
PROMISE ME TOMORROW

by Leigh Michaels

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CHAPTER ONE

Sunshine poured in the big window at the top of the long staircase, but the halls of the big old frame house were still quiet. The girls who had not been able to avoid scheduling eight o'clock classes were already on campus, and most of the rest were—as usual—still asleep when Cassidy Adams emerged from the tiny two-room apartment reserved for the sorority's housemother and descended to the dining room.

A senior girl wearing a designer ensemble, her makeup self-consciously perfect, looked up from her dispirited inspection of a slice of dry whole-wheat toast and groaned.

"And it's not even Monday," Cassidy murmured. She poured herself a cup of coffee from the carafe on the sideboard. "So what's the problem, Heather?"

"You."

"Already?" It was light. "And I've only just got up." Cassidy filled a small dish with fresh fruit, put two bran muffins on a plate, and sat down at the head of the table.

"That's what's bothering me. Every girl in this sorority spends half the day trying to look her best, and in five minutes in the morning you put us all to shame. It's not fair, you know, that all you ever have to do to your hair is brush it. And how you managed to get red hair and those gorgeous black eyelashes, too..."

"Marvelous invention, mascara." Cassidy fluffed her napkin out and spread it carefully across her turquoise skirt.

"I'll bet you bought that outfit at a discount store," Heather added bitterly. "And it looks better than any thing in my whole wardrobe."

"You might feel better about the whole idea if you were eating a civilized meal," Cassidy pointed out.

Heather shook her head. "I gained two pounds last week, and at this rate I won't be able to fit into my graduation gown, much less my dress for the spring formal." She broke off a bit of toast. "You know half the guys who come to the house any more are more interested in seeing you than the girls."

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The idea made Cassidy a little uneasy. “Heather, you know I don’t encourage anything of the sort.”

“You don’t have to. It’s that soft look you’ve got—as if you’re always wrapped in a peaceful little cloud, no matter what kind of hell breaks loose around you. It makes men go mad, you know. How did you learn to do that, anyway?”

Cassidy smiled, a little. “I haven’t any idea what you’re talking about.”

Footsteps clattered down the stairs, and a sophomore girl in a long nightshirt, her hair wrapped in a towel, burst into the room. “Cassidy, Melanie borrowed my fuchsia sweater for her date last night and now it’s got a stain all down the front of it. I think it looks like crème de menthe, and what she was doing with that when she’s not even supposed to be drinking...” She thrust the offending garment at Cassidy.

Cassidy sighed, inwardly. *Just another normal morning at the Alpha Chi sorority house.*

“There,” Heather said triumphantly. “You’re doing it right now! That look of yours—”

Cassidy ignored the interruption, and the sweater. “Have you asked Melanie what happened, Laura?”

“No—she’s still asleep, the lazybones. She was out till after curfew.”

“I know—I let her in.” *And I’ll be discussing it with her before the day is out.* “It was conscientious of her to return the sweater before she went to bed.” She looked steadily at the girl over the rim of her cup.

Laura shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Well, actually, I went and got it this morning,” she admitted.

“Oh? I thought we’d all agreed that you girls wouldn’t trespass in each other’s rooms.” Cassidy pushed her chair back. “I’m sure you and Melanie can come to an amicable agreement, Laura. Taking care of it yourselves would be much better than if I had to ask the governing council to settle it, don’t you think?”

She was almost to the kitchen door when she heard Heather grumble, “And she was up till the middle of the night. She’s got great bones and a terrific figure and to

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top it off she can party all night and never show the effects. It's just not fair to the rest of us."

"Maybe some day you'll lose your baby fat, Heather," Laura said, with devastating frankness. "Cassidy might have looked just like you ten years ago, when she was your age."

Cassidy smiled a little, ruefully, and pushed the swinging door aside. Ten years ago, she'd been a slightly pudgy fifteen-year-old, certainly nothing like the worldly-wise Heather. But the air of mature wisdom was one well worth cultivating for a woman in her position, even if it didn't do wonders for her ego when her charges added a few years to her age. And as for that look of—what had Heather called it? Something about peacefulness... oh, yes. As if she were wrapped in a peaceful little cloud, no matter what happened around her. Well, she had earned that look. And it wasn't an experience she would recommend to her charges, that was for sure.

