's been a bit traumatic. You go home now and get some sleep. Don't worry." She patted Sophy's arm. "We'll take care of your husband."

Sophy opened her mouth to correct the nurse, but what could she say? And why? Even though she wouldn't let herself think of

George that way, it was impossible to lie to herself, impossible to say that walking into his hospital room had left her unaffected.

The very moment she'd laid eyes on him this morning, the years since she'd seen him fell away as if they'd never existed.

And even worse was the realization that, however desperately she might wish it, she wasn't over him at all.

When she'd walked into the hospital room to see George lying there, his head bandaged, his arm in a sling, his whisker-shadowed jaw bruised, his normally tanned face unnaturally pale, she felt gutted—exactly the same way she'd felt seeing her daughter fall off the jungle gym at her preschool.

The sight of Lily slipping and tumbling, then lying motionless on the ground, had shattered Sophy's world. That same sickening breathlessness had hit her again at the sight of George in his hospital bed.

The difference was that Lilly, having landed on wood chips that cushioned her fall, had only had the wind knocked out of her. Seconds later, she'd bounced up again none the worse for wear.

But George hadn't moved.

It was early when she'd arrived, straight from the airport, still stiff and groggy from a sleepless night on the plane. He should have been asleep. But it looked like such an unnatural sleep. And Sophy had stopped dead in the doorway, clutching the doorjamb as she stood watching him never flutter so much as an eyelash. She had been too far away to see the rise and fall of his chest.

She must have looked stricken because the nurse had said,

“Watch the monitor.” Its squiggly line was moving up and down jerkily. But at least it proved he was breathing because absolutely nothing else did.

“You can wake him if you want,” this same nurse had said.

But Sophy had shaken her head. If George wasn’t dead yet, the sight of her first thing when he opened his eyes might very well do it for him.

“No. Let him sleep,” she said in a voice barely above a whisper. “I’ll just wait.”

“If he’s not awake in an hour, I’ll be back. We have to wake him regularly to see how he responds and if he remembers everything.”

No doubt about his memory, Sophy thought grimly now.

She turned to the nurse. “He thinks he’s going to leave today, to go to work. The doctor wouldn’t really let him…”

The nurse smiled. “I don’t think you need to worry about that. They’ll be watching him today and probably tomorrow. You should go home now and get some rest. Come back this afternoon. Chances are he’ll be much brighter by then.” She gave Sophy one more encouraging smile, then checked her beeper and hurried down the hall.

Sophy stood there with her overnight bag and her briefcase and realized she didn’t have a home to go to.

Home was three thousand miles away.

On the other hand, why shouldn’t she go home? What was keeping her here? George had clearly dismissed her. As far as

he was concerned, she needn't have bothered to come in the first place.

And she certainly wasn't going to come back this afternoon. She'd done her duty. "Payback," he'd called it.

And he'd rejected it. Consider it paid, he'd said.

That was fine with her. Shooting one last glance toward his room, she turned and wheeled her overnight bag down the hall to the elevator and pressed the button and waited, trying to keep her eyes open and stifle a yawn.

She was in the midst of the latter when the elevator door opened. There were several people in it, but only one, a young, dark-haired, very pregnant woman, swept out, then stopped dead and stared at her.

"Sophy?"

Sophy blinked, startled. "Tallie?"

"Oh, my God, it is you!" And before Sophy could do more than close her gaping mouth, George's sister, Tallie, swept her into a fierce delighted hug. "You've come back!"

"Well, I—" But whatever protest she might have made was muffled by the enthusiastic warmth of Tallie's embrace. And Sophy couldn't do much more than hug her back. It was no hardship in any case. She'd always adored George's sister. Losing the right to count Tallie as her sister-in-law had been one of the real pains of the end of her marriage.

Before she could say anything, a firm thump against her midsection had Sophy jumping back. "Was that the baby?" She

looked at Tallie, wide-eyed.

Tallie laughed. “Yes. My girl likes her space.” She rubbed her burgeoning belly affectionately. “This one’s a girl. But more about her later. It’s so good to see you.” She gave Sophy another fierce hug, but was careful to move back before the baby kicked again. “George should get run over by trucks more often.”

“No.” Even for the pleasure of seeing Tallie again, she didn’t want that.

“Well, not really.” Tallie laughed with a shake of her head. “But if it brings you home—” She beamed at Sophy.

