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American ROMANCE

WINNING SARA'S HEART

Mary Anne Wilson

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Аннотация

Could He Promise Her Forever?After years of sacrifice in order to keep a roof over her young daughter's head, Sara Flynn is thrilled when she's offered a part-time job at the local day-care center and is allowed to bring little Hayley with her. But it's her work on the upcoming charity ball that changes her life forever….E. J. Sommers might have the Midas touch in business, but what about love? After agreeing to hold the ball at his house, E.J. finds himself falling hard and fast for the blond beauty and her daughter. Only problem is, she doesn't know about his millionaire status or even his real name. Now E.J. has to find a way to win Sara's heart without losing her trust….Just for Kids: A day-care center where love abounds…and lasts forever!

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Finally—she'd said it. There was nothing between them. There couldn't be, not now—not ever…

He came around the desk and stood in front of her. "What did you think I was going to do?"

"I'm sorry," she breathed.

He narrowed his gaze, then without warning reached out and cupped her chin. He ignored the way she flinched at the contact as his fingers pressed against her skin. "What in the hell happened to you to make you like this?"

Sara drew back, tried to absorb the pain that came with his words. "Who do you think you are?" she whispered.

He leaned toward her, coming so close that she felt his breath brush her face when he spoke. "Someone who can't understand where all this anger is coming from, or why you've decided to cut off your life for your daughter." He paused, then said softly, "But then again, I don't know you, do I? I don't understand."

"No, you don't," she said, hating the way her voice was shaking.

She expected him to turn and walk away. But he didn't.

Instead, he looked right at her and said in a low, tense voice, "But I want to…understand."

Dear Reader,

Winning Sara's Heart, part of my series JUST FOR KIDS, centers on E. J. Sommers and Sara Flynn, two people who aren't looking for anything more than to be in control of their own lives. That premise always intrigues me—how two people can think

they're in control, only to meet that one person who can change everything.

This is a Cinderella story. There's a "prince" and a "princess," a magical ball, even a "fairy godmother" named Mary Garner, but no wicked stepsisters. However, there is a little girl named Hayley, who loves both the "prince" and the "princess." She happens to end up in the middle of the magic that proves that even when two people don't believe in love, it's all around them and out of their control.

I hope you enjoy E. J. and Sara's story and all the magic love can bring to this world, especially when it's least expected. Please look for the next book in my JUST FOR KIDS series, When Megan Smiles, in March 2004.

Winning Sara's Heart
Mary Anne Wilson

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For Wendy Douglas
For being a great friend when life wasn't easy.
Thanks for being there.

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Chapter One

E. J. Sommers didn't want to be here. He wanted to be anywhere but in the limousine heading into downtown Houston for a meeting at LynTech. He didn't want to sit in some stuffy conference room, facing the head honchos across a shiny table and negotiate away part of his own company. If it were up to him, he'd be out somewhere in the open, alone, letting his attorney take care of the whole thing.

"Everything okay?" Martin Griggs, that very same attorney, asked. "You look…" His voice trailed off.

E. J. turned to Martin, a thin man in a perfectly tailored, pin-striped navy suit, and with much less red hair than he'd had ten years ago when he'd first come on board with the newly formed EJS Corporation. "Just how do I look?" he asked, his dark hazel eyes narrowing on the man.

"As if you'd rather be drawn and quartered than do this," Martin said without missing a beat.

"Right on the mark," E. J. murmured.

"You need to be in the meeting, to show that the power goes all the way to the top, and you're the one in control."

E. J. nodded. "I know."

"But, you don't look too convinced."

"Hell, I'm convinced, but you know I'm never sure of anything in business. I do this by the seat of my pants, not because I've

got some impressive degree to hang my opinions and actions on. I never even made it past high school."

"Education or not, by doing it your way, you've been a success, made millions, and have one of the most viable corporations around. That's why LynTech wants this deal to go through."

"Just about everyone else looks at me and wonders when I'm going to fall flat on my face, when I'll go back to where I belong and leave the big league to the big-league players."

Martin smiled. "Sure, but you aren't falling flat on your face, and you're here, so they'll deal with you or there won't be a deal at all."

E. J. knew that Martin was stating the facts, but he still wondered what he was doing in this situation to begin with. He'd never set out to be rich, to have this kind of power or influence, and he was willing to let part of his company go to try to make his life simpler. Maybe even to figure out where his life was going from here. What he knew was, he needed time and breathing space, and getting LynTech to take over part of his operations meant he'd get what he wanted.

LynTech would get the high-tech branch of EJS Corporation, freeing him up. Quietly, they were negotiating, and it would be a done deal before the rest of the business world knew what was happening. No sharks would go after EJS Corporation. Just a quiet, fast deal. Those were the rules Jackson Ford, the negotiator for LynTech, had agreed to.

"They'll deal with me," he muttered, and tugged at the cuffs

of the brown leather bomber jacket he was wearing over a plain white T-shirt with blue jeans and his favorite pair of boots.

"You know, you really are a legend in the business world," Martin said.

"Oh, sure," he said, almost laughing.

E. J. knew how he was seen by most people. By virtue of his success and his wealth, women pursued him passionately and men went after his holdings. His business opponents were passionately resentful of what they perceived to be his ability to do what they did, but with a deceptive ease that rankled them. "A cocky upstart with an attitude" was one of the kinder remarks he'd heard. He ignored the worst remarks that labeled him as a man who didn't know a contract from his elbow and a man who had more luck than brains.

He knew he'd been lucky in his life. But he'd be dammed if he'd apologize for his success. Gossip-mongers seemed to thrive on finding out what he was up to.

"Well, Mr. Legend, we're here," Martin said as the limo slowed and pulled to the curb in front of the towering glass-and-metal building that contained LynTech. A security man was there right away, opening E. J.'s door and looking inside.

"Good morning, sir. Can I help you?"

"We're here for a meeting," Martin said. "E. J. Sommers and Martin Griggs."

The khaki-uniformed man, probably in his late twenties, with pale skin and a concerned expression, checked a clipboard he

was holding. “Oh, yes, sir,” he said with a smile. “The meeting is in the main conference room on the top floor. Mr. Holden said to send you right up when you got here.”

Martin’s phone rang as E. J. got out, and then the attorney was beside him on the sidewalk, holding up a hand to get E.J’s attention. Martin frowned but didn’t say anything as he listened to the caller. “Oh, for—” Martin finally muttered, his words stopping abruptly as he listened some more. “This stinks. It’s not what we signed on for. I’ll be right up,” he said, and flipped his phone shut.

“What’s going on?” E. J. asked.

“That was Ford. He just found out the deal leaked and the word is on the street. It’s making the rounds.”

E. J. had actually liked what he’d heard of Ford. When they’d spoken, E. J. got the sense that Ford stood by his word. Had he been mistaken? “What happened?”

“He doesn’t know, but it’s out and the sharks are circling. It’s just what you thought. They’re seeing it as a weakness in the structure, and they’re going for blood.” He motioned to the building. “It’s not going to be pretty, but we need to get this done. Come on.”

Suddenly a child screamed and E. J. flinched at the piercing sound. He glanced to his left and saw a harried-looking young woman in jeans and a loose T-shirt trying to carry a squirming toddler toward the entrance to the building. “Hush, Walker, Mommy’s inside. I promise.”

The little boy, with wispy blond hair and a good set of lungs, let out another ear-piercing scream. “Hush, hush, hush,” the woman kept saying as she hurried into the lobby of the LynTech building.

“Sorry, sir,” the security man said. “He’s going to the day-care center inside. Those kids can be a handful,” he said with a shake of his head. “Sure glad I don’t have any.” Then he realized he might have been out of line and backtracked. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that kids are bad or anything. I mean, you each probably have lovely children.”

“Two girls,” Martin said as he glanced at the closed entry doors. “You say they’ve got a day-care center in there?”