In the kitchen she checked over the menus for the week and compared notes with the assistant housemother, who was also the cook. It was an exercise they referred to as synchronizing their calendars—with thirty-two young women to keep track of, someone had to be on hand at all times. Thank heaven for a reliable assistant, Cassidy thought as she walked across the parking lot to her small car. There were moments when she wondered if taking on this second job had been such a brilliant idea after all. In the last four months, since she had moved into the house, it seemed she hadn't had more than fifteen minutes to herself.

But she quickly shrugged off the question. One did what one had to do, she reminded herself. And the result, if the unpleasant reality was faced without bitterness or complaint, was the look of peaceful acceptance that Heather had commented on.

At the first traffic light, she flipped through her appointment book. She'd been promised fifteen minutes this morning with the mayor of one of the outlying suburbs, to discuss his city's current budget crisis. It would probably take the rest of the morning to chase down the details and write the story. And of course there were still the loose ends of yesterday's stories to follow up—the drug bust that had

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shocked one of the city's best neighborhoods, the warehouse fire that had crippled a major industry, the progress being made in strike talks at one of the hospitals...

It would be another hectic day, but no more so than most; it was part of being a general-assignment reporter, and Cassidy relished every minute of it. She loved the idea of every day being different, of never quite being able to predict what might happen next.

She wound the car windows down to let the soft breeze in. It was the first really warm day of spring; it had come a little later this year than was usual in Kansas City. It was almost the first of May, and in other years there had been days like this in late March—days when the air was soft with the promise of another summer on the way, another winter survived...

“Bad choice of words,” she told herself briskly—almost automatically—before she'd really stopped to think. But it didn't ache any more, the way it had in previous springs. The warm breeze, the bright sunshine, the scent of new growth no longer brought the crushing weight of dread down against her heart as it used to do. There was sadness, but that was to be expected. All the years of her life there would be sadness when the first warm day of spring came around.

The interview with the mayor went well, once he got over the shock of discovering that the hazel-eyed young redhead across the desk from him really was the reporter who'd just finished the hard-hitting series on how local industries had polluted the Missouri River.

“You're C.R. Adams?” he said several times, sounding almost defenseless. “But you're so young.”

“And I'm a woman, too,” Cassidy added helpfully. “Don't feel bad, Mr. Mayor; quite a few people make the same mistake. Now, about this tax increase you'll be asking for...”

The mayor shook his head. “I'm not used to pretty reporters,” he murmured.

But eventually, with persistence, she got her answers. More than that, she got an invitation to lunch at the mayor's club, which she gently turned down. She was always half amused now when someone was taken aback by her age and her presumed inexperience, and her sex. She hadn't always found it funny, but she had

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quickly discovered that the contrast between her byline and the reality often worked to her advantage, keeping an interview subject just far enough off balance so that she got answers to questions other reporters could not even have asked.

She worked out the first paragraphs of the story in her head as she drove back to the newspaper office, and by the time she reached the sprawling single-story building—once a supermarket—which now housed the Kansas City *Alternative*, she could almost feel it taking shape in her head.

Still, she stopped for a moment as she got out of the car, looking, as she did whenever she approached the office, at the big block letters that stretched down the entire side of the brick building, spelling out the name. It was the oddest name for a newspaper that she had ever heard of, she had thought the first time she had come here, to apply for a part-time receptionist's job. What sort of newspaper called itself an *Alternative*?

A new one, the editor had explained to her that day. A fair one which wanted to give its readers a choice. An idealistic one which took the editorial position that the older newspapers in the city had joined the establishment and were no longer asking the difficult questions that were necessary for the health of the community.

"Idealism," she told herself drily. "We've all got plenty of that, or we'd have given up this mad venture and started manufacturing widgets or weaving baskets or selling houses by now, instead. Something we could make a little money at."

"Talking to yourself again, Cassidy?" A young reporter brushed past her at the half-wall that set the newsroom apart from the rest of the building. "Isn't that a symptom of something dreadful? I can't recall what. Brian's been looking for you all morning, and he's acting like a wounded bear."

"He knows I was on an interview," Cassidy said, almost to herself. "He assigned me that story."

