

With No Reservations

by Leigh Michaels

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CHAPTER ONE

EVEN though Lacey had been home for more than two weeks, it was still a bit of a shock each morning when she woke up in the bedroom of her childhood. The room had grown with her, of course; it was no longer pink and ruffled, as it had been in her babyhood. Still, Lacey thought as she luxuriously stretched and sat up, pushing the brightly striped sheet aside, it represented the teenager she used to be, not the grown-up, professional woman she was now. Something a little more sophisticated was called for. She yawned. Peach and moss green, perhaps— she'd mention it to her mother, and see what Ginny thought about redecorating. If she was going to live here, after all...

Then she remembered how much business she had left unfinished on her desk the night before, and she scrambled out of bed with a groan. *That's not a good sign, Lacey Clinton*, she scolded herself as she stood under needles of hot water in the shower. *You've only been on the job two weeks, and you're already starting to feel as if the honeymoon is over!*

But it wasn't really that, she tried to convince herself as she dug into her wardrobe for an oyster-white business suit. She was enjoying her new job; public relations was what she was trained to do, and she had always wanted to be a part of the hotel. She was only feeling discouraged because it was such a lot of work just now. The hotel had never had an official public relations department, so she was creating her own job from scratch, in a sense. Once everything was set up, she told herself, she would love it.

At least, I'd better, she warned sternly. *Because if I don't, I've got no idea how I'm going to break the news to my parents.*

She brushed her long red-gold hair into a flaming stream over her shoulders, and tied the silky bow at the neckline of her salmon-colored blouse. There would be plenty of time to worry about breaking the news to Bill and Ginny Clinton, she told herself, if and when she decided not to stay. And that probably wouldn't happen. After all, she loved being back in Kansas City—after two years in the mad race that was Manhattan, coming back to her home town was heaven. She had missed the easy pace, the almost small-town friendliness of the people here. She certainly would never catch herself saying that she missed the pace of New York! And, of course, there was the hotel.

The Clinton Hotel was in her blood, just as it was her father's pride and joy. Some day she would take his place as general manager and owner, as he had planned from the time she was a child.

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And there is no sense in feeling queasy about it, she told herself firmly. Of course it looks like a bigger job now than it did when you were ten years old. But by the time Dad's ready to retire, you'll be eager to take over.

After all, she reminded herself, that had been the dream of years, her plan as well as her father's, until one man and her own naive heart had blasted her life into shreds two years ago, and sent her running to Manhattan instead—

Well, she told herself sternly, none of that mattered any more. Even though she had believed at the time that her heart was forever broken, it had been foolish to allow herself to get sidetracked from the paramount goal—the hotel. Giving up everything that really mattered to her because of a man—it had been a childish thing to do. But now she had come to her senses, and Lacey Clinton was home to stay.

She squared her shoulders at the thought of the paperwork that was waiting on her office desk, and went down the broad stairs of the rambling frame house in Hyde Park.

Her mother was humming an old love song as she cleared the evidence of Bill Clinton's breakfast from the table. "Good morning, darling," she said cheerfully. "What would you like for breakfast?"

"Just toast and juice, please." Lacey kissed her mother's cheek and reached for the coffee-pot. "And I can get it myself, remember? You're not supposed to be waiting on me."

"But you can't possibly work all day on only a slice of dry bread. I'd much rather you would..." Ginny stopped in mid-sentence and smiled ruefully. "When you agreed to move back in with us, I promised not to act like the mother of a teenager, didn't I?"

"You did," Lacey agreed, with a smile.

"And here I am nagging you about what you eat."

"I'll forgive you this once."

"I hope you don't run out of forgiveness soon," Ginny Clinton admitted, "because I've a feeling I'm going to need it. Oh, Lacey, it's just so good to have you home! I'm black and blue all over, I've pinched myself so much—I can scarcely believe you're real."