“Yes, sir. Have for a while now, but I never thought kids should be around business stuff. Just my opinion.”

E. J. didn’t care about the kids or why a corporation like LynTech would even have children on the premises. He sure as hell didn’t want to talk about them or where they should be. Kids didn’t matter to him. He didn’t care if LynTech had a high school tucked away in the building. What he cared about was a rotten deal, and he didn’t want any part of what was waiting for them on the top floor.

“Call Ford back and tell him we’re on our way back to Dallas.” He wanted complications out of his life. But that wasn’t going to happen here and now. “We’re cutting our losses and getting out of town.”

Martin didn’t move. “We can’t just walk away without a face-

to-face."

"Ford and Holden both promised it was going to be closed, that we wouldn't have to go public with the negotiations."

Martin shook his head. "E. J., in business you have to see things through to the end. You need to tell them—"

"You go and see them if you want to. See what the hell happened, but I'm leaving it." Frustration was growing in him, along with impatience. He turned to the security man, who was trying to pretend that he wasn't listening to their conversation. "Where's the nearest place to get a drink?"

"Coffee?" he asked.

When E. J. nodded the man said, "Over there, in the Lennox Building," he said, motioning to the structure south of LynTech. "They just put in a sort of bar and restaurant on the ground level. Everyone's been saying it's good. Just inside the main doors to the left."

E. J. glanced at a twin to the LynTech Building, all glass and steel with a sweeping entry and the name Lennox carved into a heavy slab of marble used as a cross support over the doors. He turned to Martin. "Give me some cash?"

Martin tucked the phone back in a side pocket of his briefcase, then reached for his wallet. "I wish you'd carry cash, E. J. Do you know how much more bookkeeping I have to do to account for the dribs and drabs you take off me?" he muttered, then looked up at E. J. as he opened his wallet and held it out to him. "Why don't you just take what you need?"

E. J. took a few bills, then said, “Put it on my tab.”

“Of course,” Martin murmured as he tucked his wallet back in his pocket. “So, you’re not coming up with me?”

“No, just let me know when you’re ready to head back to Dallas. I’ll be at the bar.”

Martin nodded, then headed into LynTech.

“Can my driver stay where he is?” he asked the security man.

“Sure, no problem.”

“We should be out of here soon,” he said, and was a bit surprised that he felt so let down as he headed toward the next building. He approached the glass doors and caught a flash of his image in the expansive surface. Six feet tall, lean, wearing casual clothes, he didn’t look like a company president, not even like an average businessman. At thirty-nine, he was too old to start wearing pin-striped suits and wing-tipped oxfords, and getting razor haircuts.

His brown, sun-streaked hair was a bit too long, a bit too unstyled, and it swept back from a face that was a bit too angular and showed his aversion to shaving, with the shadow of a day-old beard at his strong jaw. He realized he needed that drink, but coffee would have to do.

He hit the door with the heel of his hand and stepped into a vast reception foyer. Glass, marble, wood and plants were everywhere. He glanced at a massive information desk to the right, set on a highly polished marble floor.

E. J. caught a hint of brewing coffee in the air and spotted the

restaurant entrance. Between two immaculately trimmed topiary plants in brass pots, a frosted-glass wood door was labeled in gold-leaf script. The Lennox Café. He crossed to it, pushed it back and stepped inside. The cold marble and the glass and steel from outside were replaced by plush burgundy carpeting, polished wood and brass, accented with crystal and mirrors.

There was only one customer at the bar and two customers in the restaurant. The man at the bar was reading from his Palm Pilot while nursing a drink, and the other two men were at a round table near tinted windows, talking business with open briefcases in front of them along with drinks.

A slender blond waitress glanced in his direction while she juggled a tray laden with food. Her startling aquamarine eyes dominated a finely boned face that was slightly flushed. "Someone will be right with you," she said in a breathless voice, then headed into the restaurant.

She moved quickly, weaving her way through the empty room, approaching the customers. At the same moment she got to the table, one of the two men pushed his chair back, stood and turned, running right into the waitress. The peace was shattered by the crashing sound of impact, falling food and dishes, a startled scream that probably came from the waitress and a jarring expletive that obviously came from the customer.

As if everything had shifted to slow motion, E. J. saw the waitress jerk backward and fall out of sight behind the nearest table. The customer took the full brunt of flying food, and a plate

bounced off his shoulder before shattering as it hit the edge of the table. A small man, totally bald, with a dark goatee and wearing a somber black suit, rushed toward the table.

The customer stood there, covered with pieces of food and drenched with what had to have been coffee, while his friend, still seated at the table, hurriedly rescued papers and checked them before putting them back in his briefcase. None of the three men gave the waitress more than a cursory glance as she struggled to her feet, her face crimson and her pale hair falling loose in a tangle around her shoulders.

She scrambled up, hurrying to the man who bore the brunt of the disaster, and she reached out to brush at something yellow clinging to his once-immaculate jacket. Before she could do anything to help, the man hit at her hand, thundering, "Let it alone! You've done enough damage."

She drew back quickly, clasping her hands in front of her, then twisting around when the man in the dark suit pulled her back and away from the customer. "Oh, my…oh, goodness," the man said ineffectively in a voice with a slight British accent while he all but pushed the waitress behind him. He never stopped his mantra of apologies and offers of help. "We are so sorry," he was saying. "Just deplorable. Unforgivable. Please, let us make this up to you."

The man standing barely spared him a look while he shrugged out of his jacket, shaking it sharply and sending the clinging food everywhere. One piece of tomato hit the small man in his chest,

imprinting a garish red mark on the pristine whiteness of his shirt. He flicked at it, then grabbed a napkin off of a nearby table and proceeded to blot at his shirt. “Sir, this is unforgivable. Please, we will take care of any cleaning bills for your suit.”

The irate man turned, red-faced, and said, “It’s ruined. It’s trash.” He dropped the jacket on the table, deliberately setting it on the worst of the mess. “And you will take care of it.”

“Absolutely, sir. My name is Bernard Hughes and I’m the manager of this establishment. We will make this right, and do accept our profound apology.”

The man and his tablemate made to leave. Almost tripping over the waitress’s foot, the tall, angry businessman yelled, “Get out of my way, you idiot!” and pushed past her while she crouched down, attending to the mess at her feet.

E. J. wasn’t sure when he started to walk toward the disaster, or why he was going in that direction at all. But he was, and the men rushed past him without a glance, muttering something about a meeting.

E. J. approached the manager and the waitress. The polite facade and deference the manager had exuded seconds ago was gone. He reached down, grabbed the waitress by her arm and jerked her unceremoniously to her feet. It was then that he knew why he was heading in their direction.

He’d had enough of everything. The bad deal because of some leak at LynTech, and men who treated this woman as if she was in servitude to the lot of them; they all left a bad taste in his

mouth. The taste got even worse when he heard the manager saying, “This is all your fault, you idiot! This is coming out of your pay. And if it happens again, that’s it! You are out of here.”

He saw the woman’s eyes, that incredible shade of aquamarine, the way they widened, and the fear in them. “I…I said I’m sorry,” she breathed. “He stood up right when I got here and the tray hit him, and—”

“You threw food all over him,” Hughes muttered. “And if he goes out of here and ruins our reputation when we’re just getting off the ground, well…” He let the words trail off, but the threat in them was very clear. “The suit cleaning or replacement will be your responsibility completely.”

She bit her lip but didn’t fight his hold on her or protest anymore. She just stood there, taking it, and that made E. J. all the more angry. He was right by them now, close enough to see a name tag on the woman’s dress that read Sara, and close enough to see the pressure the man was putting on her arm. High color dotted her cheeks and she swallowed hard before she whispered, “I am so sorry, sir.”

“You will be if you do anything like this again.”

“Hey, take it easy,” E. J. said, laying his hand on the man’s forearm.