"Well, I wouldn't go barging into his office just at the moment—the big boss is in there." The young man wiggled his eyebrows meaningfully. "And when the publisher comes to see the editor you can bet there's something unpleasant in the wind."

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Cassidy sighed and made her way down the long row of battered government-surplus desks to her own olive-green one. She turned on her computer and was halfway through the preliminary draft of her story, making notes on things she still needed to check out, when a sticky little hand clutched at her arm. “Cassy,” a small shrill voice declared, and a three-year-old girl climbed up into her lap.

The child’s mother was only steps behind. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, Theresa,” she called. “*Not* on Cassidy’s lap, you’re covered with chocolate.”

“She’s all right, Chloe.” Cassidy reached for a tissue and wiped off the worst of the mess. “As long as she’s still got more freckles than chocolate spots, I’m not worried.” She settled the child more comfortably, the small compact body fitting neatly against her chest, the sweet-smelling dark hair nestled just under her chin, and closed her eyes tightly for a moment. Sometimes, when she held Theresa, she could almost convince herself that somewhere another precious child was playing, or snuggling down for a nap.

Or throwing a tantrum, she reflected wryly. Fudge would probably have been particularly good at that, all things considered.

She forced her attention back to the young woman beside her desk. “How was your trip to San Francisco?”

“Great. That reminds me.” Chloe McPherson swung her bulky handbag down on the corner of Cassidy’s desk and started to rummage through it. “It’s ridiculous, the number of things a woman has to carry around to keep one small child functioning. Here.” She pulled out a long, slightly wrinkled envelope and handed it to Cassidy with a flourish. “Your receipt, ma’am.”

Cassidy opened the envelope just enough to see that it contained the carbon copy of a money order drawn on a San Francisco bank, and leaned down to tuck it safely into the bottom of her handbag. “You mailed it?” Her voice was a bit muffled.

“From the main post office, precisely as ordered, the morning before I came home.” Chloe looked a bit troubled. “Cassidy...”

Cassidy gave her a big smile. “Thanks, Chloe. You’re a true friend.”

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“And that means that’s the end of the subject, right? I wish I understood why you’re sending Reid Cavanaugh money. It’s not as if he’s a charity case or something.”

“A debt is a debt.”

“All right, all right—so you owe him some money. What did you do, anyway—embezzle it?”

“Hardly. I told you—it was a loan.” Her conscience prickled a little, and she thought, *It’s not really a lie, and Chloe doesn’t need the details.* It would only encourage more questions.

“Then why go to such lengths to pay it back? A personal check would do the same thing.”

“But if he doesn’t cash a check, the money stays in my account. This way he has no choice about accepting it, at least. Even if he tears up a money order, it’s just like destroying hundred-dollar bills.”

Chloe pounced. “And why would he want to tear it up? Unless he doesn’t see it as a loan, or a debt!”

Cassidy sighed. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, Chloe—next you’ll be thinking I’m paying blackmail money or something.”

Chloe’s eyes brightened. “Are you? Though I can’t think what you could be blackmailed for—you’re so pure you could compete in the Miss America pageant.”

Cassidy bit her tongue and said, gently, “Not quite. I think you’d better come back to work soon, Chloe. Six months as a full-time mommy and your nose for news is beginning to fail—it’s leading you off course.” She set Theresa off her lap and turned her attention back to the softly glowing computer screen. The child had been happily banging on the keyboard, and the last paragraph of her story had turned into gibberish. She was still trying to fix it fifteen minutes after Chloe and Theresa had gone, but it wasn’t the damage to her story that bothered her.

I should never have confided in Chloe, she thought. I forgot that a reporter of Chloe’s caliber never quite gets over that insatiable curiosity, that urge to take

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everything apart just to see what lies at the heart of the thing and makes it all fit together. And I can't exactly blame her for being suspicious; the story I told her was full of holes. But it would have been worse if I'd told her the entire truth.

And I couldn't pass up the opportunity she gave me, Cassidy reminded herself. San Francisco was perfect, and I'm going to have to trust people sometimes; I can't just take off once a month and fly somewhere to handle it myself.