“I’m not ‘home,’” Sophy said quickly. “I’m just…here. For the moment. I got a call from the doctor last night. When George was unconscious they needed his next of kin’s permission for any medical procedures, and because we’re not officially divorced—yet—that was me. And so—” she shrugged “—I came.”

“Of course you did,” Tallie said with blithe confidence. “Besides, it’s about time. How is he?” Her smile faded a bit and she looked concerned. “He wouldn’t let me come see him last night.”

“He looks like he’s been hit by a truck,” Sophy said. If Tallie hadn’t seen him yet, Sophy wanted to prepare her. “Seriously. He’s pretty battered. But coherent,” she added when Tallie’s expression turned worried.

“He flat-out refused to let us come last night. Well, there’s only Elias and me around. Mom and Dad are in Santorini. And none of the boys—” her other brothers, Theo, Demetrios and

Yiannis, she meant "—are here. So he was safe. He probably wouldn't have contacted me at all if he hadn't needed someone to take care of Gunnar."

"Gunnar?"

"His dog."

George had a dog? That was a surprise. "Did he rescue it?" Sophy asked.

Tallie frowned. "I don't think so. I think he got him as a puppy. Why?"

Sophy shook her head. "Never mind. I was just—never mind." She could hardly say, *Because George rescues things.* Tallie wouldn't understand.

George's sister shoved a strand of hair away from her face. "He said to go to his place and feed Gunnar, put him out and absolutely *don't* come to the hospital. He didn't need me hovering." She shook her head.

"George is an idiot," she went on with long-suffering sisterly fondness. "As if I would hover. Well, I will. But at least I waited until this morning. I'll go annoy him for a few minutes, just to let him know he can't push me around. And because the rest of the family will fuss and worry if someone hasn't set eyes on him in the flesh. But now you've come, you take the keys." She dug in the pocket of her maternity pants and thrust a set of keys into Sophy's hand.

"Me?" Immediately Sophy tried to hand them back. "They're not mine," she protested. "I can't take George's keys!"

“Why not? Because you and George are separated? Big deal.”

“We’re not separated! We’re divorcing. I thought we already were,” Sophy said. “Divorced,” she clarified.

“But you’re not? Good. Easier to work things out,” Tallie said with the confidence of someone who had done just that and was living happily ever after. “Elias and I—”

“Were not married when you went your own ways,” Sophy said firmly. “It is not the same thing. And I can’t take George’s keys.” She tried to hand them back again, but a yawn caught her by surprise and so she ended up covering her mouth instead.

“You’re exhausted,” Tallie said. “How long have you been here?”

“Not that long. A couple of hours. I got into LaGuardia before dawn.”

“You took a red-eye? Did you get any sleep at all?”

“Not really,” Sophy admitted. “But I’m hoping I will on the way home.”

Tallie looked appalled. “On the way home? What? You’re going home now?”

Sophy shrugged. “He doesn’t need me here. Or want me here. He made that quite clear.”

Tallie snorted dismissively. “What does he know? Besides, it doesn’t matter if he needs you or wants you. I do.”

“You? What do you mean?”

“You, my dear Sophy, are going to save my life,” Tallie told her, taking her by the arm and steering her to a pair of chairs

where they could sit.

"Don't you want to see George?" Sophy said hopefully.

"In a minute. First I want to get you on your way." The CEO Tallie had once been came through loud and clear. "I need your help."

"What sort of help?"

"George, bless his heart, thinks that I can simply drop my life and take over the running of his. And admittedly, there might have been a time I could have done it," Tallie said with a grin. "But that time is not now. Not with three little boys, a baby due in three weeks, a homemade bakery business that has orders up the wazoo, orders I need to get taken care of before the arrival of my beautiful baby girl—" Tallie rubbed her belly again "—not to mention a husband who, while tolerant, does not consider sharing me with a dog for more than one night to be the best allocation of my time.

"Besides," she went on before Sophy could say a word, "he has to go to Mystic for a boat launch this afternoon. He took the kids to school, but I need to be home to get Nick and Garrett from kindergarten and Digger from preschool. I was planning to bake today before I had to go get them. And I'd take Gunnar home but he doesn't get along with the rabbit, er, actually vice versa. So—" she took a breath and gave Sophy a bright, hopeful smile "—what do you say? Will you save me? Please?"

Sophy was even more exhausted just thinking about it. She swallowed another yawn.

“And you can sleep while you’re there,” Tallie said triumphantly.

“George won’t like it.”

