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PROLOGUE

**ARCHER ENTERPRISES, Inc.**

Mrs. George Cameron  
Lilac Hill  
Fairview, Illinois

Dear Mrs. Cameron,

We received the enclosed letter from Eric Nelson to your late husband this week, and are forwarding it to your attention. Mr. Nelson obviously felt that, as George's successors in business, we at Archer Enterprises would always know how to reach George or his family.

Since the letter appeared to be a business communication, I'm afraid the envelope was opened by mistake and the contents read. I have taken the liberty of writing to Mr Nelson to let him know that, sadly, he must have missed the announcement in the trade journals last year of George's death.

Please accept my condolences once more on your loss. I regret that I have not had a chance to pay my respects in person, but next time I'm in the Fairview area I'll consider it an honor to call on you.

Sincerely,

*Dillon Archer*

Chairman of the Board & Chief Executive Officer

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**E H N**

*Dear George,*

*You remember me, don't you? We met at a convention once in Chicago and had a great time. I read in the trade magazines that you've sold out and retired, you old fox! What's keeping you occupied now? Building dollhouses for the grandchildren? Well, if so, it's just another kind of box, and you've got plenty of experience after forty years in that business.*

*If you ever get near Naples, Florida, give us a shout. Martha and I are in the phone book, and we'd love to see you again and talk over old times.*

*Best wishes,*

*Eric Nelson*

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*LILAC HILL*

*BED AND BREAKFAST*

*Fairview, Illinois*

*Hosts: Geneva Cameron Heidi Cameron*

Mother,

I found this incredible communication as I was going through today's mail, and I thought you ought to see it.

Doesn't Dillon Archer have a nerve? He steals Daddy's plant in a hostile takeover and then has the gall to call himself "George's successor in business". He actually sends you his condolences—as if it weren't his manipulation that caused Daddy's heart attack!

And as for the supreme audacity of offering to pay his respects in person—whenever it's convenient for him—well, I'm just glad the man hasn't set foot in Fairview since the day he got control of the Works, and that he's never likely to...

A tear dropped on the note. Heidi wiped it off, but it had already stained the lavender paper.

It was more than a year since her father had died, and most of the time the pain had faded to a dull ache. These letters, however, had brought it back to full heat.

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The image Eric Nelson's letter evoked of the way things should have been haunted her. If her father were still alive, he wouldn't be playing with his grandchildren, for there weren't any. But he darned well ought to have been fiddling in his woodworking shop, or playing golf, or visiting old friends.

But George Cameron was dead, and the family business was in the hands of strangers. The whole thing was so damned unfair...

So why upset her mother with it too? Nothing would be gained by distressing Geneva. Wouldn't it be better to pretend the cursed letters had never come?

Heidi wouldn't throw them away, though. She folded both letters and her note and tucked them into a pigeonhole of her desk.

She almost hoped Dillon Archer did show up in Fairview some time. There were a whole lot of things she'd like to tell him.

## CHAPTER ONE

MITCH sounded as if he was begging. "You will take good care of him, won't you?"

Heidi Cameron shifted the telephone to her other ear, pulled off her gold button earring, and rubbed the lobe. "Of course I will, Mitch," she said soothingly. "I'll take care of your prospect just as tenderly as you would if you were here—if you ever let me get off the phone and over to the hotel to pick him up!"

Mitch laughed. "All right, I shouldn't have asked. But you know how much I'd love to be there, showing him what a great town Fairview is, and how perfect it would be for his new plant."

"I'll show him," Heidi said, and put the phone down. She gave her dark brown hair a shake, grabbed her forest-green jacket from the doorknob, and paused in the outer office. "Betty, I'm going to pick up Mr. Masters at the hotel and take him to the ribbon-cutting at the new craft store. After that we'll be at the Ambassadors' luncheon at—"

The secretary interrupted. "Masters, the chicken tycoon?"

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“That’s the one, though if Mitch hears you referring to his new prospect in those sort of terms I can’t imagine what he’ll say.”

“He called to say he can’t make the ribbon-cutting.”

Heidi sat down on the arm of the nearest chair. Masters had arrived in Fairview just last night, to check out the city as a location for the multi-million-dollar chicken- processing plant he was about to build. Now he was canceling out on the very first activity planned for him.