And she could not let down the smokescreen she had so carefully constructed between herself and Reid Cavanaugh. She had no idea if he had tried to trace her in the eleven months since she had sent that first money order from Chicago, but she had no intention of letting him guess that she was still in Kansas City after all. She didn't know what his reaction had been when he received that first envelope, either, but she could guess. He was proud, and having the money thrown back in his face was almost guaranteed to stir him to fury. She had seen him furious, a couple of times—once when she had accused him of paying blood money—and she didn't care to see it again...

“Cassidy!” it was a roar that started in the corner of the newsroom and culminated by vibrating her desk till she thought there had been an earthquake. She jerked upright, looking guiltily around towards the editor's office. She had forgotten that Brian wanted to talk to her.

Hastily she gathered up her notebook and the first computer-printed draft of her story and hurried across to the glass-walled corner office. Brian Erikson was the fairest man she had ever worked for, but she had learned long ago that it didn't pay to keep him waiting.

Today looked as if it would be worse than usual, she thought, pausing in the doorway. He was leaning back in his big chair, feet propped on the corner of his desk. The cigar which was ever-present in the corner of his mouth, and which he almost never lit, was chewed virtually to shreds; the interview with the publisher must have been exceptionally unpleasant, Cassidy concluded.

“Shut the door,” he growled. “Where have you been all morning?”

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She handed the story across the desk without a word. Brian glanced at it and tossed it back. "I forgot about that," he said. "it shouldn't have taken you all morning, anyway."

"What a gracious apology," Cassidy murmured sweetly.

"It's a compliment. You're too good a reporter to spend half a day on a piddling story."

"Why do I feel as if there's a cobra sneaking up behind me?"

Brian removed the cigar from his mouth, put his feet down, and leaned across the desk confidently. "I've got a peach of a job for you tonight."

"Tonight? Brian, you know I've got responsibilities at the sorority house now. I can't just—"

"You've got responsibilities here, too. Which is more important to you?"

Cassidy bit her lip. That wasn't very wise, she told herself. "The newspaper, of course. But can't someone else handle this? You've got another shift of reporters, you know, and I'm not supposed to have to work nights."

"What the hell kind of reporter are you if you won't go after a story no matter what time it is, Cassidy?"

"Brian, I need some advance notice when you've got evening assignments for me."

"I'm giving you notice," Brian said. "And you'd have had more notice if you'd been here all morning."

"That's not—" She stopped abruptly. "All right; you win. What's the big event?"

"You're going to a cocktail party. Five hundred bucks a head, with the proceeds going to the local shelters for the homeless."

She stared at him for a long moment. "Well, isn't that just great? When did you transfer me to the society pages?"

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Brian gave her a crooked smile and said, without rancor, “Keep up the impertinence and I’ll put you in charge of persuading the local clergymen to write sermons for the religion column.”

“Do forgive my runaway tongue,” Cassidy murmured. “The cocktail party sounds like so much fun, Brian.”

“Besides, it’s your kind of story. Just think of the poetic contrasts in the situation—it’s a benefit for the homeless, while most of the people who will be there tonight have two houses. Three if you count the recreational vehicle or the cabin cruiser.”

“I get the idea. You want a deliciously ironic little piece.”

“Nope. Write it straight. I don’t care much about the cocktail party, anyway. I want you to take advantage of all the connections. You’re going to be rubbing elbows tonight with the elite of Kansas City, and you never know when one of them might fit right into a story. This series of yours on people who are being squeezed out of the mortgage market, for instance...”

“That’s not the same thing as being homeless.” A tiny trickle of dread seemed to slide down Cassidy’s throat. “Where did you say this cocktail party was?”

“Mission Hills; where else?” He scabbled in the pile on his desk blotter and tossed a slip of paper across to her. “That’s another of those poetic contrasts, Cassidy. It’s being hosted by a guy who’s made his fortune building condominium developments where even the smallest unit goes for more than a quarter of a million dollars. Do you know how many homeless people you could house for the price of one of his condos on Quality Hill? And I’d hate to think what he spent on his own place—any time somebody builds a house in Mission Hills and modestly calls it a cottage, it must have cost a mint.”

Cassidy wasn’t listening any more. She was looking at the slip of paper, at a street address that might as well have been engraved on her heart, for all the chance she stood of ever forgetting it. “Reid Cavanaugh,” she said quietly.