Hughes jerked at the contact, looked at E. J., then seemed to relax when he saw a customer. “Excuse me, sir?”

“Let her go,” E. J. said, not raising his voice but holding the man’s gaze without wavering. “Whatever happened here, it was

an accident. I saw that idiot stand up right in front of her, and as far as I could tell, he caused all of this."

Hughes stared at E. J., mentally trying to figure out what in the hell was going on. He flicked his gaze over the casual clothes, the roughness on his unshaven jaw, then looked right at him. The deference he'd shown to the other men was there, but in a measured portion. He wasn't going to offend a prospective customer by telling him to get lost, but he wasn't about to just let E. J. run roughshod over him, either.

"Sir, this has nothing to do with you, no matter whose fault it was," he said tightly. "We at the Lennox Café expect excellence from our employees, and if that is no longer the case, they are no longer employees." He inclined his head to E. J. "I can assure you that your service will be impeccable."

"Great, but let go of her," E. J. said.

Red flushed through the man's skin again all the way up to his bald head, but he let the waitress go. "Get this cleaned up, then come to my office," he said to her before he looked back at E. J., clasping his hands in front of his chest to partially hide the red stain there. The man was furious about everything, but he was controlled. "Now, sir, the bar or the restaurant?" he asked tightly.

"The bar."

"Yes, sir, this way," Hughes said, and swept his hand in the direction of the bar.

E. J. glanced at the waitress. She had dropped to her haunches again and was busily scooping the ruined food back onto the tray.

He leaned toward her. “Are you okay?”

She looked up, her hair tangling around her shoulders, and he was facing eyes that held jarring anger. Her mouth was tightly set, her skin flushed, and her hands, holding a broken soup bowl, were shaking. “Fine, just fine,” she muttered.

“Sir?” Hughes called to him.

E. J. had no idea why she was furious with him. It didn’t make sense. He killed the impulse to ask her why in the hell she was looking at him like that, and when she turned to get back to the mess at her feet, he walked away. He followed Hughes to the bar area, sat on one of the leather-covered stools and ordered a black coffee. While the bartender got it, E. J. looked in the mirrors that backed the bar. He spotted the waitress coming across the space with the trayful of broken china and ruined food.

He assumed she’d go right past him and into the kitchen area, but he was wrong about that, too. She came right toward him, and as he turned, she faced him with just two feet separating them. He could almost feel her heat as he inhaled a combination of scents, from coffee to flowers.

Then she uttered in a low, tight voice, “What do you think you were doing back there?”

It was then he realized how attractive she was—her full bottom lip and her silky blond hair. The high color in her complexion only emphasized a delicate beauty that owed nothing to makeup. “Trying to help,” he said truthfully, and found himself making an offer that shocked him. “Do you want me to

have a talk with your boss about it?”

Now the color drained from her face. “Don’t you dare! You’ve done enough.” She looked back over her shoulder, then at him again. “Stay out of this. Please.”

He remembered her flinching when the man had grabbed her arm, but he knew when to give up. “Hey, it’s none of my business what you do or what that guy does to you.”

The color was coming back into her face. “Damn straight it isn’t,” she muttered, then turned and left him. He watched as the kitchen doors swung silently shut behind her. She was gone, and E. J. didn’t have a clue as to why he’d gotten involved at all.

Life was crazy, and a waitress with aquamarine eyes was obviously part of that craziness today. He lifted his coffee and took a drink of the rich brew. He didn’t need any more complications in his life, and if he was any judge of women, the waitress could be one huge complication.

Chapter Two

Sara Flynn stopped just inside the kitchen doors and was shaking so hard she had to put the tray down on the stainless steel counter before she dropped it. She tried to get her hair back in the knot, twisting it and pushing the pins to hold it, but she had a terrible time fastening it. As she pushed in the last pin, she took several deep breaths to try to steady herself.

"What's going on out there?"

She turned to the chef, Marv, who was doing prep work on a side table, chopping carrots and celery so quickly that the actions were almost a blur. "An accident," she said, and took the tray over to the sinks to dispose of the food and the broken dishes.

"Sounded like a bomb went off," he said.

"A bomb would have been preferable," she said, dropping the tray into the soapy water in the large sink, then turning to Marv.

The chef was fifty or so, a stocky man with dark eyes and a ruddy complexion. She'd never seen him out of his whites. He'd been kind to her, explaining things she didn't know about the business, and covering for her when she'd needed it. He stopped chopping for a minute and frowned at her. "What was it?"

She shrugged. "I dropped that last order right on the customer," she said, trying to make her mouth smile, but it was impossible.

Marv smiled for both of them. "Oh, boy, I wish I'd seen it,

although I hate to see my work ruined."

"You wouldn't have wanted to see it," she said. "Hughes is furious."

"Threatened to fire you, didn't he?"

She exhaled. "He sure did, and then some customer butted in, and…" She bit her lip, still remembering when she'd heard that deep voice and looked up to see the man standing over her. The way he'd reached out, taken Hughes by the arm—and the anger behind his action. Dark hazel eyes hadn't backed down from Hughes and his fury, and she'd known if the stranger had said or done one more thing, Hughes would have fired her then and there to prove he could.

"A customer?" Marv said, cutting into her thoughts.

She looked through the small oval pane of glass in the kitchen door and saw the man. He was still at the bar, leaning forward, his elbows on the polished wood top, and staring into his coffee mug. "He's still at the bar. He said something about talking to Hughes about what happened, but I hope he's forgotten all about that." She watched the stranger sit back, turn and look at a man coming into the restaurant.

She recognized the security man from next door. He crossed to the man at the bar, said something, then left. The stranger turned back to the bar, tossed off the rest of his drink, then stood. He was tall and lean, and had an edge to him. A dangerous edge, she thought, then rationalized she was feeling that because he'd darn near gotten her fired.

“A real knight in shining armor?” Marv asked.

She turned as the man put a bill on the bar. “No. He almost got me fired.” She ducked back when Hughes came toward the doors and stepped into the kitchen.

“Sara?” he said. “The tables aren’t ready for the lunch rush. Get them set, then come into my office.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, her heart sinking. Quickly she went past him and out into the restaurant. Her luck was holding and all of it was bad. She barely missed walking right into the stranger, and she had the horrifying thought that he was following Hughes to have that talk with him.

“You,” she muttered, stepping back to look up at him.

His eyes were a rich hazel, framed by fine lines and set under dark brows. Direct, cutting eyes that made her uncomfortable and angered Hughes. “Me,” he murmured.

“What are you doing?” she asked, realizing that her whole body had tensed.

He studied her almost indolently for a long, nerve-racking moment, then tugged at the cuffs of his leather jacket. “I’m leaving.”

“Good,” she said with relief.

She regretted saying that as soon as the single word was out. He couldn’t possibly know how precarious her life was at the moment, or how much this job meant to her. But before she could soften her words, he actually smiled at her. The expression made her tense again, but for a myriad of reasons. His eyes

narrowed and something in them softened as his lips curved gently upward. The whole effect gave her a flash of something almost endearing, before it was gone and he murmured, "I'm not used to pleasing a pretty lady simply by getting lost. But I'm doing it now." He motioned to her hair. "Got some loose strands there," he murmured, then he turned and left.

She watched the door close and hated herself for being so cold to him. He was a stranger, someone she'd never see again, but if he ever happened to come into the restaurant when she was here, she'd make sure that she at least apologized.

"Sara. You're not on a break," Hughes said from behind her.

She headed for the side alcove. She reached for a basket with fresh linen napkins in it and started folding them into individual roses. She worked quickly, soon filling a tray with the soft roses, then went out into the dining area and started setting them out with the dinnerware on the tables.

All she wanted to do was get through this day, finish her lunch shift and go and pick up her daughter, Hayley, at the sitter's. They'd go back to the tiny house that was barely large enough for her and her three-year-old, and close the door on the world. It wasn't theirs, but it was home…for now.