Lacey spread apricot jam on her toast and said, "That's flattering. But has anyone ever told you that you might be prejudiced about your only child, Ginny Clinton?" She

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settled herself at the breakfast-table and spread a linen napkin carefully across her pale skirt. “Has Dad already gone to work?”

Ginny nodded. “Half an hour ago. But he said to tell you not to be concerned about when you got there.”

“That’s a switch from my last boss.” It was only a murmur. *In a way, Lacey thought, I wish he’d be tougher on me. Treat me like any other employee.*

“He’s so glad to have you home,” Ginny said softly. “It’s going to be such a help to him to have you here. You know, Lacey, he hasn’t been feeling as energetic these last few months.”

Lacey set her cup down and stared at her mother in shock. “He hasn’t breathed a word about not being well.”

“He wouldn’t. And he actually hasn’t been ill—he just gets tired out sometimes. Having you in the office will take a great deal of pressure off him.”

It almost sounded like a warning, Lacey thought. But that, surely, was only because of her own uncertainties about the job she was tackling.

“You’re not going to work so late tonight, are you, Lacey?” her mother asked diffidently. “Don’t forget that I asked George and Elinor to come for dinner. They haven’t had a chance to see you since you got home; you’ve been working such long hours.”

Lacey propped her elbows on the table and smiled across at her mother.

Ginny sighed. “I’m doing it again, aren’t I?”

“Well, yes. I think we might as well give it up, Mother—you’re not going to be much of a success as a mere landlady, taking no personal interest in the tenant. If I happened to stay out all night...”

“I’d be pacing the front hall with a candle,” Ginny agreed. “Just as I did when you were sixteen.”

“I was seventeen. And I’ll never forget the tongue-lashing I got. Not that I’m planning on staying out all night again, but..”

“Well, I should hope not! What on earth could a young woman be doing but getting into trouble, running around at all hours of the night?”

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“Precisely. You told me that a long time ago.” Lacey pushed her coffee cup aside and said lightly, “I’m going to go and be a help to my father.”

Ginny looked abstracted. There were two fine lines in the middle of her forehead, Lacey noticed. They looked like worry lines. Funny that she hadn’t seen them before. Was it Bill Clinton, or Lacey herself, or something else, that was worrying Ginny?

Well, there wasn’t much she could do about the other things, but she could at least reassure Ginny about her own state of mind. “Mother?” She bent over Ginny and gave her a hug. “Don’t take me seriously. I’m not going to throw a tantrum because you want to know where I am, you know—I’m not fourteen any more, and I know that adults can ask about each other without being nosy.”

Ginny smiled. “Of course, dear,” she said gently. As Lacey left the room, she was already clearing the table.

But that look on her mother’s face stayed in Lacey’s thoughts all the way from the house in Hyde Park to the big hotel downtown. It had been almost an absent expression, as if there was something else nagging at Ginny’s mind.

She was probably just wondering what to serve for dinner tonight to keep up with Elinor’s gourmet cooking, Lacey told herself crossly as she reached her office. *And, even if that wasn’t it, if you go prying into her thoughts, you’re the one who’s being nosy. Honestly, Lacey, you’re starting to see trouble lurking in every corner!*

Her desk was still piled high. *What did you expect?* she asked herself as she took her jacket off. *That little elves would have taken care of it all overnight?*

The public relations office of a big hotel covered an enormous amount of territory – especially, Lacey told herself, when the general manager considered it as a training ground for his successor. For instance, the supply of promotional brochures was exhausted, but before the printers could do another batch the whole thing would have to be reorganized. The room service menus needed to be overhauled by yesterday, and there was a stack of mail and messages on her desk six inches thick.

Had no one been doing any of this stuff? she asked herself helplessly three hours later, realizing that she had made only a small dent in the pile.

Just then her father popped his head in the door. “Lacey, my girl, let’s go and have lunch.”

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She shook her head, eyes still on the letter that she had just opened. “I really can’t, Dad.”

“It’s the monthly tourist board meeting,” Bill Clinton said gently.