“You know the name?” Brian looked startled. “I’m surprised. He’s not one of the ones who makes a big show of things. He’s not on the mayor’s advisory group or the governor’s reelection committee or even a museum board, that I know of. In

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fact, I don't think the guy does much of anything but build condos. I'm surprised he's even giving the party."

Brian's feet went up on the corner of his desk again, and the cigar went back into the corner of his mouth. He moved it around till it was comfortable and said contentedly, "Maybe you can get an interview with him, Cassidy. It would polish off your new series with a flourish if you can find out what's really going on in the housing industry, from the elusive Mr. Cavanaugh's point of view."

"Brian..."

"And don't give me any garbage about how you can't do it, Cassidy. If anybody can get an interview with Reid Cavanaugh, you can. And tonight may be your best chance."

Cassidy locked herself in the ladies' room and sat on the corner of the lavatory counter, her chin resting against the heel of her hand. Her temples were aching as if someone had closed a vice across her forehead, and there was a sick emptiness in the pit of her stomach.

If anybody can get an interview with Reid Cavanaugh, you can.

Well, that was true enough, she thought bitterly. She should have no trouble at all— except that she probably wouldn't be the one who was asking the questions.

"I suppose it was inevitable," she told herself. "If you're going to be in the news business in this town, you should expect to run across everybody who is anybody, sooner or later."

Dumb, she thought. Very dumb, Cassidy Adams, not to consider the possibility.

But she had not. After all, general-assignment reporters for small, struggling newspapers spent their time chasing fire engines and politicians and homicide detectives. They were not invited to the same places as millionaire contractors were. And Reid was not—never had been—the kind of man who made news, or sought to do so. He had always liked his private business to stay private, no matter to what extent he had to go to keep it that way...

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“That’s interesting,” she muttered. She had never looked at it quite that way before; she had always thought it was only his family pride that had catapulted them both into that mess four years ago.

She jumped as someone began pounding on the door, and slid off the counter to unlock it. “Sorry,” she muttered as the society editor marched in with a set face.

“What’s the matter with you?” the woman demanded.

“Nothing much. I’m just having a massive heart attack.”

The society editor snorted and shut herself in a cubicle. Cassidy resumed her seat on the corner of the counter. It might be fun to psychoanalyze Reid some day, she decided, but just now she’d better be considering her options.

It was certain that Brian would not understand her reluctance to meet Reid Cavanaugh again, unless she went back into his office and poured out the entire truth. And even then, hard-bitten newsman that he was, he would probably not sympathize. He was more likely to rub his hands together in glee and announce that she had a chance to get a once-in-a-lifetime story. No, there was no point in confiding in Brian.

So she would have to work around him, that was all. She would go to the party, she would avoid Reid, and tomorrow she would tell Brian that she hadn’t been able to talk to him—or, better yet, that he had refused to be interviewed. It would be stretching the truth, but not excessively, and she might get by with it; Brian wasn’t likely to call Reid himself and ask why he didn’t want to talk to a reporter.

She groaned a little. *Don’t kid yourself*, she ordered. *Attend a party at that house and avoid Reid?* She might as well try to avoid traffic by walking down the middle of the road. The Cottage had not been designed to accommodate large crowds, and hiding in a corner would be an impossible task.

“Dammit,” she said under her breath.

“Are you truly ill, Cassidy?” the society editor asked. “Or are you just malingering?”

“Neither,” Cassidy said with dignity. “I’m getting myself in the right frame of mind to do a story on waste disposal. You’ve heard of method acting, I’m sure?”

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Well, this is method reporting.” She stared the society editor into silence, but as soon as the woman was gone she leaned her cheek against the cool mirror and thought fleetingly about a hospital room with a *No Visitors* sign on the door. Not even Brian could argue with that excuse, surely, if they carried her away on a stretcher...

But it would not be a long-term answer, so she went back to her desk instead and tried to concentrate on translating the mayor’s proposals for a layman’s understanding. And she tried not to see the shadow that seemed to hover just off to the corner of her eye—a very large, very dark shadow. One that, for the last year, she had thought was beginning to fade away.

Mission Hills, separated by only a narrow boulevard from the urban sprawl of Kansas City, might have been part of another world entirely. Here, in one of the smallest and wealthiest communities in the nation, narrow streets wound sinuously through quiet tree covered hills, a seemingly random pattern of deceitful twists and turns. At every curve of the street, another mansion nestled, each more beautiful than the last.

