THE MILLIONAIRE'S WISH
ABIGAIL STROM
Cherish

Abigail Strom
The Millionaire's Wish

Аннотация

All she had to do was say yes! It was the easiest deal in the world. All Allison had to do was date CEO Rick for a few months. In return, he’d help fund her financially strapped charity. Rick had a reputation to uphold – but continuing his playboy ways meant losing the only home he’d ever known.Which made Allison so perfect – after all, neither of them was looking for a permanent relationship. Yet she was soon making him dream about forever – and Rick knew he’d do whatever it took to seal this deal…

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“I’ll do it.”

Rick blinked at her in surprise. “What?”

“I accept your proposal.”

“You do?”

“On one condition.”

“What if I say no?”

Allison shrugged. “You’ll have to find another woman of character who’s not attracted to you. It won’t be that hard. From where I sit, those two qualities seem to go together naturally.”

“I should have realized you were capable of driving a hard bargain. You don’t give up easily, do you?”

She took a quick breath. “So do we have a deal, or not?”

His eyes didn’t leave hers. “We have a deal.”

Dear Reader,

On the surface, Allison Landry and Rick Hunter don’t have much in common. She’s the director of a non-profit agency; he’s the millionaire CEO of a software company. Allison is passionate about helping others; Rick believes he’s too jaded to care about helping anyone. Allison avoids relationships and hasn’t been on a date in more than a year. Rick, on the other hand, has a well-earned reputation as a playboy.

But appearances can be deceiving. And underneath the surface, these two have a lot more in common than they realise.

When Rick makes Allison an offer she can’t refuse, the two of them enter into a dating bargain that’s supposed to be all business. The only thing that could derail their perfect plan is the one thing they could never have predicted: falling in love.

Rick and Allison have a special place in my heart, and I hope

you enjoy reading their story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

My very best wishes,

Abigail

About the Author

ABIGAIL STROM started writing stories at the age of seven and has never been able to stop. She's thrilled to be published by Mills & Boon. She works full-time as a human resources professional and lives in New England with her family, who are incredibly supportive of the hours she spends hunched over her computer. She loves hearing from readers and can be reached at abigail@abigailstrom.com.

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www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my husband
Authors are often encouraged to write what they know.
Thanks to you, when I write about true love … I am

Chapter One

"How hard would it be to rob a bank?"

Allison Landry frowned at the financial statements covering her desk. One of her volunteers, who also was one of her best friends, had just come into the office with a letter in her hand.

"That bad, huh?" Rachel asked sympathetically. "Or maybe we could pull off a jewel heist." "We could wear black leather catsuits," Rachel suggested. "And hire a professional thief to help us. You know, like the guys in *Ocean's Eleven*. Preferably a George Clooney look-alike. I'd also be willing to consider Brad Pitt."

Allison's mouth tipped up in a smile. "I'd go with Cary Grant in *To Catch a Thief*, but then I'm old-fashioned."

Rachel laughed. "I'm liking this idea more and more." She paused. "Okay, fill me in for real. What's going on?"

Allison sighed, closing her eyes briefly as she ran both hands through her short brown hair. "It's been a bad day. Kevin Buckley is in the hospital again—I heard from his parents this morning. And our financial outlook for the coming year is pretty grim. Donations have been down ever since the recession started, so we're going to have to cut back on some of our existing services. And we'll have to put the plans for Megan's House on hold again—indefinitely, this time. It'll be a struggle to keep some of our programs going at all, and it's not the time to start something

new."

She felt the disappointment all over again as she spoke the reality out loud. For years she'd cherished the dream of building a retreat center for families dealing with childhood cancer. She'd hoped the dream was close to being realized, but the bleak financial picture in front of her said otherwise.

"It'll happen someday," she said now, half to Rachel and half to herself. She couldn't let her determination be quenched. After all, this wasn't the first time she'd had to face harsh realities. When you lost a sister to cancer—Megan had been just fourteen when she died—you also lost any illusion that life was fair.

"I'm sorry," Rachel said, and Allison knew she really meant it. Still, her expression was more unhappy than the occasion warranted.

"Does the look on your face have something to do with that letter in your hand?"

Rachel nodded. "I hate to give you more bad news. It's about Julie's wish."

Allison frowned. "But that's the easiest one we've had in ages. She just wants to meet that software CEO—the man who designed that video game she likes so much. Rick Hunter, right? He lives right here in Des Moines. What's the problem?"

Rachel shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "He turned us down."

Allison just stared at her. "That's ridiculous. He doesn't even have to get on a plane. His company owns that big office building

on Grand. He could walk to the hospital, for goodness' sake."

"He could, but he won't. He sent us a donation instead."

A donation. Of course.

Not that the money wasn't welcome. As her financial statements clearly showed, they needed every donation they could get.

But she was willing to bet this wasn't the first time Rick Hunter, president and CEO of Hunter Systems, had pulled out his checkbook instead of volunteering his time.

And now he was trying to buy his way out of visiting a cancer patient.

"Let me see that," Allison said, and Rachel handed it to her.

"Must regretfully decline your request … busy professional … demands on my time …"

She crumpled the letter into a ball and threw it toward the wastebasket. She missed by two feet. "Busy professional, he says. Can you *believe* that? We got the quarterback of the Green Bay Packers to visit one of our kids last year, and that was during football season!"

It had been a lousy day, and even though only part of her current frustration was really directed at Rick Hunter, he was her most convenient target at the moment.

Extremely convenient, in fact. As in a five minute drive from her office.

She shoved her chair back and rose to her feet.

"You look really pissed off," Rachel said warily. "You're not

going to do anything crazy, are you?"

"That depends on your definition of crazy. I'm just going to have a little chat with—"

Rachel's eyes widened. "You're going to yell at him. You're going to yell at Rick Hunter. Allison, you can't do that!"

"I can't, huh? Give me one good reason," Allison said, turning off her computer and grabbing her purse.

Rachel was at her own desk now, rifling through file folders and stacks of papers. "He's rich, for one thing. Like potential platinum donor rich. He designed the most popular video game in the world. He's important."

"Julie's important, too."

"Of course she is. I just think—got it!" she announced suddenly, holding up an issue of *People* magazine.

"What's so exciting about that?"

Rachel opened the magazine to a two-page profile—picture on the left and a short biography on the right.

"America's Most Eligible Bachelors," she said, as if that explained everything.

"I take it Rick Hunter made the list."

"I'll say. Allison, just look at him. You'll have to agree there are better things to do with this man than yell at him."

Allison rolled her eyes, but when Rachel brought the picture over she glanced at it to satisfy her.

Rick Hunter was on an unmade bed, leaning back on his elbows with a slight smile on his face, as if he found the person

holding the camera mildly amusing. He was wearing a tuxedo, jacket off and tie loosened. That, along with the stubble on his jaw and the artfully tousled black hair, gave him an air of casual decadence, as if he'd recently enjoyed a very good time in that bed.

His eyes weren't as casual as the rest of him. They were green, and the expression in them was reserved, even remote, but with a kind of intensity in their depths that probably had most women ready to fall at his feet.

In spite of herself, she found herself looking into those eyes a shade longer than she meant to. When she realized it, she took the magazine from Rachel's outstretched hand and tossed it back onto her desk.