Lacey sighed. There were several groups in the metropolitan area that promoted and co-ordinated tourism. Attending their meetings was certainly part of her job. But why did it have to be today?

She put the letter down and looked up at her father.

Was his health a matter of concern? He didn’t look ill, Lacey thought. Bill Clinton was graying now, but he was still trim and fit and bronzed, nearly as handsome as the photographs of three decades ago, when he’d been a very eligible bachelor as well as the general manager of the grandest of Kansas City’s old hotels. That, of course, was before the day a young woman guest had stormed into his office wearing a terry-cloth bathrobe to complain about a lack of hot water in her room, and Bill Clinton had lost his heart to Ginny...

Lacey had heard the details a thousand times; it had been one of her favorite bedtime tales as a child. *Hotels*, she thought. *This one brought my parents together, and I’ll spend my life in it, one way or another.*

A trickle of sadness oozed through her at the memory of the way the hotel had shaped her parents’ lives. Once she had thought that she, too, had found her love here inside the hotel. But that was not to be.

What’s the matter with me? she asked herself. Why am I even wasting time thinking about Damon? I got over him long ago, or I would never have come back here. At the time I thought I would die because he didn’t love me, but I survived. And he’s got no place in my life now, that’s for certain—not even the space of a thought.

“Well?” Bill Clinton asked.

It took her a minute to remember the luncheon. “All right. Give me a minute to comb my hair.”

He grinned. “Combed or not, Lacey, you’ll be the hit of the party. You’re certainly the prettiest thing that’s turned up at the tourist board meetings in a year.”

“That wouldn’t be hard,” she retorted.

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She raised an eyebrow when they reached the hushed elegance of the Clinton's green and gold lobby and he turned towards the street entrance rather than the parking lot. "The board, meeting is at the Kendrick this month. We take turns among the hotels."

Lacey didn't say anything. The late summer heat caught at her breath as she stepped on to the pavement, and the lunchtime crowds made a good excuse not to talk.

She looked up at the massive stone tower of the Kendrick Kansas City, across the street and down half a block from the Clinton. Like the Clinton, it, too, was an old building, but careful cleaning had restored an almost-new gleam to the carved and sculptured facade. She hadn't been inside it in two years...

You'll have to do it some time, she told herself. It might as well be now.

The heat radiating from the pavement made it hard to get her breath. *I'm just not used to it yet, Lacey thought. It gets hot in New York sometimes, but not like this...*

"It was closed for nearly a year, you know," Bill Clinton said. "Damon poured a ton of money into it. I think he replaced everything from basement to penthouse, just for the sake of changing it." He gave a push to a gleaming brass revolving door and ushered Lacey through.

Not everything, surely? Lacey thought. I remember this door. I nearly walked into the edge of it that night, when I couldn't see for the tears...

"He wanted me to do the same thing, you know. Together we could anchor the whole convention center business, he said."

"I didn't know that," she said.

"Not my kind of risk," her father went on. "It's all right for him—he's got forty other hotels keeping the cash-flow going and helping to support a job like that. Even if he decided to do it all over again next year, it would scarcely make a ripple in the bottom line of his balance sheet."

Change for the sake of change... Yes, Lacey thought, I can see Damon doing that. Damon never liked to settle for one thing when he could have a choice. But he would also never forget about the profit margin, for the chain of hotels his company owned, or for himself...

"Still," Bill Clinton said, almost as if he was talking to himself, "sometimes I wonder if I should have done it."

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“The Clinton’s doing just fine as it is.”

Her father looked down at her with a fond smile.

“We’re a little hotel with a loyal clientele,” she said stoutly. “What’s the point of changing it?”

She braced herself for a shock as she walked across the outer foyer and stepped into the high-ceilinged grand lobby of the Kendrick Kansas City. It had never had the sheer splendor of the Clinton’s lobby, but still she would hate to see it destroyed. What would he have done to it? she wondered. Installed a fast-food restaurant? Knocked a hole in the wall so guests could drive in to register?