Why? Had something turned him off the city altogether? But how could that be? He’d hardly seen anything of Fairview; he’d even refused Heidi’s offer to meet his plane last night, saying he preferred to take a cab and go straight to the hotel.

“He said he’d meet you at Lilac Hill for the luncheon, though,” Betty went on.

Heidi started to breathe again. Maybe he was tired from the trip. Or perhaps he just hated ribbon-cuttings. They certainly weren’t her idea of high entertainment, especially since in her official capacity with the Business Ambassadors she’d attended every one in Fairview for the past year.

She felt a bit differently about this one, however, since the proprietor was a friend and the new arts-and-crafts store was something she had long wanted to see. She hoped enough other people felt the same way to keep Callie in business.

Half an hour later, in the neat little storefront on Main Street, the Chamber of Commerce president launched into his usual remarks. Heidi had heard it all before, and she found herself thinking instead about the odds facing a new venture.

Starting a small business in a mid-sized city was a tough road these days. Heidi had good reason to know how much grit, determination, patience and capital was required, for it was just a year ago that she and her mother had opened Lilac Hill as a bed-and-breakfast, offering the occasional catered party on the side. Heidi had no lack of grit, determination, and patience, but she didn’t have many illusions left. And capital was still in short supply; her mother had had to put a mortgage on Lilac Hill, but even that hadn’t been enough. There was a business loan, too, and Heidi had taken the job with the Ambassadors to help out with the expenses.

Things were getting easier as Lilac Hill’s reputation spread and the advertising began to pay off. The business was doing as well as Heidi had expected,

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considering how new it was. But the property taxes were higher this year, and she hadn't anticipated that the tennis court would need resurfacing or that one of the big oak trees would heave a section of the driveway out of line.

“And a warm welcome to the business community!” the Chamber president boomed.

Heidi joined in the polite applause, and the crowd of well-wishers, most of them wearing the Ambassadors' standard-issue forest-green jacket, shook hands with their new colleague and wandered out to the street.

In the sudden silence, Callie looked around and gave a long sigh. “Well, this is the day I've been working toward for years. So where are all the customers who are supposed to be standing in line to get in?”

Heidi recognized the look in Callie's eyes and the edge that lay under her dry tone. Both were sheer panic, born of the sudden realization that she'd gambled everything she possessed on this idea and it was too late to back out. Heidi had seen the same look in her mirror and heard the same tone in her own voice last year, on the day that Lilac Hill took its first guest booking.

“They'll come,” Heidi said. “In the meantime, I'd be honored to be your first customer.” She handed over a pack of calligraphy paper and reached for her wallet. She wished she could stay a while, lending a hand and some moral support. But she'd be a bit late for lunch as it was. She hoped Mr. Masters wasn't already waiting.

Lilac Hill lay at the very edge of the city limits, so far out that the area seemed more country than town. From the main highway the house wasn't even visible; a tasteful sign pointed the way down a deceptively narrow road, lined with lilac bushes. The blossoms were gone now, but a month ago the whole length of the drive had been heavy with their scent.

Heidi drove slowly down the winding lane, pausing where it turned and widened to reveal a vista that had always been her favorite view of Lilac Hill, and her favorite part of coming home.

The house was the color of earth and grass and stone, but its solid brown brick, white stucco and green slate did not pretend to melt into the land. Instead its bulk, three stories tall in places, spread proudly across a gently sloping hillside. Wings jutted out at unexpected angles, and ornate chimneys stretched skyward. Here and

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there, bays and open porches were capped by battlemented balconies. Darker brick traced a delicate pattern over the highest walls, breaking up the expanse, and a grinning gargoyle perched above the massive gothic-arched front door.

Far off to the right side of the house she could catch just a glimpse of the small private lake, its cold blue water shimmering under the brilliant midday sun. Behind the mansion she could see the tennis court, the corner of the wing which contained the swimming-pool, and the barn which had once sheltered her mother's horses.

When the estate had been built shortly after the turn of the century, one critic had called its architecture pseudo-Tudor and said it was both ostentatious and gaudy. Heidi supposed the critic was correct; Lilac Hill was still a bit overpowering to the uninitiated. But to her this was simply home—a warm and loving house, full of sunshine and good smells and laughter.