"I admit he's decorative," she said. "So what? I hope you're not saying I should be nice to Rick Hunter because you think he's cute."

"Puppies are cute. Kittens are cute. This man is *gorgeous.* I'm talking drop-dead, stop-the-presses, melt-your-knees gorgeous."

"You forgot to mention spoiled, selfish, arrogant—"

"I don't think he's like that," Rachel objected. "Did you look at the article? He—"

"I'm not interested," Allison said firmly. "He turned down a kid with cancer. There's no possible excuse for that, and I'm going to tell him so."

Rachel grabbed her hand as she headed for the door. "You have to go home and change first."

Allison glanced down at herself. She was wearing a typical outfit for a day when she had no meetings with hospital directors or wealthy philanthropists—jeans and a blue flannel shirt. Her feet were clad in an old pair of tennis shoes.

"I'm not going all the way back to my apartment to change clothes. Why, do you think his office has a dress code?"

"Very funny." Rachel grabbed her purse and started looking through it. "At least let me put some makeup on you. Lipstick, mascara, something. Your face is all naked!"

"Sorry," Allison said firmly. "This is going to be a come-as-you-are meeting."

Rachel put her purse back on her desk. "There isn't a woman alive who wouldn't primp before going to see Rick Hunter. You're not normal, Allison."

"I've heard that before."

"And yet, I still love you." Rachel sighed. "Have fun storming the castle."

Rick Hunter held the phone away from his ear as he typed one-handed, listening to his grandmother with half his attention while he focused on a complicated spreadsheet.

"—and it's not that I'm *prudish*—I was a bit of a rebel in my time, I'll have you know. Your grandfather could tell you stories. Well, he could if he were alive. But I do not appreciate half the people I know calling me to discuss this appalling magazine article, which refers to you as 'The Playboy of the Midwest,' I might add."

Rick winced. He'd only done that damn photo shoot because of his company's upcoming annual charity event, a ball at the Grand Hotel to be followed by a bachelor auction. He wasn't participating—he never did, despite his undeniable bachelor status—but the magazine, along with his marketing director, had convinced him it would be great publicity for the event if the company president was in the article.

"I didn't write the copy, Gran. And I told you before—"

She spoke right over him. "I wouldn't be so upset if it didn't confirm what I always suspected. You have no intention of ever settling down, have you?"

He was correcting a complicated cell formula and missed the question. "What?"

"I said, you have no intention of ever settling down. The women you involve yourself with! The fluffy, brainless ones are bad enough, but the ruthless corporate types are even worse. I actually look forward to the straightforward gold diggers you toss into the mix occasionally. Not one of the girls you've dated in the last five years has been someone I'd be proud to call my granddaughter. Not that I've had cause to worry, since you've never shown the slightest interest in committing to any of them."

Rick sighed. "Okay, Gran, so you don't like the women I date. But neither of us has to put up with them on a long-term basis, so what's your problem?"

"My problem is that my only grandson is still a bachelor! You don't think I dream of the day you'll settle down here with your

wife and children?"

Here meant the Hunter estate, of course. The beautiful old mansion his great-great-grandfather had built in 1890. Not the house Rick had grown up in, but the only place he'd ever thought of as home. The only place he'd ever truly been happy.

"The fact is," she went on, "I've been thinking things over. And I'm considering giving Hunter Hall to your second cousin."

Rick's hand froze over the keyboard. "What?"

"You heard me. Jeremiah and his wife are planning to have children, and they'd like to raise their family here. They've said so."

Rick's jaw tightened. "If Jeremiah's shown any interest, it's because of what the house might be worth on the open market. He and his wife don't give a damn about the place. They'll sell it, Gran."

She sniffed. "That's not what they've told me. And even if they thought that at one time, things change once you decide to have a family."

She paused, and Rick thought about what it would mean to lose Hunter Hall. Maybe he'd never told Gran, but he loved it more than any place on earth.

"This house cries out for children. If I thought there was a chance you might change your ways …"

His grandmother had been hoping to marry him off for years. He, on the other hand, had never been interested in marriage. His own parents hadn't exactly been a shining example of the

institution, and he had no intention of repeating their mistakes. Better to stay clear of all that and focus on things you could actually control. Like work.

Even if work hadn't been very satisfying lately.

Rick leaned back in his chair, staring at his computer screen. If work was getting stale it was his own fault, and was therefore something he could fix. He owned the damn company, after all.

A marriage, on the other hand, wasn't something one person could control. Two hearts, two minds, two egos—and way too much risk. Date for fun, that was his motto—and when the fun started to fade, end things quick and clean, before either party had too much invested. And yes, that meant that he tended to date women he wasn't likely to fall for.

"I just want to see you happy, Richard."

"I am happy." Or content, anyway. He'd never expected happiness. His life was going according to plan, and he had no desire to make any changes. The only thing he wanted that he didn't already have was Hunter Hall.

"Won't you at least think about what I've said? It wouldn't kill you to date a woman of character for once."

Rick smiled at the old-fashioned phrase. "And what would a 'woman of character' want with me?" He'd meant it as a joke, but his voice sounded a little bitter in his own ears.

His grandmother sighed. "If you don't know the answer already, it won't do any good to tell you. I'm sorry about Hunter Hall, dear, but I need to believe that this house will echo with

the voices of children someday."

Rick looked at the opposite wall, where the original advertisement for "Magician's Labyrinth" hung in a mahogany frame. He'd modeled the magician's house after Hunter Hall, and the image had been part of the game's cover art ever since.

"It's your house, Gran. You can do whatever you want with it."

"I just wish you'd consider—"

"Yeah. I have to get back to work, okay? I'll talk to you soon."

But he didn't get back to work. He leaned back in his chair, frowning at his spreadsheet without really seeing it.

Maybe this was for the best. Wanting something you couldn't achieve through your own efforts was a weakness, and Rick had never tolerated weakness.

His paperweight was a replica of the magician's house carved out of stone, a gift from his gaming programmers a few years ago. He picked it up now, feeling the smooth, compact weight of it in his palm.

The thought of losing Hunter Hall made something clench inside him, as if his internal organs were being put through a wringer. His grip tightened. The peaks of the roof cut into his skin, and he knew this one childhood dream still had a hold on him.

His private line lit up. He set the paperweight back down on his desk and put his assistant on speaker. "What is it, Carol?"

"I'm sending a woman in to see you." She sounded irritated, but then she always did. After six years, he still wasn't sure if the

irritation was for the world in general or him in particular.

He frowned. “You know I’m preparing for the product review tomorrow. Who is it you want to send in?”

“Someone from that foundation. The one that runs the Wish Upon a Star program.”

He felt a twinge of guilt. That girl—Jenny or Julie or something. She was undergoing cancer treatment, and she wanted to meet him. Her request had come in a letter from a nonprofit agency, explaining who they were and what they did, and asking if they could arrange a hospital visit on the girl’s behalf.

“I told you to decline their request and send them a check.”

“Which I did, *mon capitaine.* But someone has come in person to speak with you about the matter. A Ms. Allison Landry.”

“Ms. Landry is out of luck. Send her on her way.”

“No.”

His eyebrows drew together. “What do you mean, no?”

“Look, boss. There may be assistants out there who could turn away a righteous woman trying to help a girl with cancer, but I am not one of them. I’m sending Ms. Landry in.”