Hughes called to her across the empty restaurant. "Sara, my office, now."

"Yes, sir," she said, and put down the last napkin.

She brushed her hands on her apron, then took a breath and headed for his office in the short hallway just off the rest rooms.

When she stepped into the small space lined with boxes and filing cabinets and anchored by a large desk in the middle, Hughes was changing his soiled shirt. “Close the door.”

She swung it shut, and when he didn’t motion for her to sit, she stood with clasped hands and tried to head off a disaster. “Sir, I’m so sorry about the accident and it really won’t happen again.”

“Do you know who that man was you poured food on?” he asked as he pushed his arms into the shirt-sleeves.

She’d seen him in the restaurant before, but she didn’t know anything about him except he liked his coffee black and his salads dry. “No, sir.”

He buttoned the shirt quickly. “For your information, Mr. Wise is one of the partners in the law firm of Broad, Simpson and Wise. One of the main tenants in this building, occupying two floors, six and seven…the entire floors.”

She tried to pretend to be as impressed as he seemed to be. “I had no idea he was that important.”

“All of our customers are important,” he said as he tucked in his shirt, then reached for his jacket from the back of his chair. “I just hope that I am able to make this right with him and his partners. But one more mistake like that and you are not going to be working here anymore.”

If she could have handed him her job right then, she would have, but she didn’t have that option. Since she and Hayley had moved to Houston two months ago, this was the only job she’d been able to find that had the right hours for her and gave her

decent wages and tips. She was away from Hayley too much, but at least she had the second half of the day with her and she was there when she went to bed. “It won’t happen again, sir.”

He frowned at her as he retied his tie, and she knew he wasn’t finished. “And you can tell that boyfriend of yours to keep out of your business. If he pulls something like that again, you’ll both be out of here.”

“My boyfriend?”

He tugged sharply at the cuffs of his jacket. “The man who so rudely interrupted us.”

“Oh, he’s not my boyfriend,” she said quickly. “I don’t even know who he is. I’ve never seen him before.”

Hughes studied her, then smoothed his tie. “Just get back to work and remember that our customers expect excellent service.”

“Absolutely,” she agreed.

She went out of the office and returned to folding the napkins. The bartender, Leo, called out to her. “Hey, Sara?”

She turned. “What?”

“That guy who was just here? The one talking to you and Hughes over there?” He motioned to where the accident had happened.

Not him, too. “What about him?”

He held up two twenty-dollar bills. “He paid for his drink with these, then left. I hardly think he was so impressed with me that he left me more than a thirty-five-dollar tip. Can you tell him I’ve got his change whenever he wants to come and get it?”

"No, I don't know who he is."

"Oh, I thought you and he…" He shrugged and folded the bills, tucking them in his vest pocket. "I'll hold on to them and see if he comes back." The phone behind the bar rang, and as Leo answered it, Sara turned to go and check her drawer to make sure it was even before the lunch rush started. But she'd barely turned when Leo called out to her again. "Sara?"

She looked back at him. "What?"

He was holding the cordless phone out to her as he looked around. Then he whispered when she crossed to take the phone, "Hughes is gone. It's for you."

She felt her stomach sink. Only one person would be calling her—the baby-sitter. She took the phone and spoke quickly into it. "Marg?" she asked.

"Yes, hello, Sara. I'm sorry to be calling at work, but—"

"Marg, what happened? Is Hayley all right?" Her hand was holding the phone so tightly it was aching. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no, no, Hayley is just fine. She's napping right now, as a matter of fact. But I just found out something and wanted you to know right away." She hesitated, then said, "I won't be able to watch Hayley after this week."

Now her heart sank for a different reason. It had taken her forever to find someone to care for Hayley, someone she trusted and she felt safe leaving her child with. "For how long?"

"Actually, I'm going back to school. I've been thinking about it for some time, and the opportunity just came up. I can't pass

it up," she said. "I'm sorry. I know this is an inconvenience for you, but I have a few recommendations for you, other sitters. I just wanted you to know right away."

"I appreciate that," she said, but thought it was more than an "inconvenience" for her. Another sitter? "I'll be by for Hayley later and you can give me the names?"

"Absolutely," Marg said brightly.

She hung up, then turned and handed the phone back to Leo. "Thanks."

"Your little girl okay?" he asked, surprising her by asking since she'd never spoken to him about Hayley.

"She's…she's fine," she said. It's just me, she wanted to add, but didn't. She wasn't going to wallow in self-pity. She hadn't been fired. Hayley was okay. Things would work out.

"Customer," Leo said, nodding toward the door.

For some reason she expected the stranger to be coming back, hoping it was, so that she could apologize. But when she turned there was no lean man in a leather jacket with a smile that seemed to see humor where none existed. Instead, she saw a lady whom she'd met the first day at work, Mary Garner, who helped run the day-care center in the LynTech building next door. Mary came in every day at this time to have a cup of tea and nibble on shortbread biscuits. The slender, gray-haired lady smiled when she spotted Sara.

"Hello, there," Mary said brightly.

The lady was in her sixties, with a gentle, soft voice. She

wore simple dresses in grays or navies, and always sensible shoes. "Good morning," Sara said, and led her to her usual table, one off to the side by the windows. "The usual?" she asked as Mary settled into the high-backed leather chair.

"Yes, thanks," Mary said, then touched Sara's hand before she could leave to get the tea and biscuits. "Is everything all right? Your little one's okay, isn't she?"

Mary was the only customer Sara ever talked to for any length of time, and for some reason, she was the only person she'd told about her situation. "Hayley is just fine, thank you."

"Well, you look totally stressed," Mary murmured softly, then her eyes widened. "That husband of yours, he didn't show up here, did he?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing to do with Paul, and he's not my husband. We've been divorced for three months now, and as far as I know, he's off somewhere on the East Coast making musical history." She shook her head. "He's doing his own thing, and he won't think about us…not unless he needs money."

Mary sighed. "Then what's going on?"

"Just a bad morning," she said.

Mary tapped the table. "Can you sit for a minute?"

Sara was tired and the idea of sitting down for a bit was very appealing, but she couldn't take a chance of making Hughes angry again. "I'd better not."

Mary looked past her, then lifted her hand. "Sir?"

Sara turned and realized that Mary was motioning to Mr.

Hughes. She literally held her breath as he approached them. "Mrs. Garner? What a pleasure to see you here again," he said pleasantly in his clipped British accent. "I was just saying to our chef that you can set your watch by Mrs. Garner. Eleven o'clock, right on the mark." He glanced at Sara, then back at Mary with concern. "Is there a problem?"

"Oh, my goodness, no, sir. I just wanted to ask you if Sara could keep me company for a few minutes? I thought a few minutes of adult conversation before heading back to the children would be a treat for me."

She could tell by the way his jaw worked that he wanted to say no, to push Sara back into the kitchen to help with the prep work. But he nodded obsequiously. "For you, dear lady, anything." He looked at Sara. "Ten minutes?"

"Yes, sir."

He looked back at Mary. "Have a lovely day, Mrs. Garner."

"Thanks so much, Mr. Hughes," Mary said with a smile. "You are a prince among men."

He smiled at that. "And you are a true lady."

As he walked away, Mary patted the table across from her and said, "Sit down, dear."

"I'll get your tea first," Sara said, then hurried off and was back in a few minutes with a tray with two cups of tea and the plate of biscuits. She put them down in front of Mary, then slipped into the opposite seat.

She couldn't help glancing at Hughes over by the bar, and was

shocked to hear Mary mutter, “Don’t worry about that officious twit.”

Sara looked at Mary. “He’s my boss.”

“A twit,” Mary said, then took her time sipping tea, before she sat back in her seat. “Now, what’s been happening?”