At least it had been only that until a couple of years ago, when her father's business had begun to falter under the threat of a hostile takeover. Then the takeover had materialized and George Cameron's health had begun to fail. Within months, Heidi's father was dead and Lilac Hill was at risk. Still was at risk, because if the gamble they had taken didn't pay off...

*It will, she thought. It has to. For Mother's sake.*

Heidi parked her car near the carriage house, away from the dozen vehicles which occupied the brick court at the back of the mansion. Proper manor houses, she remembered her grandfather explaining, didn't have driveways or sidewalks leading to the front door, and so Lilac Hill didn't either. Not that it made much difference, for the back door was nearly as grand, and it led into the same center hall, lined with walnut paneling.

She walked into the solarium, where the murmur of voices beckoned, and ran an appraising eye over the room. Round tables, each skirted with a gaily flowered cloth and set for four, were set up by each of the tall arched windows, in order to provide the best views of the garden just behind the house. Off to one side, the buffet table was already set up, and everything was in place.

She started to look around for Mr. Masters. Mitch wasn't very good at descriptions, but fortunately she knew all the Ambassadors, male and female; picking out the one strange man would be simple.

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Some of the Ambassadors had already chosen tables, others were standing, drinks in hand. She moved easily around the room, greeting each group.

The stranger was at the last table, in the far corner of the sun-room. His back was toward the window, and he'd tipped his head a little as he talked to the man beside him. At the very moment Heidi saw him, he turned toward her, and sunlight fell soft across his tanned face and gleamed blue-black in his hair.

He was good-looking, but not classically handsome— his features were a little too strong for that. But in any case his looks had little to do with his attraction. He seemed to emit energy that pulsed over Heidi in waves, robbing her of all ability to breathe. She'd felt that way only once before in her life, one summer day down on the lake when she was ten and had caught a wayward canoe paddle right across the solar plexus.

Why hadn't Mitch at least told her that Masters was a sexy devil?

Because Mitch wouldn't have noticed. And she shouldn't, either. He was a business prospect, that was all.

*For heaven's sake, she told herself, breathe!*

He was talking to Ken Ferris, who managed the Wood Works. That was unfortunate, but it couldn't be helped. Despite its troubles in the last couple of years, the Works was still the biggest employer in Fairview. The business community could scarcely shut Ken Ferris out, and neither could Heidi—even though the Wood Works was owned by Archer Enterprises now instead of the Cameron family. She just hoped Ken hadn't told Masters anything negative about Fairview.

Where Archer Enterprises was concerned, she thought dryly, there was no predicting what might happen.

Her prospect didn't seem to be listening to anything Ken Ferris was saying, however. He hadn't taken his eyes off Heidi, and as she approached he raised his index finger to touch the corner of his mouth.

Involuntarily she licked her lower lip, and saw his eyes brighten.

*It's absolutely sizzling in here, she thought. I knew we should have had this party in the dining-room, where the air-conditioning is more easily controlled.*

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He rose, with slow grace. He was even taller than she'd expected, at least eight inches above her own five-six. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure," he said. His voice was deep but surprisingly soft. Just listening to him made Heidi think of slipping down into a warm pool of water and drifting away.

"Welcome to Fairview," she managed. Mercifully, her voice didn't crack. "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Masters."

"I'm not," he said.

"What?" Somehow he'd gotten hold of her hand, and he was holding it close to his chest, almost over his heart. Heidi stared at her fingers, bemused by the sensations which rippled up her arm—warmth, and an almost electrical thrill.

"My name isn't Masters. Though at the moment I wish that it was. If he rates a greeting like that..."

Ken Ferris cleared his throat. "I'm sorry," he said. "Let me introduce you. Heidi Cameron, Dillon Archer."

The black and white marble floor seemed to rock under Heidi's feet.

Dillon Archer... the man who had wrecked her family's business and thereby devastated her father's health and cost him his life—and done it all so casually that he hadn't even bothered to set foot in Fairview to see the company he was taking over.