Rick felt another twinge of guilt, but he refused to give in to it. He had no desire to visit a cancer ward and his reasons were no one’s business. And he’d had it up to here with righteous women today, between his grandmother and Carol and now this latest interruption.

He pictured her as a woman with iron gray hair and an iron

gray demeanor, and the thought of her invading his inner sanctum and scowling at him in disapproval was too damn irritating to deal with.

"I'm in a bad mood. If she comes in here I'll just snarl at her."

Carol snorted. "This one can take it. She'll snarl right back."

Definitely iron gray.

Rick sighed. "Fine. Go ahead and send her in."

He barely had time to rise to his feet before his door opened and Allison Landry stepped into his office.

Never in his life had a preconceived image been so off the mark. The woman coming toward him was hardly more than a girl—a girl whose short, silky haircut made her look like an angry pixie.

She had a pixie's body, too—at least what he could see of it. Her slender, understated curves weren't exactly showcased by her jeans and flannel shirt.

This was not a woman who used her appearance to get what she wanted. She didn't even wear makeup, he noted as she came to a halt in front of his desk, her eyes blazing and her cheeks flushed.

Not that she needed it. She had perfect skin—so clear and smooth he found himself wondering if it could possibly feel as soft as it looked.

Her eyes didn't need any help, either. They were the color of —what was the name of that stone? Lapis lazuli? And fringed by eyelashes so thick they were like tiny black fans.

Her mouth … her mouth was pretty good too. Wide and full and sweet, even with the corners turned down as she registered her obvious dislike of everything about him.

She looked mad as hell. And the fact that he was a rich and powerful CEO was not going to stop her from telling him about it.

Allison rode her wave of anger right into the executive office. And there was Rick Hunter, rising to his feet to meet her, every hair in place and with no hint of stubble along his jaw.

He was all business, exuding the same power and sophistication as the mahogany and leather furniture that had probably set him back what Allison paid in office rent for a year. She couldn't even imagine what the suit cost. She'd always thought that computer executives had a more casual look, but Rick Hunter obviously preferred formality.

Probably because it kept people at a distance.

"Mr. Hunter," she began coldly. "I came here to—"

He came around to the front of his desk, and she backed up a pace or two before she could stop herself. He was tall, about eight inches taller than her five foot six, and the difference made her feel at a disadvantage. "You're from the Star Foundation?" he asked.

"I'm the director. And I—"

"The director?" He leaned back against his desk. "You look about eighteen."

"I'm twenty-seven," she said in a voice like ice. "Want to see my driver's license?"

A corner of his mouth twitched. “That’s all right. I believe you.” He studied her for a moment, his green eyes appraising. “You’re here because I turned down that girl’s request. I suppose you think I owe you an apology.”

Her spine stiffened. “You don’t owe me a damn thing, and I’m not interested in an apology. I’m only interested in knowing when you’re going to visit Julie. I know you’re a busy professional with demands on your time—” she didn’t even try to curb the sarcasm in her voice “—and that the request of a stranger doesn’t loom large on your to-do list. Especially when it would involve spending an entire hour devoted to something other than business or your own pleasure—”

He raised his hands, palms out. “Slow down, Ms. Landry. I don’t—”

“And I’m sure you’re not used to sacrificing even that much time to make someone else happy. But if you had any idea what these kids go through on a daily basis—the hell their families live through—”

“I do,” he said roughly, and when she stopped in surprise, staring at him, he looked away. That was actually a relief, as she found herself strangely distracted by those green eyes, which the photographer, good as he or she had been, hadn’t done justice to.

“I mean,” he said more quietly, “I can imagine. And despite what you obviously think of me, I didn’t turn down your request because I’m a selfish, uncaring bastard. My reasons—” he stopped. “My reasons are none of your business. But I’d be more

than happy to make a sizable donation to your foundation, and if you choose to use some of those funds to get something for Jenny—"

"Her name is Julie." She was so mad her skin felt hot. "It might interest you to know that most of our kids don't wish for *things.* Most of their wishes have to do with people—wanting to meet a favorite writer or athlete or musician. Wanting to meet someone they admire."

That made him frown. "Why would Julie admire *me?*"

"Didn't you read her letter? You designed her favorite game, and she loves it. It's helped her through a terrible time in her life. Something about the game connected with her, and because of that, she feels connected to you. She'd like to meet you. Why is that so hard to understand? And why on earth can't you take an hour or two out of your day to—"

"No," he said abruptly. "I'm sorry to disappoint you—and her—but that's not going to be possible. Now, why don't we discuss that donation I mentioned? I'm sure an agency like yours needs every—"

"I'm not interested in your money."

The words came out impulsively. She knew she'd regret them tomorrow. Even now a voice was telling her not to be stupid, not to be proud, and to take Rick Hunter's guilt money. People who ran nonprofits couldn't afford to be choosy, and plenty of donations were made for publicity, or for the tax deduction, or for any number of reasons that had nothing to do with the

foundation's mission. And she'd been grateful for every dime, and never let herself judge other people's motivations.

Until now. For some reason, she wasn't willing to let Rick Hunter off so easily, even if refusing his offer hurt her more than it annoyed him.

She took a deep breath. "You can't fix this with money. You're just going to have to deal with the fact that you're disappointing a girl who's already had enough disappointments to last a lifetime."

Something flashed in his eyes, there and gone. "I'm sorry about that, I really am. But I can't believe you wouldn't benefit from a financial contribution. I know nonprofits have been struggling the last couple of years."

That was a hit to her solar plexus.

"Try to get this through your head, Mr. Hunter. *I don't want your money.* But since that's the only topic you're willing to discuss, I might as well go."

"Wait," he said gruffly. "Don't storm out, all right? Just—wait a second."

She'd been on the point of turning away, but now she hesitated. His eyes were on her face, and once again there was something in his expression she couldn't decipher. It held her in place for a moment.

"Look, how about this," he said after a long pause. "I'll send you a check next week, to give you time to …" He hesitated. "To think things through. I won't hold you to anything you said here today, and I hope you'll accept the donation. Okay? I'm sure you

could use the money."

He was making it easy for both of them. She could storm out in self-righteous anger, take a few days to calm down, and deposit his check without having to back down from her lofty position. Not to his face, anyway.

Her jaw felt stiff. "Yes, we could use the money. The Star Foundation is struggling right now. But money is only part of what keeps us going. The heart of what we do is help *people.* When our kids make wishes, they're specific. They're personal. Anyone can donate money, Mr. Hunter. But Julie wants to meet *you.*"

She was trying to reach the man she'd glimpsed so briefly behind the facade. Instead, her words only made him withdraw again.

"I'm sorry."

"But—"

"I don't like hospitals," he said, as if that ended the discussion.

Allison stared at him. "No one likes hospitals. That's why it's so important to help the people who are stuck in them."

"I'm sorry," he said again. His expression was blank and cool.

Had she only imagined seeing a real human being behind that mask? "I'm sorry, too," she said after a moment. "Parents feel so helpless when a child is diagnosed with cancer. Every instinct tells them to protect their kids, and then along comes a situation completely outside their control. That's why it's so frustrating when someone like you could actually *do* something—take some

small, positive action to make a difference—only you won't."