“Who’s telling George?” Tallie raised both brows.

Not me, Sophy thought. She should say no. It was the sane, safe, sensible thing to do. The less she had to do with George or any of his family before the divorce was final, the less likely she was to be hurt again.

But life, as she well knew, wasn’t about protecting yourself. It was about doing what needed to be done. “Payback” wasn’t always what you thought it would be. It didn’t mean you had a right not to do it.

“All right,” she said resignedly. “I’ll do it. But as soon as George can come home, I’m leaving.”

“Of course,” Tallie said, all grateful smiles. “Absolutely.”

Sophy hadn’t let herself think about where George might be living ever since he’d walked out of her life.

If she’d wanted to guess, she’d have picked some sterile but extremely functional apartment where he’d be called upon to do as little interaction with his environment as possible.

She couldn’t have been more wrong.

George had a brownstone on the Upper West Side. Not just an efficient studio in a brownstone or even a complete floor-through apartment. George owned the whole five-story building.

And while most of the brownstones in the neighborhood had long since been subdivided into flats, George’s had not.

“When he came home he said he wanted a house,” Tallie told her. “And he got one.”

He had indeed. And what a one it was.

Sophy stopped on the sidewalk in front of the wide stoop and stared openmouthed at the elegant well-maintained facade. It had big bay windows on the two floors above the garden entrance, and two more floors above that with three identical tall narrow arched windows looking south across the tree-lined street at a row of similar brownstones.

It had the warm, tasteful, elegant yet friendly look that the best well-kept brownstones had. And to Sophy, whose earliest memories of home were the days spent in her grandparents’ brownstone in Brooklyn, it fairly shouted the word *home.*

It was exactly the sort of family home she’d always dreamed of. She’d babbled on about it to George in the early days of their marriage. He’d been preoccupied with work, of course. Not listening. At least she hadn’t thought he was listening…

No, of course he hadn’t been. It was coincidence.

All the same it wasn’t helpful. Not helpful at all.

At least, she thought as she climbed the steps, the sound of a ferocious dog barking his head off on the other side of the front door belied any homey feelings that threatened to overtake her.

So that was Gunnar.

He sounded as if he wanted to have her for brunch.

“He’s lovely,” Tallie had said. “Adores George.”

But apparently he wasn’t keen on rabbits—except perhaps for

meals—and the jury was still out on what he thought of her.

Good thing she liked dogs, Sophy thought, fitting the key in the lock and putting on her most upbeat, confident demeanor. She had no idea if it would convince Gunnar. She just hoped she convinced herself long enough to make his acquaintance.

"Hey, Gunnar. Hey, buddy," she said as she cautiously opened the door.

The dog stopped barking and simply looked at her quizzically. He was a good-size dog, all black with medium-length hair and some feathering.

"A flat-coated retriever," Tallie had told her, and when Sophy looked blank, she'd elucidated. "Think of a lean, wiry *black* golden retriever—with Opinions. Capital *O* Opinions." Gunnar's opinion of her was apparently being formed even as she talked to him.

"I hope you like me," Sophy said to him. She'd at least had the wisdom to stop at a pet shop on her way down Broadway, where she'd bought some dog treats. Now she offered one to the dog.

In her experience, most dogs took treats eagerly and without question. Gunnar took his, too. But instead of grabbing it, he accepted it delicately from her fingers, then carried it over to the rug by the fireplace where he lay down and nosed it for a few moments before consuming it.

She dragged her bag in over the threshold and shut the door behind her, then turned to survey Gunnar's—and George's—domain.

It was as impressive inside as it was out. From the mahogany-paneled entry she could see into the dining room where Gunnar was finishing his dog treat, up an equally beautiful mahogany staircase to the second floor and down a hallway to the back where a glimpse of a sofa told her she would find the living room.

But before she could go look, Gunnar came back and poked her with his nose, then looked up hopefully. “Treats are the way to your heart?” she said to him—and was surprised when he replied.

He didn’t bark. He didn’t growl. He just sort of—talked—made some sort of noise that had her looking at him in astonishment. So he poked her again.

“Right,” she said. “Yes. Of course.” And she fetched another treat out of the bag she’d bought. He accepted it with the same gravity with which he’d accepted the first one. But he didn’t eat it. He simply carried it down the hall.

Sophy followed. She thought he was going to take it into the living room, which indeed was at the end of the hall. But instead Gunnar turned and went down the stairs. He obviously knew better than she did what she was supposed to be doing and was showing her where to go to open the door to the garden.