Her first impression was of the things that had vanished. Gone were the heavy red velvet draperies that had closed off each archway into the lower halls and hushed the sound of travelers’ footsteps. Gone were the mirrored doors that had shut off the upper balconies. In their place was open air and cool blue and grey furnishings—and people. What had been a cold and formal and quiet—always quiet—room was now filled with soft music from a grand piano in the center of the lobby, and with a comfortable buzz of conversation as groups gathered here and there, waiting for tables in the nearby restaurant. That was new, Lacey thought. Or had it always been there, so well-hidden behind those red velvet draperies that only an intrepid explorer could find it?

She looked thoughtfully out over the room as the escalator carried them up to the mezzanine, to the meeting-room where the buffet luncheon for the tourist board had been set out. The remodeling of the Kendrick Kansas City had been change for the sake of change, her father had implied. But if that crowd down in the lobby was a sample of what Damon had done to the rest of the hotel—

I’d like to ask him about it, Lacey thought. I’d like to know by what percentage it increased the occupancy rate, and what return he figures he’s getting on the investment.

Purely business questions, she realized with a tinge of relief. Questions asked of a business colleague. Good, that meant that she’d been simply shying at shadows on the way over here. Damon Kendrick had flicked her pride two years ago, but he hadn’t really wounded her heart, after all. And so she could face him again, at the tourist board meeting or anywhere else, without fear.

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HE WASN'T at the luncheon. That was not surprising, Lacey told herself; the Kendrick Kansas City was the flagship and headquarters of the chain, but Damon himself might be in Seattle or Boston or Nassau, or any of the other thirty cities in which Hoteliers, Inc. owned or managed hotels.

She assembled a sandwich from the lavish spread on the buffet table, filled a bowl with a hearty-looking vegetable soup, and joined her father at the big square table. A couple of minutes later a young woman came over to join them, juggling a soup bowl and a portfolio. "So the adventurer finally came home," she murmured as she pulled out a chair.

Lacey jumped up. "Julia!"

Julia Patterson fended off a hug with a grin. "Watch out for the soup!"

"What are you doing here?" Lacey asked, a little guiltily. Surely she should know; she and Julia had been best friends in college. But in the last two years she'd lost track of most of her old friends.

"Don't remind me," Julia murmured. "I'm the executive secretary of this organization now."

"In other words, the boss."

"Well, that's what they told me when I took the job, but I think it really means that I take orders from everyone. Are you truly home to stay this time? I heard you've already settled in at the Clinton, and a new public relations office must mean that the hotel is finally going to take a more active part in the tourism promotions we're planning."

A more active part? Finally? Lacey wanted to ask what Julia meant, but, before she could swallow her bite of ham-on-rye and phrase the question, the president of the organization had called the meeting to order.

It was more than an hour later, as the meeting broke up, that she got a chance to ask, and the answer left her chewing her bottom lip.

"The Clinton doesn't seem to be getting the sort of response from clients that we would all like to see," Julia said flatly. "I think if you'll look over the balance sheet you'll see what I mean."

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That left Lacey confused. Just how would Julia know what the Clinton's balance sheet looked like? But, before she could ask, Julia looked around and said, "I suppose your father has introduced you to all the new people."

"Haven't had the chance," Bill Clinton said as he pushed his chair back. "You know them all better than I do, anyway, Julia." He smiled. "I need to run down stairs to talk to the head of catering for a minute. I'll wait for you in the lobby, Lacey."

"See?" Julia said without rancor. "I take orders from everyone. Have you met Grant Collins? He's the general manager of the Kendrick Kansas City now."

Lacey shook her head. "I'm shocked by how much turnover there has been in the industry since I left."

"There's been a string of general managers here in the last few years, that's certain. Grant's survived longer than most."

"It would be a challenge to work for Damon, I'm sure." It was absent-minded; Lacey was watching the man Julia had pointed out across the room, and she didn't see the quick look the young woman gave her.