And now Dillon Archer was standing in the solarium Heidi's great-grandfather Wood had built, as arrogantly as if he owned it as well as the business which had provided the money to build this house. He was still holding her hand, and he was looking at her with a peculiar warmth in his eyes, as if he'd like to taste her...

She jerked away from him. "My mistake," she said tightly.

Ken Ferris chuckled nervously. "I wanted to talk to you anyway, Heidi. You see, I told Dillon about Lilac Hill, and how it's the best place to stay in Fairview, and—"

"Sorry, Mr. Archer," Heidi said curtly, and didn't care that she couldn't have sounded less regretful if she'd tried. "We're booked solid. Try the hotel."

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She turned on her heel and headed for the table in the far corner, the furthest possible from Dillon Archer. She thought she heard him give a soft little whistle, but it could have just been her ears ringing with embarrassment.

Her face was burning as well. Of all the idiotic things to do, to walk straight up to Dillon Archer like a lovesick cow...

And what was he doing here, anyway? What had brought him to Fairview? If he hadn't even bothered to look at the plant before taking it over...

Of course he hadn't bothered, Heidi thought scornfully. What he had paid for the Wood Works was no more than pocket change to Dillon Archer, so naturally he'd showed no more concern for the purchase than if he'd sent someone out to get him a sandwich.

More importantly, to Heidi at least, was the question of why Dillon Archer was at Lilac Hill in the first place. Ken Ferris was a member of the Ambassadors, of course, but what incredible bad judgment had led him to bring his boss along to this meeting? And to suggest that Dillon Archer might actually stay there—under the roof of the very people he had nearly cheated out of house as well as livelihood...

Heidi chose a chair that would let her keep her back to him, and she held her spine so straight even her grandmother would have been impressed. Just because she'd been forced to open her home to strangers, to serve club luncheons in the solarium and house paying guests in the bedrooms, it did not mean she had to associate with Dillon Archer!

Heidi's mother appeared in the doorway and looked around. There was a fretful line between her brows, and that was so unlike Geneva Cameron that Heidi jumped up and rushed toward her. But it was foolish to think she could protect her mother from their inconvenient guest. Geneva might have encountered him already; someone had no doubt shown him and Ken Ferris the way to the solarium. He might even have sought her out, to offer the condolences he'd promised in that letter last fall...

Then Heidi spotted the man at her mother's side, a short, barrel-chested fellow in a plaid sports jacket. "You must be Mr. Masters," Heidi said, and offered her hand.

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He gave her a sharp look as if considering whether he should admit it, and then nodded. Heidi led him toward the corner table, where two empty chairs remained.

It was the longest business lunch she could ever remember. Fortunately the other two men at their table kept the conversation going, quizzing Masters about his business. One of them even offered to take him to dinner that night. Heidi tried to hide her relief when he accepted the invitation.

She tried to listen to the speaker, but she couldn't concentrate. Her eyes kept straying to the far corner of the room. Not that Dillon Archer was doing anything to attract attention; as far as Heidi could tell, he hadn't even moved since the speaker took the podium. He was merely sitting there, arms folded, legs comfortably extended and crossed at the ankle, to all appearances enjoying both the sunshine and the speaker.

But she could still feel the energy in him. The sensation was milder, at this distance, but it was definitely still there.

*He's like a spring, she thought suddenly, wound tight and ready for action, just waiting for a touch to set him free.*

He turned his head just then, and smiled at her.

Heidi put her chin up a fraction and leaned toward Masters. "Is there anything you'd particularly like to see while you're in Fairview?" she asked quietly.

He nodded. "There is one thing. I'd like to tour your biggest industry. The Wood Works, I believe it's called."

The speaker finished, and Heidi automatically joined in the applause. Chairs scraped as the Ambassadors rose, but she didn't hear them. "Why would you want to?" she asked with honest curiosity. "It's not similar to your business at all. They make boxes."

Even as she said it, she could almost hear her father exclaiming in shock at the oversimplification. The Works dealt in packaging containers of all sorts, from cereal cartons to shipping crates.