Sara fingered her teacup. “Well, to begin with, I dumped a whole tray of food on one of the most important people in this building, according to Mr. Hughes.”

Mary stared at her, then started to chuckle. “Oh, my.”

“Exactly,” Sara murmured, starting to smile in spite of herself. “He’s a lawyer or something in this building, a Mr. Wise. You know the kind, a three-piece suit with polished fingernails.”

Mary nodded. “Oh, yes, I do know that type.”

“Then Hughes went ballistic,” she said, picking up her cup. “He was livid, worried about me driving off customers. Then one of the customers stepped in, but I wish he hadn’t.” She had a sudden memory of those hazel eyes, and she clasped her hands around the teacup to steady them. “I was afraid Hughes was going to fire me on the spot.”

“Well, he didn’t, obviously.”

“For now.” She exhaled. “And my baby-sitter…” She shook her head. “Never mind. I hate people who have a laundry list of complaints if someone just says, ‘How are you?’”

“I asked. But speaking of baby-sitters, I have an idea that I wanted to run past you if I could?”

Sara looked at her watch. “I’ve got a few more minutes.”

"Okay, you know all about Just for Kids?"

"Sure, of course. It's a great idea for a day-care center, and I'm a bit surprised that a huge corporation like LynTech would let them set up over there."

"It started with LynTech," Mary said. "It was the brainchild of the CEO's wife, Lindsey Holden. But that's beside the point. Right now they're expanding, opening up to the public, bit by bit. That's where you come in."

"Oh, sure," Sara said with a wry smile. "I'm a whiz at business. I could give them financial advice."

Mary grinned. "You probably could, the way you manage to be a single parent to Hayley and work here and survive."

Sara laughed a bit ruefully. "That's about all I do. Survive." She looked at the teacup and put it down. "By the way, I think we'll take you up on that movie offer this weekend."

"Wonderful! There's a little girl at the center, Victoria, she's four. I think I'll try to bring her with us." Mary had been widowed a couple of years ago and she'd never had children, according to the conversations they'd had. She'd said that was one of very few real regrets she had in life.

"I think a movie is a good idea," Sara murmured. It would be the first fun thing she'd done for Hayley since coming to Houston. Hayley needed some fun. And so did she.

"We'll plan on it for Sunday, and it's my treat." Before Sara could object, Mary said, "I have more than enough money, and I know you don't make a bundle working here. Let me treat,

okay?"

Sara hesitated, then finally nodded. "Thank you."

"My pleasure," Mary said. "And speaking of money. Your sitter doesn't come cheap, does she?"

Marg had been more than she could afford, but not as bad as some she'd checked into. "She's reasonable," she said. "At least for now. She's closing business as of next week."

She didn't want Mary's sympathy, but she wasn't prepared for the woman to actually clap her hands and smile. "Perfect!"

"Excuse me?"

Mary's smile just grew. "You know, I truly believe in fate. That we meet others when we need to and things work out."

Sara didn't understand where that came from. "I don't see what —"

"It just so happens that they need someone to help out on a part-time basis at Just for Kids, someone good with children, and someone they can trust. You fill the bill. I think we could work out something where you could leave Hayley there while you work your shift here, then when you're done here, after lunch, you can come over there and spend the afternoon with her." Mary looked as pleased with herself as if she'd just figured out a way to bring about world peace. "It's perfect," she pronounced.

"It would be, but I can't afford something like that," she said.

Mary's smile didn't falter. "There's nothing to afford. That's the best thing about this plan. If you help us out for the afternoon, Hayley can be there all day for nothing. Now, you can't refuse

an offer like that, can you? Still being able to work here while she's being looked after…and…you don't have to pay child care costs?"

She stared at the woman. "I'd work there?"

"You know how hard it is to get someone you can trust with children. And they're very particular about whom they hire over there. You've told me you worry about Hayley and who's with her. Well, you'd know who was with her and she'd be right next door."

Her tea was forgotten. "You think that I could do that?" she asked, not quite believing that she could be the recipient of this kind of good luck.

"Yes, I do. I talked to Mrs. Holden and she thought it sounded like a great plan."

"Oh, Mary, that…would be…it would be great," she managed to say around a lump in her throat.

"Sara!" Hughes came barreling out of the kitchen, striding in her direction like a man on a mission.

She stood quickly, picking up her teacup. "I need to get back to work."

"Tell you what, come in tomorrow right after you finish here, and we can all sit down and iron out the details and get you familiarized with the work involved."

"Thank you," she breathed just before Hughes got to them.

"Mrs. Garner, forgive me for the interruption," he said, then looked at Sara. "We just received a reservation for twenty in half

an hour. We need to get things set up."

"Yes, sir," she said, and gathering her teacup, smiled at Mary. "Thanks, and I'll come by tomorrow," she said, then headed back to the kitchen.

"Sara?" Leo called to her.

She stopped by the bar. "What?"

"That guy, the one who left the huge tip?"

"What about him?"

"He left this, too," he said, and held up a single key.

She went closer and looked at the key, about three inches long, gold, with what looked like leather molded to the top of it and a monogrammed E on both sides. "What is it, a house key or a car key?"

"I don't know, but the guy is either locked out of his house, or his car's not going anywhere." He dropped the key in his tip glass, and said, "If he comes in again, and I'm not here, let him know?"

Apologize and get his key back to him if she ever saw him again. "Sure thing." But hopefully her mysterious defender wouldn't return. Otherwise she might lose this very necessary job for good.

Chapter Three

One week later

In the master suite of his ranch house just south of Dallas, E. J. threw clothes into a leather overnight case lying open on his massive poster bed. The house, a sprawling adobe structure that had once belonged to the biggest oil baron in the area, was surrounded by rolling acres of grazing land. He'd bought it because it let him be alone whenever he wanted. He had the money to do it, so why not. Although security was breached from time to time, in general he felt safe here.

At the moment, safety wasn't on his mind. His father was. As he tossed in the last of his clothes, he said, "Run that by me again, Dad?"

He glanced over his shoulder at Ray Dan Sommers, who stood, arms folded, feet braced, without a bit of apology in his expression. Ray was sixty-five years old and looked every day of it, with weathered skin and a sinewy body that came from years of working the oil fields. And he'd just dropped a bomb on E. J. "You heard me, Sonny," his father said.

His father was sure he knew what was best for his only child, a thirty-nine-year-old whom he persisted in calling "Sonny" when he was trying to get something past him. E. J., dressed only in his jeans and boots, his dark brown hair still damp from the shower and slicked back from his now clean-shaven face, snapped his

case shut. As he reached for a white T-shirt, he said, “Don’t call me Sonny, and you heard me, too.”

He tugged the shirt over his head, then pulled it down as he looked at Ray again. “Explain,” he said tightly as he tucked the shirt into the waistband of his Levi’s.

Ray backed up a bit as they met gazes, but he didn’t back down. “It seemed like a real good idea. You know, it’s PR, it’s image-shaping, like the big boys say.” Ray was in his usual jeans, plaid shirt and worn boots. He frowned, drawing his gray eyebrows together over hazel eyes, and stroked the beard stubble on his chin. “With you back in negotiations with LynTech, it couldn’t hurt for you to show your magnanimous side. Charity’s good and it shows there’s no hard feelings about that mess last week. Besides, it’ll give you a big tax write-off to use your place in Houston for LynTech’s charity ball.” He shrugged. “It all works out.”

“Why didn’t you check with me first?” E. J. asked, his exasperation showing in his tone.

The son faced the father, each the echo of the other, but with twenty-six years of aging separating them. Ray almost matched his son’s six-foot height, and they were both lean. Both had brown hair, with Ray’s laced with a good dose of gray.

“You’re right, E. J., dead right,” Ray conceded, catching E. J. a bit by surprise. His dad seldom backed down on anything. “You were busy with…” He shrugged. “Well, you were with Heather, and you seemed busy.” A sly smile touched his lips. “I’d never

interrupt that."