Cassidy had always had trouble driving through the community; whenever she thought she had the pattern figured out she found herself back on the boulevard instead, and she had finally concluded that the people who had drawn the street plan had intended it to be that way to keep the uninitiated at bay. But this time, when she really would have liked to get permanently lost, she had no trouble at all going straight to Mission Drive, to the hillside that sloped away from the street and looked down over the new green grass of the country club golf course. To the cream-colored brick house that had been almost brand new four years ago, when she had last come down this street.

The Cottage. Reid had told her once that the description had been intended as an insult by the neighbor who had first called it that. “Why, it isn’t any thing much at all,” she had said. “It’s only a cottage!”

But it was a fitting name, and it had stuck. The house did look a bit like an old-world cottage, with its low profile and shake-shingle roof and dark-brown shutters and trim. And though it was not at all cramped or dismal or dingy, in comparison

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with its grand neighbors it certainly did look small. But looks, she had found, were sometimes deceptive.

Cassidy parked her car a long way down the street and took her time, picking her way carefully across prize-winning lawns, the grass already green and thick under her feet. It was another of those contrasts which in other circumstances would have tickled her sense of humor; in Mission Hills people devoted more money every year to nourishing their lawns than most city families spent to feed themselves.

Judging by the number of cars lining the street, the party was already in full swing, but people were still arriving. Cassidy followed a small group up the path, past a trickling fountain and between a low-spreading evergreen and a burning bush whose swelling buds promised luxuriant foliage to come, and held her breath as she stepped across the threshold into the house that— for a brief few weeks almost four years ago—had been her home.

The crowd in the foyer seemed to shift and sway before her eyes. Between bodies, she could catch only a glimpse of the wide staircase leading down to the lower level, and beyond it the formal living-room at the back of the house. But she didn't need to see it, really—that simple glimpse had told her it was still the same blend of soft neutral and pastel colors, forming a subtle frame to what had always been the glory of the house: the views from almost every room across the hillside that sloped down to a winding creek and the country club beyond.

“Your ticket, please?” a soft voice at her elbow said, and Cassidy had the impression that it was not the first time the question had been asked. She handed over the complimentary ticket Brian had given her.

The elegant young woman at the tiny ticket table looked puzzled. “You're with the Press?” she asked softly.

“I'm C.R. Adams of the *Alternative*,” Cassidy murmured.

“Of course. Natalie will show you around.” A second young woman looked up from the dining-room next door at the sound of her name, and came quickly into the foyer. “Get Miss Adams a Press kit, won't you, Natalie? And I'm sure she'll

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want to talk to our director. And of course to Mrs. Cavanaugh. Where did she go, do you think?”

Mrs. Cavanaugh.

It shouldn't have been a surprise; Cassidy certainly had reason to know how smoothly Reid could negotiate his way through the bureaucracy with the least possible publicity. Still, surely she should have heard about it by now if he had a wife—especially a wife who was devoted to causes like sheltering the homeless...

The crowd in the hallway dissolved, momentarily, as one group of people descended the wide, curving stairs and a handful of others started to climb back to the main floor. In that instant, for no reason at all, Cassidy looked up from the young woman at the table and stared across the width of the foyer at the tall man who had just reached the top step. He laid one strong brown hand on the carved newel post, raised the other, which held a sherry glass, to his lips, and stared back at her, his forehead slightly furrowed, as if he was angry.

I shouldn't be surprised at that, she thought.

The clatter of the party faded—or perhaps it was only drowned out by the rush of blood pounding in Cassidy's ears.

Four years.

He could have changed so much in that time that she wouldn't have recognized him at all. But he had not. He was still tall and lean and straight, without an excess ounce of flesh. His hair was still that odd mix of black and platinum, and as for the stern set of his jaw—

The front door opened and a stray shaft of late sun light passed over her shoulder and caught in his hair, turning it entirely to silver.

And then, precisely as if he had consulted his personal catalogue of faces and found her not worth remembering, his brow cleared, and Reid Cavanaugh turned away. A moment later she heard his laugh, strong and clear, ringing out above the noise of the crowd, as if he had not a care in the world.