Another flash of emotion showed through. "Ms. Landry—"

She wouldn't be drawn in again. "Goodbye, Mr. Hunter."

She left his office without looking back.

In the privacy of the elevator, she took a deep breath. When the doors opened she hurried across the elegant lobby, relieved to step outside again into the fresh air.

She walked quickly, impatient at every crosswalk. Her heart was beating faster than usual. After several blocks she realized she'd gone right past the garage where she'd parked.

She stopped, turned, and went slowly back the way she'd come.

She was supposed to be good with people. It was her job to get them involved, to persuade them they could make a difference.

But she'd failed to make even a dent in Rick Hunter's armor. She'd felt at a disadvantage from the moment she walked into his office, and that wasn't something she was used to.

And she'd ended up with nothing. No visit for Julie, and no money for the foundation. He'd offered, and she'd turned him down. She'd never refused a donation before.

She slid behind the wheel of her truck and turned the key in the ignition. He'd probably still send a check—he seemed like the persistent type. She'd just have to swallow her pride and accept it.

Pride had no place in her work. Nothing, and certainly not her own ego, could be allowed to get in the way of her mission to help families.

So why had she let Rick Hunter get to her? Why had she taken their encounter so personally? She'd swallowed her pride before—why did this feel so different?

She remembered those moments when she'd seen something underneath his coldness … something like real emotion. Like he really did feel badly about Julie. Like he really did want to help her.

That was the only reason she'd stayed as long as she did. Once she realized he wasn't going to budge, she should have left. But a part of her had wanted to stay, to see if maybe, just maybe, she could get him to change his mind.

Not just for Julie's sake, but for his, too. It would have been nice to see those two meet—the icy CEO and the irrepressible Julie, who managed to radiate enthusiasm for life even when she was exhausted by cancer treatments. There was no way Rick could meet her and not smile. Not unless the man truly lacked both a soul and a heart.

And somehow, in spite of everything, she didn't think that was the case.

She slammed on her brakes for a red light she'd almost missed, adrenaline prickling her skin.

When the light turned green again she stepped carefully on the gas. It didn't matter why her interaction with Rick Hunter had gotten under her skin. Maybe it was just the accumulated stress of a bad day. But from now on, she'd think of him like any other donor. When his check came, she'd cash it. She'd add him to the

foundation's mailing list and send him a thank-you card.

And she'd never have to see him again.

Chapter Two

On the days Rick walked to work, he usually took the most direct route between his condo and his office. Today he made a detour past James Memorial Hospital.

After eighteen years, he could drive past the place without being affected. He saw the hospital through his car window a dozen times a week. But now he stopped in front of the building, looking up at the rows of windows. He still remembered which one had been his mother's.

Fourth floor, third from the left.

He lasted about ten seconds before he walked away. His hands were fisted inside his pockets.

Memories of grief and helplessness were a sick weight in his stomach. During the intervening years he'd built up layers of strength—physical, financial, emotional— all designed to insulate him from ever feeling helpless again.

He'd be a fool to undo any of it, to revisit that pit of emotional hell. The only reason he was even considering it was because of his plan to keep Hunter Hall—the plan he wanted Allison Landry to agree to.

The thought had occurred to him a few minutes after she'd left his office, and he'd dismissed it almost immediately. But then, as the day wore on, he couldn't get the idea out of his head.

He couldn't get her out of his head, either.

Not because he was interested in her. She was pretty—beautiful, even—but she wasn't remotely his type.

He recalled the sight of her standing in the middle of his polished, expensive office, looking anything but polished and expensive. Allison had been fierce and passionate and focused on her mission. The women he dated were sleek and sophisticated and focused on him—or on landing a rich husband, anyway. And from their five-hundred-dollar hairdos to their manicured toes, they were designed to impress.

Allison didn't give a damn about impressing people. Her personality, her appearance … she was the complete opposite of the women he usually went out with.

And exactly the kind of woman his grandmother wished he would date.

What was it Gran had said? That it wouldn't kill him to date a woman of character for once. That she just wanted to believe he could change his ways.

She wasn't asking for a wedding or an engagement. So maybe, if he was with a woman like Allison for a few months, that would satisfy her.

It would only be for show, of course. Allison wasn't interested in him—that had been pretty damn obvious—and he wasn't interested in her. Which made her perfect, because he had no intention of actually falling for her—or any woman, for that matter. Nothing made a man more helpless than that.

This would be a straightforward business deal, beneficial to

both parties.

Provided he could make Allison an offer she couldn't refuse.

When he arrived at the office, Carol was already at her desk. "What are you thinking about, boss? You've got a funny look on your face."

"I was thinking about Allison Landry."

Carol handed him some letters to sign. "I'm not surprised. That's a young woman who makes an impression."

He scrawled his name on the signature lines. "She made an impression on you, anyway." He handed the letters back. "You liked her, didn't you?"

"I did. The way she charged in here, like David taking on Goliath … when this company was just a start-up, I got to see more people like that. People with passion, you know? Now it's just a parade of business types, corporate suits like you."

He frowned, disliking that characterization more than he would have expected. "You think I'm just a suit?"

"Maybe not," Carol said grudgingly. "But ten more years and that's exactly what you'll be. Of course if you got back to the creative side of things, maybe designed a new game …"

"Games are for children. Why do you think we recruit out of college for that division?"

"You could design for the business software line."

He shook his head. "Give it up, Carol. You know I'm too busy."

"You could hire a couple of VPs to handle some of your

corporate responsibilities and free up your time to—"

"Not going to happen."

Carol sighed. "Well, no one can say I didn't try." She glanced down at her message spindle. "Nelson called, by the way. He wants to talk to you about his noncompete agreement."

Rick felt a quick pulse of anger. "He can go to hell. He left us two weeks before product launch and now he's trying to wriggle out of his agreement? Screw that. The next time he calls, refer him to our attorneys."

"I'll give him the message, but you don't always have to be such a hard-ass. Were you like this with Allison Landry? Is that why she blew through here so fast, after she talked to you?"

Rick had started toward his office, but now he paused. "She was upset?"

"She didn't look happy. So I guess that means you're not going to do it, huh?"

"Do what?"

"Visit that girl in the hospital."

Carol knew he avoided hospitals, although she'd never asked him why.

"I'm not planning on it," was all he said now.

He went into his office and shut the door behind him. A few minutes later he was at his computer, reading about the Star Foundation and its young director.

Allison had lost a sister to cancer when she was eighteen. She'd taken a year off before starting college at the University of Iowa,

where she eventually majored in business. While she was still in school a small publishing house released a memoir based on the journals Allison had kept during her sister's illness and in the year after her death.

To her own surprise, the memoir had become a bestseller. After she graduated, Allison used the proceeds from her book to start the Star Foundation. The agency provided support to families dealing with childhood cancer and also administered the Wish Upon a Star program, which worked to grant wishes to seriously ill children. In the last five years the foundation had touched the lives of hundreds of families.

Rick leaned back in his chair. She had a pretty impressive resume for a twenty-seven-year-old.

Based on what he'd just read about the agency and the scope of its services, he figured Allison's operating budget was around three million dollars. He could also make a guess as to the financial difficulties she was facing. Nonprofits all around the country were still struggling.

He clicked on an image link, and a photo of Allison popped up on his screen.