"When was this?"

"A few days back. I came out, saw the two of you at the pool and figured you didn't need to talk business then."

Ray made it sound as if they'd been having an orgy. Heather McCain had come out to see him before she left for New York. What Ray didn't know, and what was none of his business, was that they'd decided it was time to move on, that their relationship had run its course. He had a feeling she'd been waiting for some declaration of love, but it never came, so she'd cut her losses. "So you just agreed for me?"

"They were asking, and I didn't want to interrupt you about something like that, so I said it would be okay."

"Just let LynTech use my place in Houston for a charity ball for some day-care-center thing?" he asked, still annoyed but starting to think that it might not be a totally rotten idea. He didn't have much to do with kids, and probably never would, but it couldn't hurt to help out that way. He just hated being volunteered.

"They're doing stuff for a pediatric wing at the hospital, sort of sharing the donations or something, and the only place they had to hold it in was an old auditorium. That wasn't right."

"They use the place, and that's it?"

"Sure, mostly."

"Mostly?" E. J. shook his head with a sigh. "What else?"

"Nothing big. They just asked if you could be there for the

ball. I said, sure you would."

"Dad, why in the hell—"

"Why not? You can be there in a blink of an eye on that fancy helicopter you got waiting for you now. And you're going to be heading to Houston off and on during the year, now that the deal with LynTech is going through, and you agreed to stay involved for the first year. I just didn't know you'd be going up there before the ball and staying at the house."

"You were wrong," he muttered.

"Yeah, sure, I know. I thought you'd fly in, just zip there and zip back. Even so, the place in Houston is the size of a small country. You can have all the privacy you need, and you can do whatever you want. Have Heather there if you want, and no one's the wiser."

He was right about the size of the sprawling estate in Houston. "Heather's in New York."

"Well, women always seem to find you irresistible," Ray said with a sly smile.

"They find my money irresistible," he muttered.

"Hey, you're my son, and the women find the Sommers men irresistible."

"Sure, Dad, sure," he said. But he knew one woman who didn't. The blond waitress with those aquamarine eyes. He remembered all too well her anger at him for trying to help, a memory that had sneaked back into his mind at the strangest times this past week. "I'm going for business," he said firmly as

he turned and reached for his suitcase.

"And if Heather shows up there?"

"She's in New York and we aren't seeing each other anymore." He wished he hadn't said that last part when Ray came closer.

"Sonny? What did you do now? She was nice, real pretty, and you would have had great kids."

"Oh, Dad, I've told you, we just had fun. No marriage, no kids, nothing. And it's over."

Ray shook his head. "Sonny, you're almost forty. You should be thinking of settling down, thinking about my future."

He turned to his dad. "Your future?"

"Hell, yes," he said with a gruff laugh. "You're my only kid, and I want to be a grandpa before I'm too old to enjoy it."

E. J. brushed that off quickly. "Don't even go down that road."

"You're quite a catch, Sonny. Even that dang magazine listed you as one of the most eligible men in the state last year."

"Sure, and so was that singer with the shaved head and a lobster tattoo," he muttered.

"It was a scorpion," Ray said.

"Whatever."

"I'm glad you're doing this," his dad said.

He glanced back at Ray. "Doing what?"

"The deal with LynTech, you getting back on track with Ford after the fiasco of the leaks."

Ray hadn't given him any feedback when he told him he was thinking of scaling down his holdings or when he'd told him

about the mess last week. “Why?”

“If you have less work to do, maybe you’ll have more time to start looking around for someone to have those grandkids with.”

“What part of ‘that’s not going to happen’ don’t you understand?”

Ray frowned. “Never say never, Sonny. You’ve got a few months before you’re forty.”

E. J. laughed at that. “And you’ve got a few months before you’re sixty-five.”

“So?”

He crossed to the dressing room and disappeared inside to get his leather jacket, then came back into the bedroom. “So? Why don’t you get married again? You’re still quite a catch.”

Ray shook his head. “Don’t have no desire to do that. Your mother was the one woman who—”

“Could rope your heart,” E. J. finished for him as he put his wallet in his pocket and crossed back to the bed to get his suitcase. “I know.”

“She sure did,” Ray said.

He’d heard that since he was five and his mother had died. That was it for Ray. There had been women now and then over the years, but as Ray said, “None worth bringing home.” He faced Ray and nodded to the door. “I’m leaving.”

“I’m walking you out.”

The two men went together through the sprawling main house, their boot heels clicking in unison on the terra-cotta floors of the

heavily beamed, adobe-walled rooms.

"You want me to come with you?" Ray asked as they crossed the great room, which was done in a southwestern decor and took up the center of the house and cut toward the back of the building.

"No, just take care of things here, and don't volunteer me for anything else."

"There was one other thing," Ray said as they got to the side exit, the one that led across a stone patio to a helicopter pad beyond a breadth of rolling lawn. "But it can wait."

E. J. didn't open the door, even though he could hear the throaty vibration of the helicopter ready to take him to Houston. He turned to look at his father. He didn't remember much about his mother, except her voice when she sang to music, but Ray had been the rock in his life. They'd been in the oil fields together, worked side by side, and when he'd "struck it rich," Ray had been there. But over the years, he'd learned to never let a casual "one other thing" pass unchallenged.

"Spill it," E. J. said.

"You gotta go, Sonny. You said you didn't want to be late for the meeting this morning."

"Don't call me Sonny," he said tightly. "And I'm not going until you tell me everything."

Ray shrugged. "I sort of told them you might be able to get some of your friends to come to the ball."

E. J. rolled his eyes and sighed with exasperation. "Dad, for

the love of—"

"Don't worry about it," Ray said quickly. "I can make some calls and ask them to—"

"No," he said quickly.

"But they'll expect—"

"No! Just tell me that's it, that you didn't offer me for anything else."

"Just that you'll participate in a few things."

This was going from bad to worse. "Like what?"

"An auction they're going to have."

"And?"

"That's it. Everything."

"Nothing else?"

Ray spread both hands palms-up to his son. "I swear."

E. J. shook his head. "No more volunteering me for anything. Got it?"

"Got it," Ray said.

"Okay, I'll be back in a few days. If anything comes up—" he paused, looking his dad right in the eye "—anything, you call me."

"Absolutely," Ray said with a nod, then held out his hand. "Can you leave the key to the SUV? My truck's acting up and I need to do a few things while you're gone."

"Sure, but get the spare key from the drawer in my dressing room. I can't find the original anywhere."

"Okay. Have a good trip, Sonny," Ray said.

"That's the plan," he said as he opened the door and the throaty engine of the helicopter made the air around them vibrate. He hurried out onto the patio and jogged toward the waiting helicopter. Damn it, he loved his dad, but he never knew what he'd get them into. Or get him into. This had turned out to be a rough deal, from leaks to miscommunication, and probably the decided perception the top brass at LynTech had about him. Truth be told, if Jackson Ford hadn't been there to talk him into reinstating the negotiations, this would have been over long ago.

He ducked low, climbed into the passenger seat of the helicopter and nodded to his pilot, Rick Barnes, who handed him a headset. He slipped it on and spoke into the mouthpiece. "Any word from Martin?" he asked Rick.

"He's in Houston already and will meet you at the car when you get there. He's got all the papers."

E. J. nodded, then, as the motor's rpms increased and the helicopter took off, he glanced back at the house. Ray was still there, lifting a hand toward him, and he waved back. Ray's assurance that there were no more surprises waiting for him in Houston hadn't rung true, but he hadn't had the time to dig. When he got back, he'd straighten everything out, including his dad.

SARA HURRIED INTO THE BACK of the restaurant, past Hughes's office and into the small room used for employee lockers. She quickly changed from her waitress uniform to jeans, a pink T-shirt and running shoes. "Wear something comfortable," Mary had told her last night when she'd called

to check to make sure Sara would be bringing Hayley into the center before going to the restaurant for her shift. “Nothing good. Fingerpaint tends to find its way onto everything.”

