

Chapter One

David Carlson glanced at his mirrors, signaled then pulled over into the turn lane. Disappointment rode his shoulders. He needed a big story. He was so close to gaining a position among the top echelon of reporters at The Herald, and now the rumor about graft in the city's transportation department he'd been investigating had fizzled into nothing but a disgruntled employee trying to get his boss in trouble.

David frowned and made the right turn onto Monroe Street. He was feeling a little disgruntled himself. One thing was sure, he wouldn't find his big story this afternoon. At least not until he cleared away this minor one. He scanned the buildings on the right, looking for numbers—1422. . . 1424. . . Ah! There it was.

David flipped on his blinker, pulled into the parking lot of the Westwood Literacy Center then glanced at his watch. Five minutes early. Perfect. Okay, Professor Stiles, let's get this over with!

Erin Kelly hurried down the hallway, crossed the entrance and stuck her head around the open office door. "You wanted to see me Professor?"

"Yes, yes. Come in, Erin, I'll just be a minute." The elderly man rummaged through a towering stack of papers on his desk, scowled then ran his hand through his thinning gray hair. "I had it here yesterday. . ."

He thumbed his way through another pile. "I don't know why I can never find—"

Erin hooted. He scowled up at her. "Are you laughing at me, young lady?"

"Not at all." She gave him a cheeky grin. "I'm laughing at your expectations."

"Humph!"

The snort was one of fond affection. Erin's grin widened. She gestured toward the litter of books, magazines and miscellaneous folders and papers that covered the large desk. "Do you really expect to find a specific item in that mess?"

"I do."

She took a brave step forward. "Then perhaps if you tell me what you're searching for, I could help."

"I don't need any help! That's what's wrong." The professor directed a baleful look toward his secretary in the entrance room and raised his voice. "That woman was in here straightening up again. She can't leave anything alone."

"I only threw away things that were growing."

The words floated in over Erin's shoulder. She laughed and turned toward the door. "Good one, Alice!"

The secretary grinned at her, then faced the other way as the outer door opened.

Erin shifted her gaze. A tall, broad-shouldered, gorgeous man entered. He looked vaguely familiar. She searched through the files of memories in her head as she watched him walk over to Alice.

"Good afternoon. I'm David Carlson. I have an appointment with Professor Robert Stiles."

The sound of his voice did it. Recognition dawned. David Carlson appeared occasionally on Channel Four News. What was he—?

"Hah! I've got it! One o'clock!"

Erin turned back to find the professor waving a scrap of paper through the air like a flag of triumph.

"That's what I thought, just couldn't remember for sure." The professor ducked his head and squinted at her over the top of his glasses. "Some newshound called the other day. He wants to interview me about—"

Someone cleared their throat behind her. The professor stopped speaking and shifted his gaze to a point above and beyond her head. His gray eyebrows drew together. "Who are you?"

"The newshound."

There was a trace of amusement in the deep voice. Erin stole a sidelong glance as David Carlson stepped up beside her and extended his hand over the desk.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything important. Your secretary told me to come in. I'm David Carlson of The Herald, Professor Stiles. It's good to make your acquaintance."

"Humph. Too early to know that." Her boss waved an age-spotted hand in her direction. "This is my program coordinator, Erin Kelly."

David Carlson swung his handsome, impeccably groomed dark head her way. She looked up into his intelligent, alert, gray-blue eyes and the oddest sensation hit her. Everything inside her went still. It was as if time stopped.

"She'll be answering your questions."

The professor's voice started time moving forward again. Erin gave herself a mental shake and drew in a breath of air. "Hello, Mr. Carlson." She smiled and extended her hand. It was swallowed by his larger one. Warmth telegraphed itself up her arm. She glanced at their joined hands, shocked by the feeling.

"A pleasure, Ms. Kelly."

A manila folder smacked down on the only clean spot on the desk. Erin jumped, withdrew her hand from the encompassing warmth and focused her fragmented attention as Professor Stiles fastened a keen-eyed look on David Carlson.

"Erin knows as much about the grant as I do, young man, and she's better at tolerating questions about our operation." He slapped his hand down on the folder. "This is a copy of the grant for reference—I don't want any misquotes." He looked at her.

"You can tell him about the center, Erin."

"But—"

A wave of her boss's hand cut her off. "I've no time to discuss the matter, I'm already late for another appointment. I'll talk with you later." He grabbed up his suit jacket and rushed from the room.

Erin could have cheerfully shaken him. The least he could have done was warn her! She snatched up the folder, clasped it to her chest and turned around. "Well, Mr. Carlson, it looks as if you're stuck with me for your interview. I'll do my best to answer your questions, but—as you've probably guessed—I'm surprised by this assignment and therefore ill-prepared."

"That makes two of us that are surprised, Ms. Kelly." David Carlson's gaze lowered to her hands holding the file.

Erin's breath caught. He was checking for a ring. A Romeo? Her caution reflexes snapped into high gear.

His gaze lifted back up to meet hers and he smiled. "And, speaking for myself, very pleasantly surprised. I'll take dining with a lovely young lady rather than an irascible old man every time."

Smooth, Mr. Carlson, very smooth—but then practice makes perfect. Disappointment filtered through the remnant of that odd stillness. "Dining?"

David Carlson's smile spread into a slow grin. "It's a luncheon appointment."