"It's especially tough here, with Damon's office right up on the sixteenth floor. Some of them seemed to forget that the general manager of a hotel is the boss, and they kept running to Damon with every minor problem. They didn't last long."

Lacey finished her inspection of Grant Collins—a tall, nice-looking, athletic type who looked confident of himself, she thought—and turned back to Julia. "And others just quietly got ulcers because they thought the chairman of the board was watching their every move," she said drily. "Which, of course, he was."

"Something like that. Have you seen him since you came back?"

"Damon? Why would I? It's long over with, Julia."

Julia didn't answer. "Come on and I'll introduce you to Grant. You two really should know each other."

Yes, we should, Lacey thought idly. It would be interesting to compare notes on how we've both managed to survive a few months of close contact with Damon Kendrick.

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Close up, Grant was even better-looking, and his blue eyes were frankly interested at his first sight of Lacey. His handshake was firm and warm, his light brown hair was pleasantly curly and his smile was engagingly crooked.

That's part of his success, Lacey thought. I'll bet he can charm the dowagers right out of their bad moods. But he can't be as innocent as he looks, or Damon would have chewed him up by now.

"Thanks, Julia," he said, still holding Lacey's hand after the introductions were over. "You've just made the hotel business in this city a hundred per cent more interesting."

Lacey laughed at him and retrieved her hand. "Perhaps we should have coffee some time and discuss occupancy rates."

"How about making it champagne, and we can talk about the color of your eyes?" he countered smoothly.

I was right, Lacey thought. He's definitely not innocent. But it was flattering, nevertheless, and she felt a little stir of interest. She might be living with her parents, but that didn't mean she wanted to be a hermit, and it was always pleasant to be told that she was attractive. "Coffee," she repeated gently. "You know where to find me."

Grant laughed. "You win," he said. "We'll start with coffee."

Julia gave Lacey a long, appraising look as they crossed the half-acre of pale blue and grey carpet on the mezzanine to the lobby escalator. "Lacey, I've never seen men act that way, except when they're around you." Her tone was good-natured, but there was a note of seriousness underneath. "I always have thought you were some sort of witch when it came to men. It's enough to make even your best friend jealous."

"Sorry."

"No, you're not. There's your father. Shall we go down?"

Bill Clinton was leaning against a marble pillar at one side of the big room, his arms folded, watching the parade of people.

What was he thinking? Lacey wondered, and let her eyes sweep over the lobby.

The view from the mezzanine was a wonderful vista, she thought. Taking those doors out had been a brilliant idea. And as for the long, open lobby escalator—what a glorious way to make an entrance, and grab the attention of a crowd...

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Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a tall, dark-haired man come into the lobby from the direction of the street. There was no reason she should have spotted him, one man in the middle of a stream of humanity. But she did. He was wearing a pale grey suit, and under his arm was a slim leather portfolio. He seemed to be alone, and as she watched he stopped in the doorway, his head up as if he was testing the scent of the room, his eyes roving. It looked like a habitual gesture.

I wonder if he does that every time he walks into one of his hotels, Lacey thought. As if he's sniffing for trouble.

His gaze came to rest on the escalator just as Lacey's foot settled firmly on to the top step, and then it was too late to turn back. Her heart started to thud violently, and her fingers clutched the railing. For a long moment, he stood at the end of the lobby and watched while the escalator carried Lacey inexorably downwards towards him.

It's all right, she told herself. You have to meet him some time. Just take a firm hold on yourself, and be charming and polite, as if you've forgotten everything that happened two years ago.

"All over, hmm?" Julia said drily. "Damon is standing there staring at you as if he's about to start drooling."

Lacey exerted every ounce of strength she possessed and turned to look at Julia with a light laugh. "Damon has far better manners than that—he would never drool in public."