Sara had dropped Hayley off at the center before her shift, and was relieved when her daughter had been thrilled with the array of toys in the playroom, a wonderful climbing tree in the center of the space, with “tree houses” off in each corner. She’d squealed at a huge black-and-white pet rat in a fancy cage decorated with ribbons and with the plaque reading Charlie that hung over the door.

The three-year-old had barely spared Sara a hug when Sara had said she was leaving, but she’d be back. “She’ll do just fine,” Mary had said with a smile as Hayley ran off with a group of kids. “And we’ll see you when your shift is done.”

Sara had fought the urge to check on Hayley on her break, but now she was anxious to get over to the center. She tugged the pins out of her hair, freeing it from the knot, then she turned to the mirror by the stand of metal lockers. She was shocked to see she was actually smiling. It seemed forever since she’d smiled for no reason. She smoothed her hair, tugged the T-shirt down, then gathered her things, pushed them in her backpack and headed out of the room.

Ten minutes later, she was entering Just for Kids. At the moment it was a quiet space, with soft music playing through hidden speakers. In the main playroom, murals of children holding hands and laughing hung on the wall, and soft carpet

covered the floor where the real children lay on colorful pads at the base of the huge, handmade, paper tree. Mary was sitting on the floor with her back against the trunk, her eyes closed. A large storybook lay open on her lap. The child was lying on her stomach on a bright pink pad, sleeping.

Mary must have sensed Sara's presence, because her eyes opened, then she held a finger to her lips. She got to her feet and smoothed her navy dress. "Nap time," she whispered, crossing to Sara and smiling. "We don't want to shorten it in any way. Hayley just wore herself out, but she had a good time, I think."

Sara looked at her daughter, a tiny child for three, with blond hair, slightly flushed cheeks and dressed in pink overalls. "I bet she did."

Mary glanced at a helper Sara had met before, a sixteen-year-old girl, who wore black jeans and a black top with Whatever splashed in gold across the front. Even her hair was black and caught in two pigtails. She was helping at the center during her summer break from school, and was a daughter of one of LynTech's executives. "Mallory, keep an eye on things?" Mary asked in a hushed voice. The girl nodded and sat down where Mary had been.

"Come on into the office where we can talk," Mary whispered, then turned and led the way to the back of the room and down a short hallway. "We can talk in here," Mary said as she closed the door to Lindsey Holden's office and crossed to a desk that was over-flowing with papers.

She sat down and motioned for Sara to do the same. “What a mess,” she said, looking at the papers that littered the desk. “This charity ball is nothing but work,” she said.

“It sounds very grand,” Sara said. She’d heard all about the fund-raising event sponsored by the center through LynTech, to benefit the new pediatric wing at the hospital and the center itself. “And it should bring in a lot of money.”

“Hopefully,” Mary said with a sigh. “It’s growing to gigantic proportions, though. The mayor will be there, a senator might show up. EJS Corporation offered the use of an estate on the outskirts of the city, and get this, the main house has an actual ballroom in it. We got very lucky and Marigold Events is donating their party-planning services for it. It’s the premier party-planning company anywhere, from what I’ve heard, and Marigold Stewart herself is heading the staff.”

“Marigold?”

“That’s her real name, from what I can find out.” She sat forward. “The reason I’m telling you all this is because we’ve been thinking that you could really be of use to all of us if you’d be a liaison of sorts between Marigold and the center.”

“I thought I was going to be working here.”

“Oh, you will be. All that means is, Marigold will contact you instead of me or Mrs. Holden, or Mrs. Gallagher, the other LynTech CEO’s wife who also works at the Center. You might have to make a few trips out to the Sommers estate, maybe check out a few things, but other than that, you can do everything from

here until the actual ball." She motioned to the office they were in. "Everyone uses this room, so you can, too."

She'd never planned more than Hayley's birthday parties, but she'd give it a shot. "Okay, just tell me what to do."

Mary pushed a stack of papers toward her. "Start here, and if you have any questions, holler."

Sara looked at the papers and saw floor plans and lists of everything from donations to attendees. The mayor was right at the top of it, and under it was E. J. Sommers. "This E. J. Sommers owns this place?"

"He sure does. And he'll be there. We have a promise of his appearance."

"He's important?" she asked.

"Important? Oh, I forgot, you're not from Texas. The man's a legend, dragged himself up by his bootstraps and made tons of money on some oil thing. He apparently does things his way and has fun doing it…with any number of women."

"Let's hope he's not married," Sara muttered as bitterness rose in her throat.

"Oh, no, he's not married. He's been tied to Heather McCain, the daughter of a big political family in the state, for a while. You know the type, tall, pretty, rich? Maybe she'll bid on him at the ball."

"Bid on him?"

Mary leaned forward and tugged a sheet out of the stack. "A bachelor auction." She tapped the paper with her fingertip. "You

know, pay for spending the evening with an eligible man? He's agreed to do it, and we're hoping he brings in a lot of money."

Sara picked up the paper and saw a minimum bid of two thousand dollars next to the man's name. "Well, I hope he's worth whatever he brings in," she said.

"From what I've heard, he is," Mary said with a grin.

"I HOPE THIS IS WORTH IT," Zane Holden, one of the two CEOs at LynTech, said as he sat forward and eyed E. J. on the far side of the huge conference table. "After all this work, it had better be everything Jack and Matt think it can be. We're here on good faith, all of us, and I hope that's the way you feel."

E. J. sat very still, waiting, knowing that whatever he said probably wouldn't fully satisfy Zane Holden. His mind was blurring from long hours of discussions that seemed to be going in circles. Between Ray's surprises and the hardball negotiations in this room, he was tired, but now he was back in the fray and in it for the duration. He had never been a patient man and he wanted this deal nailed down today or tomorrow.

Finally he said, "Of course, that's a given. We're all here on good faith."

Jackson Ford, sitting by Zane, had seemed vaguely distracted today, but even so, when he spoke, he hit the mark. "Okay," he said, his dark eyes narrowing as he ran his fingers through his deep-brown hair. "Let's just agree that we all want what's best and that we want this settled as quickly as possible. The figures are there. The rules haven't changed." He looked right at E. J.

“The ball’s in your court, so what are you going to do?”

Martin shifted in his seat next to E. J., but didn’t say a thing. He wouldn’t until he was asked to, even though E. J. knew he was itching to get in the middle of the fray. “I need a break,” he said, and stood.

“Good idea,” Zane said, and stood, too. The others started to get to their feet, and Rita, a woman who seemed to be the right arm to more than one of the executives at LynTech, closed her notebook and said, “Drinks are over there,” motioning to a built-in bar by the windows.

As she turned to speak to Zane, E. J. saw Martin head for the bar and pour himself a drink. E. J. flexed his shoulders, then left his paperwork on the polished conference table. He saw Ford say something quietly to Zane before he ducked out, then Robert Lewis, a spry-looking man, probably in his sixties, in a neat navy suit that was in direct contrast to his almost white hair, came around the table to where E.J was standing. Lewis, the founder of LynTech, was there as an adviser.

“I’m pleased that you showed up here today in person, instead of sending a hired hand.” He glanced at Martin, who was by the bar talking to one of Lyn-Tech’s accountants. “No offense to anyone, but it’s always better to do business directly, rather than going through too many people.”

E. J. looked back at Robert. “I’m glad you’re here, too. You had the original vision for this company and I like the way you did business, being up front about everything.”

Robert nodded. “In that vein, I’m interested in why you’re selling off a piece of your company.”

Damn, he liked this guy. No games, no oblique comments. Too bad Ray wasn’t as straightforward. “I’m doing it because I want to, sir. My life’s too complicated and this will simplify it.”