She let Gunnar out into the back garden with its cedar deck and table and chairs and the bucket of tennis balls that George must toss for Gunnar. Even though it was small and utilitarian, it was still far more appealing than the parking lot behind her apartment in California. She left Gunnar there and went back

inside because she was more curious about George's office.

What would have been billed "the garden apartment" in a split-up brownstone, obviously served as George's office. One big room contained a wide oak desk, a sleek state-of-the-art computer with what was probably the biggest computer screen she'd ever seen. There were file cabinets, a worktable and shelf after shelf of scientific books. There were papers in neat stacks on the desk and worktable, and a few spread out that were filled with equations in George's spiky but very legible handwriting. When they'd been together, he had made out shopping lists in the same precise way.

Feeling a bit like a voyeur, though goodness knew she couldn't understand any of whatever he was working on, Sophy deliberately went back out into the garden and threw some tennis balls for Gunnar.

She made a friend for life. He was tireless. She was even more exhausted by the time she said, "Last one," and threw it across the small yard. Gunnar caught it on the rebound from the wall and trotted back to look at her hopefully. "Later," she promised him.

She could have sworn he sighed. But obediently he followed her back into the house, up the stairs and on up the next flight where there was a spacious yet homey family room that looked decidedly lived in—right down to the toys in one corner.

Toys?

Surprised, Sophy looked closer. Yes, there were toys. Blocks, LEGOs, Lincoln Logs and a fleet of scratched and dented

Matchbox cars. Boy toys, Sophy thought. But it was clear that Tallie's boys were welcome at Uncle George's. Or did George have a lady friend with children? Not that she cared.

The family room was on the back of the house, just above the living room. Sophy found it cozy and friendly, drawing her in. There were books on the shelves, not only scientific tomes, but also popular mysteries and sailing magazines. She picked them up, noting that they weren't pristine. They had obviously been read.

She scanned the shelves curiously, then spotted a photo album as well. She opened it before she could think twice—and was quite suddenly confronted by memories that seemed almost like a blow to the heart.

The album was full of pictures from the reception after their wedding. Not the more formal portraits, but lots of casual family ones. She and George laughing as they fed each other cake. She and George dancing on the deck of his parents' home. She and George surrounded by his whole family, all of them smiling and happy.

Numbly she turned the pages. After the ones from the reception, there were others of the two of them. On the beach. In a small cozy house before a fire.

Sophy's throat tightened at the sight. At the memories of their honeymoon.

Well, it hadn't been a honeymoon—not really. There hadn't been time to plan one because the wedding had been so hastily

arranged and George couldn't take time off work.

All they'd had was a weekend in a tiny groundskeeper's cottage behind one of the Hamptons mansions near his parents' home by the sea.

But for all that it had been impromptu, it had been memorable. They had, she'd thought, forged a bond that weekend. They'd talked. They'd laughed. They'd cooked together, swum together, walked on the beach together. They'd slept together in the same bed—though they hadn't made love.

Her pregnancy was too far along for that.

Still, for all they'd had a less than orthodox beginning, she'd dared to hope, to believe…

Now she shut the album and stuck it back on the shelf. She didn't want to look. Didn't want to remember the pain of dashed hopes, of lost love.

No, she corrected herself. It hadn't ever been love—not really. Not to George.

Deliberately she turned away. "Come on, Gunnar," she said to the dog. "Let's take a look at the guest room."

That's the most she was in George's house, in his life. A guest. She needed to remember that.

"I didn't change the sheets," Tallie had apologized. "I figured I'd either be back there tonight or George would be home. There are other rooms up above. There's a room for the boys up there, but George probably hasn't changed the sheets since the last time they were there. And that's where George's room is, of course."

Sophy felt enough like Goldilocks eavesdropping further in a house where she didn't belong. The last place she wanted to look at was George's bedroom.

George's bed. She didn't want to remember the nights she'd spent sharing a bed with George. Making love with George…

"I'll just take the room where you were," she'd told Tallie. "It will be fine."

It was Spartan—but perfectly adequate. It had a bed, sheets, a blanket and two pillows. What more could she ask?

Sophy kicked off her shoes and pulled off her jacket, already heading for the bed when she remembered that she needed to get on the computer and put through a video call to Natalie and Lily.