Masters grinned. "And we use boxes to ship our product—lots of boxes. In fact, I've bought some from this plant, so I'd like to see how it operates. Besides, do you think my competitors in the meat-packing industry invite me in for tours? Hardly—no more than I welcome them into my place of business. But I've found

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that in principle, one assembly line is pretty much like another. No matter what the end product is, there's something to be learned from the process."

*Take care of my prospect*, Mitch had told her. That certainly implied showing Masters whatever he wanted to see. But it also meant she was responsible for presenting Fairview in the best possible light, and Heidi wasn't so sure a tour of the Wood Works would be such a great idea. The Works was no longer the showplace it had once been. Ever since Dillon Archer had taken it over, the trend had been down—production had slumped, employment numbers had sagged...

"You can arrange that, can't you?" Masters' voice had a sharp edge.

The man was thinking of investing millions of dollars in this community. He had a right to ask questions before making his decision, and checking out the business climate was a perfectly reasonable request. If seeing the Works turned him off.. .well, that wouldn't be her fault. It would be just one more thing to lay at Dillon Archer's door.

Besides, she couldn't prevent him from walking across the room to Ken Ferris, or Dillon Archer himself, and asking for a tour.

"I think so," Heidi said. "Let me see what I can do."

She left Masters chatting with the speaker and took a deep breath before she crossed the room again. To all appearances, Dillon Archer was absorbed in conversation with the vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce. But she suspected he wouldn't be surprised when she turned up at his elbow. She could feel the vibrations he was giving off; no doubt from his perspective it worked something like radar.

She was right; as she joined the group Dillon Archer was saying, "Thanks for the invitation, but I don't think I'll be in Fairview long enough to make a good Ambassador." He didn't even look at Heidi, but he raised his hand as if to take her elbow and draw her into the circle.

Heidi sidestepped, and his fingers closed on air. He smiled just a little. "Well, hello again. Have you reconsidered your decision about renting me a room?"

"I only wish I could," she said mendaciously. "Actually, I need to talk to Ken. We have a visitor who wants to see the Works in operation. Can you arrange a tour for him this afternoon?"

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Ken's glance at Dillon Archer was so fleeting that Heidi almost missed it. It puzzled her a bit; Ken was the plant manager, for heaven's sake—why would he feel he needed Dillon Archer's permission to arrange a simple tour?

But it was Dillon who answered. "I think we can accommodate the lady, don't you, Ken? On condition that she comes along to keep her protégée in line, of course."

Heidi opened her mouth to protest. Masters didn't need a chaperone. Besides, she hadn't been in the plant since her father had packed up the contents of his desk, and she didn't want to see what Dillon Archer had done to it.

Dillon was watching her lips as if he was already certain of what she'd say and was merely waiting for the opportunity to withdraw the carrot he'd dangled in front of her. But then she'd be in a jam with Masters, and with Mitch when he came back.

"Fine," she said curtly. "What time?"

Ken said uncertainly, "Half an hour?"

"I'll see you then." Heidi turned on her heel and walked away, uncomfortably aware that Dillon Archer was smiling.

She felt a pang of disloyalty as she approached the old brick administration building precisely half an hour later. It wasn't that she'd taken a solemn vow never to set foot in the Works again, but to go inside that plant as a guest of Dillon Archer—a self-invited guest, to be sure, and an unwilling one, but a guest nevertheless—seemed an insult to her father's memory.

The guide who came to greet them was a long-time employee, one Heidi remembered from years ago and who obviously remembered her. She shook his hand warmly. "How are things going, Jack?"

He shot a look at Masters and said diplomatically, "Hard to tell, Miss Cameron. Lower production among our customers means fewer things to ship, and less need for packaging. Times are tough all over, you know."

He gave the standard spiel about the plant's products and its market area, and handed out safety glasses before leading the way into the factory.

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Heidi took one look down the length of the first building and gasped. Everybody in Fairview knew that the Works no longer employed as many people as in her father's day. But what she hadn't realized was that much of the machinery was gone as well. The huge building, once bustling with workers and crammed with huge cutters and folders and presses, now held just one row of equipment, and the sounds of manufacturing echoed from the empty corners.

Masters looked at her curiously, but he didn't ask why she had reacted so strongly. Instead he turned to the guide. "Why's it called the Wood Works, anyway? Almost everything you do is in corrugated cardboard, isn't it?"