Her soft brown bangs and serious expression made her look earnest and idealistic, but the tilt of her chin hinted at the force and determination he'd seen in his office yesterday.

And her bone structure could probably land her a modeling job.

Not a woman who could be easily categorized. When Rick

realized he was staring, he closed the internet browser and picked up his phone.

* * *

"We had a letter from Telecorp today. They have to cut their annual donation by fifteen percent." Allison sighed, wondering how much more bad news would be coming their way. "I wanted to start paying you this summer. Scott and Beverly, too. Maybe I can still figure a way to—"

"Don't be silly," Rachel said briskly. "I wouldn't let you pay me. What part of volunteer don't you understand?"

"The part where you're getting your MBA next month and will probably be looking for gainful employment."

"If and when that happens, I'll still volunteer on weekends. I love the work we do here, you know that—and I'm not going to abandon you when you need me most. I know we're going through rough times financially, but we'll get through it. And in the meantime, I'm not going to let you or our kids down."

Tears came into Allison's eyes. "You're amazing, you know that?"

The phone rang, and she picked it up absently.

"Star Foundation, Allison speaking."

"Ms. Landry? This is Rick Hunter."

She almost dropped the phone.

"Ms. Landry? Are you there?"

She cleared her throat. "Um … yes. Yes, I'm here."

His rich baritone voice was cool and businesslike. "I'm calling

because we didn't end things on the best of terms yesterday, and I'm hoping we can start over."

"Start over?"

"Yes. I have a business proposal for you."

"A business proposal?"

She knew she was repeating everything he said, but she couldn't seem to come up with anything more intelligent.

"Why don't you let me explain over coffee? I've got a busy day, and I'm sure you do too. How about 6:30, at the Starbucks around the corner from your office? Unless there's someplace more convenient for you."

"No, that … would be fine."

"Until then," he said.

"Until then," she echoed.

There was a brief pause. Not sure what else to do, she hung up.

She stared at the phone on her desk, her hand still curled around the receiver. She was meeting Rick Hunter tonight.

So much for never seeing him again.

"Who was that?" Rachel asked curiously.

Allison explained, and Rachel stared at her.

"I don't believe it. You have a date with Rick Hunter!"

"It's not a date. But it's weird, isn't it? What kind of business proposal could he have for me?"

"He doesn't. That's just to camouflage his real interest." Rachel's eyes were sparkling. "He fell madly in love with you at first sight, but sensing your animosity he had to—"

“Will you please join me back here in reality?”

“Reality is overrated. Okay, at least give me some details. You hardly told me anything yesterday. Is he as sexy in person as he is in that magazine? Just looking at his picture makes me want to burst into song.”

Allison’s mouth twitched. “Like in a musical?”

Rachel sighed dramatically. “More like an opera. I could do a whole aria about my lust for Rick Hunter. Did you sing while you were in his office?”

“No. I mostly yelled at him for being a selfish jerk. Which he is, by the way. He turned down Julie’s wish, and whatever he wants to see me about, I don’t think it’s to tell me he’s changed his mind.”

Rachel shook her head. “I tried to tell you before, you’re prejudiced. I read about him in that article. His company supports a lot of charities. And he went into the army right after 9/11—that’s not selfish, is it?”

Okay, that was surprising. Allison had a soft spot for soldiers—her brother was overseas right now on his fourth tour of duty.

Of course, military service didn’t automatically make Rick Hunter a hero. Not everyone went into the army for noble reasons. Maybe he just wanted to blow things up. He did design all those violent video games, after all.

“You know, I think you’re right,” she mused aloud.

“I frequently am. About what, specifically?”

“I think I *am* prejudiced. I’m looking for reasons not to like

him.”

“That’s because you’re fighting an attraction so powerful you __”

Allison laughed. “Okay, stop. I won’t admit to a powerful attraction, but I’ll try to keep an open mind when I meet him later. Is that good enough?”

Rachel grinned. “For now.”

Rick finished work by five o’clock, which left him time for a quick workout before his appointment with Allison. He rode the elevator down to the basement, where he’d had a fitness center installed for his employees.

He was about to start his usual weight circuit when one of his VPs challenged him to some one-on-one basketball.

A short but hard fought game left him feeling relaxed and loose. He took a quick shower, decided to change into jeans and a T-shirt, and at six-twenty strolled into the Starbucks near Allison’s office.

She wasn’t there yet. If she was like nine women out of ten he knew, she’d be late, of course. He settled himself at a table in the back with a black coffee and the *Wall Street Journal*, but found himself glancing toward the entrance every couple of minutes.

At six-thirty on the dot, she came through the door.

He’d been wondering if she would dress any differently for this second meeting. He was used to women primping for him, dressing up for him. Hell, he’d been with women who wore makeup to bed.

Not that this was a date, of course. But it wasn't crazy to think that Allison might have put some thought into her appearance before seeing him again.

She gave a nod of recognition when she saw him and threaded her way through the crowd toward his table.

She was wearing jeans and a gray sweatshirt. When she sat down, he could see she wasn't wearing any makeup at all. Not even lip gloss.

Okay, that confirmed it. Allison Landry was not attracted to him.

Which was perfect, he reminded himself. For the kind of arrangement he was looking for, attraction would only be a complication.

"Hello again," he said, laying down his newspaper. "Thanks for agreeing to meet me."

She smiled, and her face was transformed. Gone was the serious-minded idealist. When she smiled like that she looked sweet, a little playful, and completely charming.

"I have to admit, I'm curious as to what kind of business proposal you have for me."

He hesitated. "Can I get you some coffee first? Or tea?"

"No, thanks."

He hesitated again. The straightforward look in her blue eyes made him feel unsure of himself, something he wasn't used to. "Before I tell you about it, I'd like to apologize for yesterday. We didn't get off on the right foot."

“Maybe not, but we’re here to start over, like you said.” She rested her forearms on the table and clasped her hands together. “Tell me about your proposal, Mr. Hunter.”

“Rick.”

“Okay, Rick. And you can call me Allison. Now that we’re on a first name basis, will you tell me why I’m here?”

In a negotiation, always lead with strength. He took out the check he’d already signed and slid it across the table.

She frowned at him a second before picking it up.

Her skin was so translucent he could see the flush creeping up from the base of her throat to the roots of her hair. He could practically feel the warmth rising from her skin.

He was caught, fascinated. When was the last time he’d seen such transparent emotion?

She looked up at him.

“This is …” She paused to clear her throat. “This is a check for half a million dollars.”

He nodded slowly, his eyes on hers. “Would it help?”

Stupid question. Of course it would help.

“You can’t imagine how much,” she said, her voice trembling a little. “I was going to spend tomorrow figuring out what programs to cut this year … which services we won’t be able to provide. This …” Her chest rose with a quick breath. “This changes everything.”

He shouldn’t have asked. Now he felt a flicker of guilt, because there were strings attached to that check. For a moment he

wished there weren't, that he could bask in the glow of those flushed cheeks and shining eyes and ask nothing in return.

But that's not why he was here. Well and good if their deal helped her out—her foundation did good work and Allison was obviously a good person. But he needed to get something out of this, too. He thought of Hunter Hall and hardened his heart.

"That's one half of the business proposal I was talking about."