“An excellent reason,” he murmured.

E. J. inclined his head slightly. “I thought so.” He glanced around, then said, “I need to stretch my legs. I’ll be back in…” He looked at his watch. “Half an hour.”

Robert said, “Make it an hour. We all need a break.”

E. J. nodded, then turned to find Martin next to him again. “We’ve got an hour.”

“Good, we can go over—”

“No, I should have said, I have an hour. I need to get some fresh air and think.”

“But, if you—”

“Martin, relax. I’ll be back. Give me at least half an hour, then we’ll talk before this gets back in gear.”

Someone came up behind him and touched his shoulder. He turned to find a woman he hadn’t seen before. She was a very delicate-looking blonde, very pregnant and pale, but her smile was radiant. “Mr. Sommers. I’m Lindsey Holden. Zane’s wife?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I’m going home now, but I wanted to thank you so much for offering your estate for our ball. It was beyond generous, and it’s greatly appreciated.”

He felt a bit embarrassed by her effusive thanks. “No problem,” he said, a real lie, but he wasn’t going to tell her about Ray’s manipulations. “I hope the event raises a lot of money.”

“I’m sure it will,” she said. “I heard you say you were going to take a break, and I was thinking, since you have a few minutes, why don’t you go down to the center on the main floor and just take a look at it? The party planner is due in this morning, and you could talk to her or to Mary Garner.”

That was the last thing he wanted to do, but he didn’t have the heart to say that to her. “Maybe, if I have time.”

She gave him a weak smile. “Good, good.”

Zane was there, putting an arm around his wife. “She’ll talk your ear off about the center,” he said with an indulgent smile. “But now she needs to get home and rest.”

He nodded to E. J., then with his arm around his wife, Zane took Lindsey out of the conference room. Before anyone else could grab his attention, E. J. left, leaving his jacket in the room. He went out into the hallway, glanced in both directions, then started for the elevators. Once inside the car, he rode down to the main floor and intended to go directly outside and walk for a while.

But when the door opened, he saw a group of children coming into the building, maybe fifteen of them, chattering and laughing, with two women riding herd on them. He hesitated, then turned to his right, heading for a hallway that he hoped led to a rear exit and away from the kids. Despite what he’d told Lindsey Holden,

he had no intention of being around kids during this break.

He found a back door marked Parking Garage, pushed it back and felt it hit something with a solid thud. He heard a gasp, the sound of things dropping, then he eased the door back cautiously. This time it swung open freely, and he was looking out at a girl in jeans and a pink T-shirt, going down on her knees on the cement floor. Blond hair fell around her shoulders, hiding her face, and pieces of colored paper, crumpled and stained with paint, seemed to be everywhere, spilling out of a torn green trash bag.

He hurried toward her, reached for her upper arm and tried to help her back to her feet. “Sorry. I didn’t know anyone was out here.”

Then she was on her feet, turning, pushing pale blond hair off her face with her free hand, and her aquamarine eyes met his as her husky voice uttered, “You?”

Chapter Four

The moment seemed to freeze in time. Him. The stranger from the restaurant. Holding her by the arm, not more than two feet away, staring at her with as much surprise in his hazel eyes as she knew was in hers. “You?” she repeated, suddenly focused on his hold on her arm. She turned, easing out of the contact, and as he drew his hand back, she could have sworn there was the shadow of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Me,” he drawled.

She’d thought about seeing him again, but it had always been a meeting in the restaurant, him coming in, her walking over and very politely apologizing to him, then telling him his key was in the tip jar. That was as far as her imagination had taken her. She’d never thought he’d knock her down with a door, or that she’d be staring at him, tongue-tied. Nervous, she crouched and began to pick up the papers, trying to stuff them back into the ruined plastic sack, but they came out the torn side as quickly as she pushed them into the bag.

The next thing she knew, there was a metal clang on the cement, and she glanced to her right to see the stranger’s denim-clad legs and scuffed cowboy boots right beside her, along with a stainless steel trash bin.

“Try this,” he said as he hunkered down beside her and reached for the papers.

“Thanks,” she muttered, catching a glimpse of his hands, large, strong-looking hands, without any rings. Working hands, she thought, with plain, square nails, not like those of that man at the restaurant whom she was sure had been wearing clear nail polish. “Let me do that,” he said as he took the papers out of her hands, gathered up the last of them and pushed them into the container.

As they both stood, she took stock of him. Now he wasn’t wearing a leather jacket. He was in a plain white T-shirt that clung to broad shoulders and a strong chest, along with plain jeans and scuffed leather western boots. He dressed like a lot of men she’d seen around Houston, yet was unlike anyone she’d ever met. He had that way of looking at her, with narrowed eyes that made her nervous. He tucked the tips of his fingers in his jeans, snugging the denim on his narrow hips, and inclined his head.

“Are you okay?” he asked in a low voice.

She felt heat in her face and lowered her gaze. But she regretted that as soon as she realized that his jeans were as snug as his T-shirt. She looked up right away, met his slight smile and prayed that he didn’t have a clue where her thoughts had been headed. “I’m fine, and I…I’m glad we ran into each other again,” she said.

“Oh, you are, are you?” he asked.

She shifted from foot to foot, feeling like a child standing in front of a parent trying to apologize for something. “I meant that I wanted to say how sorry I am for acting the way I did before,

for what I said and everything. I know you were just trying to help and I…" She bit her lip hard. "I shouldn't have reacted the way I did."

"Why did you?" he asked bluntly.

She shrugged, meeting his gaze evenly. "Should I have fallen at your feet and kissed your boots?" she asked with a touch of sarcasm that she really hadn't intended.

All he did was grin at her again. "Now, that has definite possibilities."

She felt her face flame. "Sorry. That was…"

"Uncalled for?" he provided.

"Yes, and if you must know, I was afraid that Hughes would fire me on the spot, and I can't afford to be out of work."

"Why didn't you just say that?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I never thought of explaining myself, and I was afraid if you said any more that he'd get angrier and—"

"He'd get rid of you?"

"Exactly," she said.

"Did he?"

"No, he didn't. He gave me another chance."

"How magnanimous of him," he murmured.

"He's the boss," she countered. "He might be an officious twit, but he's my boss."

That brought a rough chuckle. "Officious twit? I've met the type," he said.

"Then you know what I'm up against."

"Yes, I do. And I'm glad that you still have a job.

But does that job mean you do janitorial work over here?"

She tucked her hair behind her ears. "No, this is another job."

"Two of them?" he asked with a lifted eyebrow. "At the moment," she said. "Do you have plans for more?"

"You never know," she sighed, and wondered why she was saying anything to him beyond the apology. "I should be getting back. I just wanted to apologize for the way I acted last week."

"Apology accepted," he murmured.

"Do you work here?"

"Excuse me?" he said.

"You're here. I assumed that you work here, too?"

"You said you work here, didn't you?" he asked, answering her question with a question.

"I just started at the day-care center."

"That's a coincidence," he said.

"You work at the day-care center?" she asked, finding it hard to envision him around the gang of kids she'd just left inside.

"Me? No," he said, as if she'd asked him to jump out of an airplane without a parachute.

She actually found herself laughing. "You look horrified. Kids scare you?"

"Scare me? No. But I can't say that I have any affinity for them."

"You don't have any children, I take it?"

"No," he said, in exactly the same tone he'd assured her that

he didn't work at the center.

"They do scare you, don't they?" she asked.

"No, but I don't have—"

"Any affinity for them?" she supplied.

He chuckled again. "You've got it."

"Okay, if you don't work at the center, what do you do?"

"Work. Long hours."

"Here?" she asked.

"At the moment," he said.

She had the feeling that getting answers would be a time-consuming task. "Janitor?"

"What?"

"Are you a janitor? You knew where the trash receptacle was."

"I looked up and it was there," he said.

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