The guide nodded.

Another voice said, "Perhaps Miss Cameron can answer that question better." Dillon Archer appeared beside her.

It was only then Heidi realized that she'd breathed a sigh of relief when they'd left the administration area for the factory floor—safe, she'd thought, from his presence. She ought to have known better, of course. Though why the man would want to follow her around...

He obviously had no trouble reading the question in her face. "I haven't had the tour myself," he said smoothly. "Not the official one. I think it's always a good idea to check out what the public's being told about one's business, just to make sure it's all consistent."

The comment was reasonable enough, but Heidi didn't believe it. She shrugged it off, however, and answered Masters' question. "The company was founded by Horace Wood right before the turn of the century, and passed down through the generations—to his son Frederick, then to Frederick's son-in-law. So it's always been called the Wood Works. Kind of catchy, I always thought."

"But it's not still in the family," Masters pointed out.

"No," Heidi said. "No, it's not still in the family."

The guide gave her a sympathetic look and drew Masters off toward a press which put creases into sheets of cardboard so a box would fold just right.

"I'm very sorry about your father," Dillon said.

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She couldn't look at him. Of course he was sorry, she thought. Only a monster would deliberately cause that sort of suffering; Dillon Archer simply hadn't anticipated the results of his actions. But that fact didn't relieve him of responsibility where George Cameron was concerned.

He seemed to know that pursuing the topic would only make things worse, and he didn't say a word for the next three minutes. Then, while Masters was admiring a job drawing tacked up over a work station, Dillon said, "Ken was telling me about the Ambassadors."

"Really?" Heidi hoped he heard the chill in her voice.

"He thinks it's a very unusual organization."

"He's right." She didn't elaborate.

Dillon seemed to take the hint, and they walked along in silence down the length of the building and on into the next one, where company names and logos were printed on the boxes. Here, too, machinery that Heidi remembered from her childhood was missing.

"What did you do with it all?" she asked finally.

"The presses? Sold some, junked the others."

"And you haven't replaced them with anything? No wonder employment is down so far."

"The machines were out of date."

"And what about the people? Were they out of date too?"

He frowned. "We haven't eliminated anyone's job."

"With a few exceptions. Or have you forgotten?" She was thinking about her father's assistant manager, who had been gone within days of the takeover.

"Surely you can't blame me for wanting my own management team? But as far as the line employees, we haven't cut a single position. We simply haven't hired replacements, so as people retire or seek other opportunities—"

"Which of course they're doing, because they know there's no future here. I'm surprised you haven't closed the plant down. Or are you just waiting till you can depreciate the whole thing for the tax advantages, and then you'll abandon it?"

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“Heidi—”

“I don’t recall suggesting that you use my first name.”

He let the silence lengthen, and said finally, with surprising mildness, “Perhaps we’d be better off talking about the Ambassadors after all.”

“I thought you wanted to take part in the tour.”

He nodded toward Masters and the guide, well off to the side with their heads practically inside a machine. “Somehow I doubt this is anything like the standard tour the schoolchildren get.”

“Of course not. Mr. Masters is a prospective customer. Shouldn’t you be paying more attention to him?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want him to feel pressured.”

“Then surely there’s something back in the administration building that’s crying out for your attention.”

“Don’t you think that’s Ken’s job?”

Heidi was exasperated. “Why are you even here in Fairview, anyway?”

“Are you seriously suggesting I owe you an explanation?”

She turned away. Moisture stung her eyes, but the heavy plastic safety glasses prevented her from discreetly wiping it away. She blinked fiercely instead.

Obviously he wasn’t going to go away, and she couldn’t—short of pretending a faint or something similar, and she knew darned well Dillon Archer wouldn’t be fooled by that. So she said, “The Business Ambassadors started out as just another boosters’ club. You know the kind of thing—pancake breakfasts, barbecue suppers, a scholarship drive now and then. But a few years ago some far-sighted people began to think that it wasn’t wise for a city the size of Fairview to depend so heavily on one major industry. A wise decision, from the looks of things.” She waved a hand at the depleted production line.

She didn’t know what kind of response she’d expected, but he merely looked interested.