She opened her laptop on the bed and was glad she often used the video program to help out and advise the "wives" in the field who worked for her and Natalie. So she was quickly up and running, and felt an instant pang of homesickness when the call went through and she could see Lily at home with Natalie in her living room.

"Mama?" Lily demanded, sticking her face right up against Natalie's laptop. "Are you in the computer?"

Sophy laughed. "No, darling. I'm in New York. I had to come here last night, just for a couple of days. I'll be home soon. Are you being good for Auntie Nat?"

"'Course I am," Lily said. "I'm helping."

"Great." Though whether Natalie would think the help of a four-year-old was such a blessing, Sophy wasn't sure. "What are

you going to do today?"

The three-hour time difference meant that Natalie and Lily were just getting started on their day. But clearly Natalie had given some thought to what they would do. Lily rattled off an entire list of things that included "after lunch going to the beach with Uncle Christo," undoubtedly so Natalie could get some real work done.

"Is that a dog?" Lily demanded, abruptly breaking off her recitation.

"Dog?" Sophy was confused, then realized that Lily wasn't just seeing her. Her daughter could see at least a part of the bedroom behind her. And Gunnar was standing by the bed looking equally curiously at the computer screen.

"Um, yes," Sophy said. "That's Gunnar."

"He's big," Lily said solemnly. "An' really, really black. Would he like me?"

"Oh, I think so," Natalie said. Gunnar, for all his ferocious barking while she was on the doorstep, had been an absolute gentleman since she'd crossed the threshold. He actually seemed to be looking at Lily.

"Hi, Gunnar," she said.

He looked quizzical and tentatively wagged his tail.

"He likes me!" Lily crowed.

"Who likes you?" Natalie reappeared and bent down to peer into the screen, eyes widening when she spotted the dog. "Who's that? Where'd he come from? Where are you?" she shot out the

questions rapid-fire.

"That's Gunnar. He lives here."

"Here where?" Natalie demanded.

"At George's," Sophy said reluctantly.

"At Daddy's?" Lily demanded, sticking her face close to the screen to peer around the room eagerly. "Are you at Daddy's?"

"Yes, but—"

"Where is he?"

"Yes, where is Daddy?" Natalie demanded, frowning her concern.

Sophy heard the archness in Natalie's tone. "He's in the hospital." She tried to sound calm and matter-of-fact.

"Is Daddy okay?" Lily asked. "He's okay, isn't he, Mommy?"

"He will be," Sophy assured her.

"So what are you doing at his place?" Natalie wanted to know.

"Feeding his dog. And taking a nap. In the guest room," she added in case Natalie had other ideas.

Fortunately whatever ideas Natalie had she wasn't sharing them in front of Lily. She pressed her lips together, then shrugged and said, "Well, get some sleep then."

"I will. I just wanted to see Lily. Love you, kiddo."

"Love you, Mommy," Lily responded. "An' Daddy. An' Gunnar, too." She put her hand on the computer screen, as if she could reach out and pet him. Then she brought Chloe's face up to the screen and pointed out Gunnar to her. "He's your friend, Chloe," she told her stuffed dog. "An' he's mine, too. Oh, Uncle

Christo's here. 'Bye, Mommy. 'Bye, Gunnar. See you later." And Lily skipped off, dragging Chloe away by a paw, leaving Sophy staring at the empty chair in the kitchen.

"Sorry about that." Natalie suddenly appeared. "Christo just came in bringing fresh cinnamon rolls from the bakery."

"Ah, well. A girl's got to have her priorities. Give her a hug for me."

"Of course." There was a pause. Then Natalie said, "I didn't realize Lily was quite so gung ho about George. She doesn't know him."

"She's fixated. All families have mommies and daddies. Or they're supposed to. We don't. She wanted to know why. Then she wanted to know everything about him."

"You should have told her about Ari. He's her father."

"No." Sophy didn't accept that. "He sired her. He would never have been there for her. George was."

"Briefly."

"Yes, well—" But Sophy didn't want to get into that. She had never told Natalie all the reasons for the breakup of their marriage. It was personal. "Anyway, she asked. I told her. She's curious. It's the lure of the unknown."

Natalie looked doubtful. "What about the lure for you?"

"I'm fine," Sophy said firmly. "Besides, it's only one afternoon. I'm only putting the dog out—and grabbing a few hours' shut-eye. George isn't here. His sister asked me. I'm doing *her* a favor."

"If you say so," Natalie said doubtfully.

"I do."