Damon Kendrick looked up for one endlessly long moment, in which Lacey felt as if the escalator had traveled miles instead of mere feet, and then he strode across the lobby and vanished in the direction of the reception desk.

Lacey wasn't quite sure whether she felt relieved or disappointed that the inevitable meeting had been avoided for the moment. After all, she would have to face him some time.

"Witch," Julia said succinctly, just as the escalator reached the bottom, and Lacey laughed.

"A very successful witch, wouldn't you say?" she murmured. "I certainly made him vanish in a hurry."

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“I may just turn a few of these things over to you,” Bill Clinton confided as they returned to the hotel. “The boards and committees and such. You seemed to enjoy it. I’m getting a little too old to be patient with the process.”

“You, old? Never, Dad.” But it was true, she thought. He was almost sixty. *And by the time he retires, I’ll be more than ready to step into his shoes,* she told herself. *I have to be.*

The Clinton’s doorman, in his bottle-green livery with the gold braid on the sleeves, touched two fingers to his hat as they approached. He was new, too, Lacey realized; at least, she hadn’t seen him on duty before. It was startling how many of the people she remembered at the hotel had retired or moved on in the last two years. But apparently the Kendrick had similar problems—at least when it came to general managers.

That should be no surprise, she told herself. Damon must be dreadfully hard to work for, with that arrogant certainty of his—the conviction that he was always right. She had to admit, though, that when it came to the remodeling of the Kendrick Kansas City, he’d been absolutely correct. What had been a mildly profitable mid-sized hotel now appeared to be a stunning success.

That sparkling blue and grey lobby had looked like a small jewel of a watercolor sketch, she thought. And in comparison the Clinton’s green and gold now looked to Lacey like a somber old oil painting, dark with age and a bit tattered at the corners, in a dusty, tarnished frame.

It’s your imagination, she told herself, and went back to her office to check on the balance sheet, as Julia had suggested she do.

She had thrown down her pencil and was staring out of the window at six o’clock when her father knocked on her door. “Lacey, your mother’s expecting us,” he reminded gently.

Reluctantly she turned her swivel chair around, and obediently started to clear her desk.

“May I hitch a ride with you?” he asked. “I let one of the boys take my car this afternoon.”

“Sure.” She locked the papers she’d been working on in the drawer of her desk and got her handbag.

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“You’re awfully quiet,” he said.

“I’m thinking. It’s been a long afternoon, Dad.”

He didn’t press for an explanation, and they were half way home before Lacey said, “The Clinton’s not doing just fine, is it, Dad?” She didn’t look at him, but she heard the tiny sound he made, and her hands clenched on the steering wheel. “The hotel’s not losing money, but it isn’t making much, either. Our special packages aren’t being used, our ads aren’t picking up much business—occupancy is down all the way around. In fact, it’s gone steadily downhill for the last year, ever since Damon reopened the Kendrick Kansas City.”

Bill Clinton sighed. “You’re quite right, Lacey.”

Something inside her seemed to crumble. *I was hoping that I had it wrong*, she thought. Instead, he had confirmed her fears.

She swallowed hard. “Well, we’ll just have to do something to bring it back,” she said with forced cheerfulness.

“You’ve got a free hand, Lacey. Whatever you think we should do.”

She tried to stifle the icy shiver that crept up her spine. *I didn’t sign on for this!* she wanted to shout. Taking some of the responsibility off her father’s hands was one thing, but it felt as if the weight of the stone and brick building itself had come to rest on her shoulders.

The street in front of the Hyde Park house was jammed with parked vehicles. Where had they all come from? she wondered as she carefully threaded her brand new little car through the maze and into the driveway.

Then she saw the banner hung across the full width of the house. “Welcome home, Lacey,” it proclaimed in letters a foot tall.

No wonder, she thought, that her mother had been so careful to make sure she would be at home tonight. No wonder her father had caught a ride with her. No doubt he had also been prepared to delay her arrival, if necessary, until it was safe...

And of all the nights for a surprise party, she thought, this must be the worst.

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