“So they reorganized and started sending people out to recruit industries that were looking for expansion possibilities. They were successful on a small scale, so

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they took on bigger challenges. Eventually they hired a full-time recruiter—that’s my boss—and started...”

“You work for the Ambassadors? You’re not just a member?”

Heidi nodded.

“But I thought you ran the bed-and-breakfast.”

“My mother and I do. But I owe the community something as well.”

“I see,” Dillon said thoughtfully. “You’re suffering from a touch of lady-of-the-manor syndrome. I expected as much.”

Heidi bit her lip. There was nothing to be gained by getting into a childish shouting match. To do so would only encourage him to delve further into her reasons for working, and she’d just as soon he didn’t know how things were going at Lilac Hill. It was none of his business.

The tour seemed to go on forever, and they finished it in icy silence. Back at the administration building, Masters offered a perfunctory thanks.

Heidi smiled at the guide, then fixed her gaze on Dillon Archer’s tie and said politely, “I appreciate the trouble you took.” Which, of course, was precisely none, and she didn’t think he’d miss her implication.

“How kind of you to mention it,” he said gently. “If I should find myself needing a favor in return—”

Heidi’s temper snapped. “If you think this means I owe you one—”

“Of course it does. But you needn’t hold your breath. I make it a point never to blackmail a lady.”

Masters was silent almost all the way across town to his hotel. Heidi hardly noticed, till he said finally, just as she pulled up at the main entrance, “It doesn’t look like a terribly profitable operation, does it?”

She was startled, at a loss for an answer that would be both diplomatic and true. But Masters didn’t seem to care whether she replied.

“Yes, I think Archer might be open to negotiations,” he mused. “Considering the circumstances, I might get very favorable terms. If I decide to come here, that

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is.” He gave her a crooked smile and patted her arm. “I’ll tell Mitch you were a great deal of help, if it all works out. Now, can I buy you a drink, little lady?”

Heidi turned him down as gently as she could, pleading the need to get back to Lilac Hill. She wasn’t telling even a white lie; all she wanted to do was go home.

She had never been so happy to see Lilac Hill, or so relieved that tonight there would be no guests. The house was not overflowing with guests, as she’d told Dillon Archer. Far from it, in fact; this was one of the rare days when they had no bookings at all.

*I never expected to be grateful for that*, she thought. No guests meant no cash flow. But it also meant quiet and relaxation and a chance to feel that she was at home again—home as it used to be. And tonight that was a very precious sensation indeed.

She went straight to her room on the top floor to shower and change clothes. She considered her wardrobe and settled on brief shorts and a coordinating top. She didn’t bother with shoes; she enjoyed the feel of Lilac Hill’s mellow hardwood floors beneath her toes.

On a day like today, with no guests on hand, there would be no formality. The housekeeper would be in her apartment above the carriage house, putting her feet up for a well-deserved rest. Geneva and Heidi would relax with a drink and then simply help themselves to the leftovers from the Ambassadors’ party.

There hadn’t been time or privacy to talk to her mother after lunch, so Heidi still didn’t know how Geneva felt about Dillon Archer’s appearance. Had he mentioned that letter?

The stereo was playing in the library, which they had always used as an informal living room. The music was Rachmaninov, a moody piece. Geneva was feeling melancholy, Heidi deduced. As well she might...

She didn’t feel the vibrations till she was past the door, and then it was too late, for Dillon Archer was rising from the wing-backed chair by the empty fireplace. “Your mother said you’d be coming soon to keep me company.” His gaze skimmed from her still damp hair to her bare toes, lingering appreciatively over the length of her legs. “May I get you a drink?”

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Heidi's skin felt as if she'd gotten too close to a blow torch. She said irrationally, "There were no cars out behind the house when I came home." Had he just arrived, then? Perhaps he'd only dropped in to pay a condolence visit as he'd promised to do.

Dillon frowned as if he shared her puzzlement. "As a matter of fact, I noticed that too. Do your guests often arrive so late? Or have they all just happened to cancel their reservations since lunchtime?"

Heidi was caught, and she knew it. She swallowed hard.

Dillon took a step closer. "Isn't it fortunate for me that I talked to your mother this afternoon and found there was a room available after all?"