She blinked at him. "Right. Yes. Of course." She shook her head, smiling ruefully. "I'm sorry if I got carried away. The sight of all those zeros was a little overwhelming."

He watched her rein in her emotions. And even though he knew it would be easier to negotiate if they were both in business mode, a part of him missed the stars that had been in her eyes a moment ago.

She laid the check back down on the table. "Well, you certainly have my attention. I'd like to accept this donation if it's possible. So what do you need in return?"

"I need a woman like you." He paused. "Specifically, I need people to believe you and I are a couple. If you'll pretend to date me for three months, that check is yours."

Silence.

Allison stared at him, and he looked back at her steadily. Then she cocked her head to the side, as if she wasn't sure she'd heard right.

"You want me to … pretend to date you?"

"Yes."

Another silence. “Okay, I’m waiting for the punch line. Because this is a joke, right?”

“No. It’s a straightforward business proposition.”

She stared at him for another minute. Then she sat slowly back in her chair, her eyes still on his.

“I’m going to need some backstory here,” she said at last. “I read last month’s *People*, and I find it very hard to believe that Rick Hunter, Playboy of the Midwest, needs to pay five hundred thousand dollars for a fake girlfriend.”

Damn that magazine. “That article is the reason I’m asking you to do this. My grandmother has never liked the women I date, and after she read that piece … well, let’s just say she wasn’t happy. And because of that, I’m going to lose something. Something that’s important to me.”

Allison frowned. “And pretending to date me is going to fix that somehow?”

“That’s the idea.” He remembered Gran’s exact words. “My grandmother wants me to date a woman of character. The minute I met you, I knew you fit the bill. So I’m proposing a business deal. An arrangement that would benefit us both.”

For someone who could be so transparent with her emotions, Allison could also put on a pretty good poker face. “What is it that you want? That you don’t want to lose?”

An image of Hunter Hall flashed into his mind. “A house.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I think you can afford to buy your own house.”

That made him smile. “Yeah, but not this one. It’s been in the family for more than a hundred years. Hunter Hall, it’s called.”

“And would your grandmother really sell your family estate? Just because she doesn’t like the women in your life?”

He hadn’t planned on going into this much detail. “Not exactly. She’s moving to the city this summer, and she was going to transfer ownership of Hunter Hall to me. But now she’s talking about giving the house to someone else—a second cousin. She wants a family to live in Hunter Hall. My cousin is married, and wants to have kids. So he says, anyway.”

“And you don’t want that? A family, I mean?”

His jaw tightened. He wasn’t husband or father material, but that wasn’t something he’d be discussing with Allison. “I’m happy as a bachelor and I intend to stay that way. Which is why I date … the women I date.”

“I see.” She was studying him thoughtfully, and her level, blue-eyed gaze was disconcerting.

She glanced down at the check for a moment, and then back up at him. “Look, I won’t lie to you. I’d love to accept this donation. But I don’t think—”

She was going to say no. He interrupted her before she could finish. “It’s just a few dinners and parties, Allison. What’s the big deal?”

“I’m not the only woman of character in Iowa. Couldn’t you—”

“You’re not attracted to me.”

She blinked. “What?”

“I said, you’re not attracted to me. That’s why you’re perfect.”

She frowned at him. “How do you know?”

He could have told her his lip gloss theory of female behavior, but it wasn’t just that. He’d had close to twenty years of dating experience; he knew when a woman was attracted to him.

“It’s true, isn’t it? And I’m not attracted to you.”

In actual point of fact, the more time he spent with her, the more attracted he felt. It was the reverse of what usually happened when he met a beautiful woman. Usually his attraction kicked off with a bang and went downhill from there.

But since he had no interest in dating her for real, it didn’t seem to matter—and he knew Allison would be more comfortable with the lie.

“Nothing personal,” he added when she raised her eyebrows, although she didn’t look insulted. “You’re just not my type. And that’s why this plan will work. I get Hunter Hall, your foundation gets half a million dollars—and when it’s all over, no one gets hurt.”

He leaned across the table toward her. “Say yes, Allison.”

The brief flash of intensity in his green eyes caught her off guard. It was like a weapon he could unleash without warning. Rick Hunter, she suspected, very seldom asked for anything he didn’t get.

She looked down at his check, that small rectangle of paper that for just a moment had made her so happy.

The money would mean so much to the foundation … would mean so much to the families she supported. But the fact was, she hadn't been in a relationship since high school. The thought of changing that now—even if it was in name only—sent a nervous tremor through her.

"Listen … Rick." She cleared her throat. "I don't …"

He sat back again, the expression in his eyes more reserved now. "You're seeing someone."

The simplest thing would be to say yes. But Allison was naturally honest, and she found herself shaking her head. "No, I'm not seeing anyone. But—"

"But what?" That persuasive tone was back, the one she was sure served him well in business and his personal life.

She took a deep breath. "I don't date. You like your life the way it is? I like mine, too. You stay single by dating women you won't get serious with. I stay single by not dating at all. At this point, anyway."

He looked genuinely surprised. "When's the last time you were in a relationship?"

She didn't want to tell him it had been almost ten years. He wouldn't understand … not unless she told him things she'd never told her own mother. Things she'd never told a living soul.

"It's been a while," she said evasively.

His gaze moved over her face and down her torso, and then back up to her face. She was wearing a bulky gray sweatshirt, so it wasn't like he was getting an eyeful, but she could feel her face

turn red at his appraisal.

"I have to admit, I'm surprised. But if you're not seeing anyone, I don't see the problem."

She started to get impatient. "The problem is, everyone in my life knows I don't date. They don't understand it, but they accept it. If I start seeing someone out of the blue they'll go nuts. They'll want to meet you. My family especially. I have an older brother and sister and none of us are married yet, and my parents really want grandchildren. If my mom gets the idea that I'm seeing someone, she'll start planning a wedding. It'll be awful."

She took a breath. "And there's no way they wouldn't find out. You're news. If we start going out, it'll be in all the local papers."

"My grandmother's the only one who needs to think we're romantically involved," he said after a moment. "You can tell your friends and family whatever you want. Tell them we're going out as friends and that the media's making more of it than it is."

He leaned forward, his biceps bunching as he rested his forearms on the table. His black T-shirt stretched across his broad shoulders.

"Say you'll do it." His voice was forceful and persuasive at the same time, backed up by that intense gaze and a quick, flashing smile.

Allison felt her palms getting sweaty. A very inelegant reaction, one the women Rick Hunter dated probably never experienced.

He was persuasive, all right. And confident, like there was no

doubt he'd get his way in the end.

Allison rubbed her palms on her denim-clad thighs and scooted her chair back a few inches, putting a little distance between them. She'd seen this kind of confidence before—plenty of times, in fact. It had been a defining characteristic of a lot of the rich kids she'd gone to high school with. The boys especially, and one in particular. Paul had been so confident it had been impossible to imagine him ever failing to get something he wanted.

She folded her arms across her chest. "I'm sorry, but I'm not your solution here."

He looked surprised. "You won't do it?"

"Don't look so shocked. You're obviously used to people falling all over themselves to give you whatever you want, but—"

Now he was frowning. "I don't expect people to fall all over me."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. I bet no one ever says no to you. Come on, admit it. Don't you usually get your way? Maybe always?"