"Right." Natalie shrugged, still looking concerned. "Be careful, Soph'."

"I'm being careful," Sophy replied. "Don't worry. I'll talk to you later, let you know what flight I'll be on."

"So you're coming soon?"

"Tonight. There's nothing to stay for."

Natalie smiled. "Great."

Sophy shut down the computer and put it on the nightstand by the bed. Then she finished undressing down to her underwear, drew back the covers and slid into the bed. It was heaven. And what she'd told Natalie was true: she was being careful. Very careful.

She closed her eyes and didn't let herself think about the photos in the album. She didn't let herself remember those months of hope and joy. She tried not to dwell on the fact that she was in George's house, that she could go up one more flight of stairs and lie in George's bed.

She didn't want the memories of loving him—of making love with him. She didn't want the pain.

The bed dipped suddenly. Her eyes snapped open to see Gunnar had leapt lightly onto the foot of the bed. He stood peering down at her.

She reached up and fondled his velvety soft ears, then scratched lightly behind them. He arched his back, almost like a

cat. Then he turned in a circle and lay down next to her, so close that she could feel the press of his body through the covers.

She didn't know if he was supposed to be on the bed or not. She didn't care. The solid warmth of his body was comforting, reassuring. Even if he was George's dog, she liked him. She told him so.

Gunnar twitched his ear.

Sophy smiled, gave him a pat, Then shut her eyes and very carefully and resolutely did not let herself think about George. She slept.

And dreamed about him instead.

George wanted out.

Now. This afternoon.

"You can't keep me here," he told Sam, who was standing beside George's bed saying he needed to do exactly that.

Sam wasn't listening. He knew George. They'd ridden bikes together, climbed trees together and played lacrosse together. They'd even got drunk together and pounded on each other a few times—as friends do. George hadn't decided yet whether it was a stroke of good or bad luck that Sam had been the neurologist on duty when they brought him in last night.

He was leaning toward the latter right now as Sam was standing there with a stethoscope, looking grimly official.

"Well, no. I can't ground you. Or tie you to the bed," Sam agreed drily. "I did think that perhaps I could appeal to your adult common sense, but if that's a problem…"

George bared his teeth. It made his head hurt like hell. But then so did everything else he'd done today, which was pretty much nothing. He'd tried to read and couldn't focus. He'd tried to write and couldn't think. He'd tried to get up and walk around, but when he did, he'd barely made it back to the bed without throwing up. If they'd let him go home, he could at least get some sleep.

"It would be different if you didn't live alone," Sam was saying. "Having someone who can keep an eye on you would make it more feasible."

"Babysit me, you mean," George grunted.

Sam grinned. "If the shoe fits…"

George glared. Sam just raised his brows, shrugged and looked back implacably.

Scowling, George folded his arms across his chest. "I'll be fine," he insisted. "I promise I'll call if I think it's worse."

"No," Sam said.

"I have work, a dog, a life—"

"A life?" Sam snorted at that. "I don't think so. You teach physics, for heaven's sake!"

It wasn't all he'd ever done, but George didn't go there. He just stared stonily at Sam and waited for him to give in.

"No," Sam said. "Just because I broke your nose in sixth grade doesn't mean I'm going to surrender my obligation as a doctor to give you my honest medical opinion."

"*The hell you did!* I broke *your* nose!"

Sam laughed. “Well, at least your memory’s not totally shot.” He lifted a hand and rubbed it ruefully across the bump in his nose. “At least I gave you the black eye.”

“It wasn’t that black.”

“Pretty damn,” Sam said. “Anyway, we’ll talk about it tomorrow. We need to make sure the bleeding has stopped.” He nodded toward George’s head.

But George didn’t notice. His attention had been grabbed by the glimpse of someone just beyond the door. *“Sophy?”*

Was he seeing things? She’d gone, hadn’t she? Done her “duty” and hightailed it back to California?

But just as he thought it, she poked her head around the doorjamb. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you. I thought Tallie might have come back.”

Tallie? George started to shake his head, then thought better of it. “No. She went to get the boys from school. You talked to Tallie?”

Tallie certainly hadn’t mentioned it. His sister had breezed in this morning to see how he was doing. Well, *breeze* might not have been the right word. *Waddle,* maybe. She’d looked as if she was going to have her baby any minute. He hadn’t seen her in a month, and she hadn’t been nearly that big last time he had. He felt a little guilty calling her last night and asking her to take care of the dog.

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