He folded his arms, like her. "No."

"You grew up rich, didn't you? I can spot the attitude a mile off. The silver spoon crowd—you're all alike. You think because you—"

"Hey! Stop doing that."

His voice was sharp enough that she actually did. "Stop doing what?" she asked.

“Stop making assumptions. Stop judging me because I have money. I’m sorry if that offends you—”

“That’s not what offends me. It’s your obvious belief that everything—and everyone—should just fall in your lap.”

He leaned forward again. “I don’t think that. I’ve never thought that. Believe me, I could give you a long list of things I’ve wanted in my life that I didn’t get.”

She frowned at him. “You ooze confidence. It practically … drips off you.”

He shook his head. “I’m not going to apologize for being confident. I am confident. But not because I have money, in spite of what you obviously believe. I’m confident because I believe in myself. Don’t you believe in yourself?”

Of course she did. As far as work went, anyway. As for personal stuff …

Irrelevant, Allison decided. She shrugged impatiently. “I suppose. Anyway, we got off track with the—”

“You got off track, as I recall. With your prejudice against the wealthy.”

“I’m not prejudiced.”

“What I don’t get is how you can run a charitable foundation. Aren’t rich people kind of your bread and butter? How do you manage to hide the fact that you despise them when you’re asking for donations?”

She flushed. “That’s a terrible thing to say. For one thing, it’s not only the wealthy who contribute to charities. And for another,

I don't hate rich people. I'm incredibly grateful to anyone who donates their money—or their time—to the Star Foundation. Especially when they do it because they want to, and not because they expect something in return."

His jaw tightened. "Unlike me, right? Is that what you wanted to hear? Yes, I'm selfish. No, I don't give without expecting something back. I'm sorry I don't meet your high standards for human behavior, or fit into your perfect little world where everyone acts like a saint. But here's a reality flash for you."

He stabbed a forefinger on the table in front of her. "Charities all over the country are struggling right now, and yours is no exception. You can keep on looking down your nose at me, and let your foundation suffer—or you can admit you need my money and take it. How many of the families you pretend to care so much about will be hurt if you turn me down?"

He leaned back again. "Sounds pretty damn selfish to me."

She was so mad her hands were shaking. But the worst part was, she knew he was right.

If she turned down his donation, she'd have to cut programs and services. The reality of that stared her in the face.

Looking across the table at him, seeing the coldness that had come into his expression, Allison felt a sudden wave of recklessness.

Why shouldn't she accept his offer? They'd go out to a few overpriced restaurants and have a few stilted conversations. Why had the idea of that made her feel so nervous, so awkward and

unsure of herself? Right now, she didn't feel awkward at all. The anger flowing in her veins made her feel like she could do anything.

So yes, she'd take his money. With a donation this big, she might be able to add some services this year. Expand her existing programs. Reach more families.

And she'd get something else from him, too.

"I'll do it."

He blinked at her in surprise. "What?"

"I accept your proposal."

"You do?"

"On one condition." She leaned forward, schooling her features into what she hoped was an implacable expression. "You'll visit Julie in the hospital this Saturday."

To drop her eyes at this point would be a sign of weakness, so she held his gaze as his eyes narrowed and his dark brows slanted together.

After a minute he started to drum the fingers of one hand against the table. When he realized what he was doing he curled that hand into a fist.

"What if I say no?"

She shrugged. "You'll have to find another woman of character who's not attracted to you. It won't be that hard. From where I sit, those two qualities seem to go together naturally."

Another minute of silence. Then his fisted hand relaxed, and he leaned back in his chair.

"I should have realized you were capable of driving a hard bargain. You don't give up easily, do you?"

"The families I work with don't give up. I hold myself to the same standard." She took a quick breath. "So do we have a deal, or not?"

His eyes didn't leave hers. "We have a deal," he said.

A deal.

Half a million dollars for the foundation, and Julie's wish granted.

And a date with one of *People* magazine's Most Eligible Bachelors. Several dates, actually. A few months worth of dates.

She felt a little dizzy. "Okay, then." She took another breath. "I'm sure you've got better things to do than sit here with me all night." She took out her wallet and tucked his check carefully inside. Her hands shook a little. "When can I deposit this?" she asked. "Do you want me to wait until after I've honored my side of the bargain?"

He shook his head. "No, I trust you. You're a woman of character, remember?"

He was actually smiling a little, and she smiled back reluctantly. "I'll let Julie know you'll be coming by on Saturday."

If he'd been anyone but a powerful CEO, she would have said a look of panic came into his eyes. "I assumed you'd be there, too. Won't you be there?"

He was probably one of those single men who weren't comfortable around kids. Was that the reason he'd been so

reluctant to do this?

She sighed. “I can be there if you want. Two o’clock, at the hospital?”

Some of the tension went out of his expression. “Yes, fine. And we’ll go to dinner that night.”

It was Allison’s turn to feel a pang of anxiety.

“Now, can I drop you somewhere?”

He rose to his feet and offered her a hand. Allison extended her own, a little hesitantly, and it was enveloped in a strong, warm grip as he helped her up. She took a step back as she pulled her hand away, tingles radiating from her palm and blood rushing to her cheeks.

“I’m all set. But thanks.”

He was just a foot or so away. She had to tilt her head back to look at him.

She backed away another step. “Well … good night.”

Her heart racing, she turned away, moving quickly through the crowd to get to the door. She pushed it open and stood outside for a moment, taking in a big gulp of cool evening air.

She’d made a deal with Rick Hunter. A straightforward business arrangement, as he called it.

Sure it was straightforward—to him. As for her … well, straightforward wasn’t the word she’d use to describe her mental state at the moment.

She took another breath. This was for her foundation. She needed to think about the families she could help with Rick’s

money—not Rick himself, with his black hair and intense green eyes and well-muscled body.

She wouldn't think about his coldness, either … or the few times something else had broken through, just for a moment.

He thought she wasn't attracted to him.

She prayed he'd still believe that when their deal expired. Because she didn't like him, and she didn't want to be attracted to him.

And she definitely didn't want him to know that she was.

Chapter Three

Rick had convinced himself it wouldn't be so bad. An hour, maybe two at the most.

But right now, staring up at the marble facade of James Memorial Hospital, he couldn't make his feet take the steps that would lead him inside that building.

"Rick?"

He turned, and Allison was there beside him.

She looked like a breath of fresh air in a long-sleeved cotton blouse, pale yellow with lavender stripes. Faded jeans showed off her slender legs. Her silky short hair was the perfect frame for her face, with her wide cheekbones and pointed chin and serious blue eyes. In the April sunlight, strands of gold made the chestnut brown shimmer. He wondered why he'd always preferred long hair on women.

"Hello," he said.

Allison was frowning. "Are you all right? You look like you're feeling sick. Should we reschedule?"

He shook his head. He was damned if he was going to give in to weakness like this—especially in front of Allison. "I'm fine," he lied. "Went out with some friends last night, with an emphasis on Southern Comfort. I guess I'm still feeling the effects." That was true—except about feeling the effects. He might be thirty-five but he could hold his liquor like he was twenty-one.

"Well … if you're sure." She started toward the revolving glass doors, and he forced himself to follow her. Focus on Allison, he told himself. She looked so … reassuring, somehow. Sweet and fresh and warm.

He made it all the way across the lobby before he had to stop again. They were right in front of the gift shop. In spite of everything he could do, memories of the last time he'd visited this place flooded through him.

He'd gotten flowers for his mother the day before she died. For years afterward, the scent of flowers had made him sick.

"Rick! Are you all right?"

He hated that Allison was seeing him like this. He hated that he couldn't control himself better. He should be able to control himself. He was a successful man at the height of his career.

And right now, he might as well be seventeen again. It felt like everything he'd worked for since then had been stripped away.

"Rick, you're scaring me. You have to tell me what's wrong."

"I just … need a second."

He walked a few paces to a waiting area and sat down on a hard plastic chair. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and looking down at the floor tiles. He was aware that Allison had sat down next to him, but he was focusing all his attention on his breathing, on trying to slow his heart rate, on trying to be himself again. Calm and in control.

"I'm sorry," he said after a few minutes, when he could look at her again. He thought of a dozen lies he could tell, all believable,

but each and every one of them stuck in his throat.

"My mother died of cancer," he said abruptly. His voice sounded rough and strange to his own ears. "In this hospital, eighteen years ago. I haven't been back here since. I haven't been in any hospital since."

He'd never told anyone that before. He hadn't talked about his mother since the day she died. And why the hell should he? It wasn't anybody's damn business—including Allison's. He could feel his face flushing, like a boy's. A flicker of anger made his jaw tighten.

"I'm sorry," she said, laying a hand on his arm. "You should have told me. We don't have to stay. Let's leave now, all right?"

The anger died. How could he be angry with Allison? Her hand on his arm was so gentle, and her eyes conveyed compassion without the pity he would have resented.

"No," he said, straightening up in his chair. He took a deep breath. "I'm okay. And I want to do this." He looked down at her. "Your sister died of cancer, didn't she? I read it in your bio. And I don't see you running away from hospitals. Or people with cancer."

She shook her head, rejecting the comparison. "If there's one thing I've learned in the last ten years, it's that people react differently to grief. I responded by—well, by making cancer my mission. That was what I needed to do, to get through it. You had a different reaction. But you shouldn't judge yourself for the way you responded to your loss. And you shouldn't force yourself to

do this right now if you're not ready for it. I can tell Julie …"

"No. I want to see her. And I won't be … like this." "It's okay if you are. These kids don't need people to put on happy faces like clown makeup. It's good to be positive, but it's even better to be real. To be whoever you are. Kids are perceptive—they know when you're lying to them. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes," he said. He took a deep breath. "Okay, then. Let's go."

Allison could feel the tension coursing through him as they rode the elevator to the fifth floor and stepped out into the pediatric ward.

Rick hadn't turned down Julie's wish because he was selfish. He'd turned it down because he'd known how hard it would be to come back here. To revisit his loss.

She'd broken one of her cardinal rules—never to judge someone without knowing them. Her work put her in a position to see people at their worst as well as their best, and because of that, she always tried to give people the benefit of the doubt. Always, no matter what the circumstances. Human beings were complex, and she never wanted to take shortcuts through that complexity, to define people based on superficialities.

So why had she been so quick to judge Rick?

She remembered how he'd looked down in the lobby, like a boy confronted with an uncomfortable emotion—grief or anger or shame. She wondered how he'd react when he saw Julie. The young girl certainly looked like a cancer patient, with her thin, pale face and the scarf she wore to hide her baldness.

When they entered her room Julie was staring at the TV monitor in front of her with fixed intensity, holding a video game controller in her hand and manipulating buttons so fast Allison couldn't follow the motions. She seemed completely unaware of her surroundings. Allison and Rick came up to her bedside and she didn't even register their presence.

Allison glanced over at Rick, and was glad to see that he looked better. He was watching what Julie was doing, and Allison remembered with a sudden shock that he had actually designed this game. She looked at the monitor they were both studying and saw several characters, all more or less medieval looking, with swords and spears and bows, facing down forty or fifty unpleasant looking lizard-like creatures who also were holding swords.

Julie gave a cry of frustration as one of the characters on screen—a tall, blond man in chain mail—took an arrow in the neck and fell writhing to the ground.

"Quick," Rick said, grabbing the controls from Julie and doing something Allison couldn't follow. "That kind of armor has a one-time healing spell woven into it. Hardly anyone under level forty knows about it, but—"

Before their eyes Julie's character sat up, pulled the arrow out of his miraculously healed flesh, and leapt to his feet. He uttered a bloodcurdling battle cry and hurled himself back into the fray.

Rick paused the game and handed the controls back to Julie. "Sorry," he said. "I get carried away sometimes. My name is—"

“I know who you are,” Julie said. Her voice was hushed, her eyes luminous as she stared at him.

Allison hid her smile. “Julie, this is Richard Hunter. Rick, this is Julie Pratt.”

“Hi, Julie,” Rick said, smiling as he held out his hand. Julie looked like she was in the presence of royalty, or at least Taylor Lautner, as she shook it.

“Is Eric your favorite?” Rick was asking, grabbing a chair and sitting down by Julie’s bed.

“Uh-huh,” Julie said. “I like that he can use magic but he’s also a warrior. You know? And he has such a tragic past.”

“He’s definitely the most complex character,” Rick agreed. “Do you want to play two-person? I could take Teska or Unthas if you’d like.”

Julie made a kind of gurgling sound that Allison thought was probably an affirmative. Rick must have interpreted it the same way, because he took a spare controller from the shelf below the monitor and settled back into his chair with a look on his face that mirrored Julie’s as the two of them started pushing buttons.

Allison pulled up a chair herself and sat quietly, fascinated by the instant bond created by this game. Rick and Julie were talking to each other about battle tactics, about something called the Gem of Fanor, and about the mind games their characters had to endure in the Labyrinth of Dreams, which could, apparently, reveal the characters’ deepest motivations and desires but could also deceive and betray. The characters all seemed to have

complicated backstories that tied into their quests, which both Rick and Julie knew inside and out.

This was a different Rick Hunter than the man she'd met two days ago. He'd been hit by a painful memory today—a memory that had the power to get past his defenses. He'd faced it, and now it was as if he'd forgotten to put his armor back on. He was talking and laughing with Julie as if they were both sixteen.

Allison cleared her throat. "It looks like you two are busy, so I'm going to pay a few visits. See you in a bit, okay?"

Julie didn't even hear her, but Rick gave her a quick grin before turning back to the young girl who looked like she'd been given the best gift of her life.

Allison visited several patients before going back to check on Rick and Julie. They were still talking about the game, although the TV was off now. Julie was sitting straight up in bed and chatting a mile a minute, like any normal teenage girl. Allison was so happy to see her like that it was a few minutes before she paid any attention to what they were saying.

"I've made it inside a few times, but only to the front hallway. The spell always ends so fast. A friend of mine made it into the library once, and he actually found the Book of Hadram before the magic sent him back to the forest. He brought the book with him, too, and the spells and maps in there got him up to the seventeenth level. I suppose I shouldn't ask you how to stay in the house longer, right? I mean, I should probably figure it out for myself. I know it's a combination of different magics, but

of course the higher level players are all cagey about the secrets they've figured out. I'd love to have time to explore the whole house, you know? Since Rick—I mean, oh my gosh, *you*

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