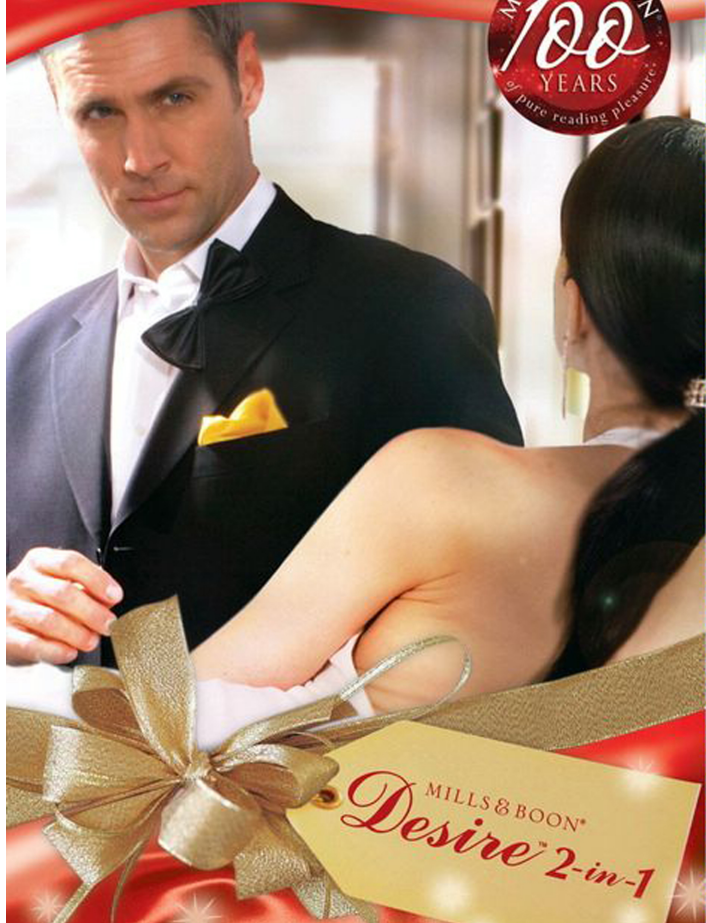


Between the CEO's Sheets

Charlene Sands

House Calls

Michelle Celmer



Michelle Celmer
Charlene Sands
Between the CEO's Sheets /
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АННОТАЦИЯ

Be swept away by passion... with intense drama and compelling plots, these emotionally powerful reads will keep you captivated from beginning to end. *Between the CEO's Sheets* Charlene Sands Cool, confident and totally in control. Millionaire businessman Wade Beaumont made a habit of going after what he wanted with focused intensity. After one steamy night together years ago, Gina had run from him. But now, faced with his seduction plan, she feared she was falling for her boss all over again. And she knew he wasn't about to let her go. *House Calls* Michelle Celmer Sharing the cottage was her idea, and since Pete Morgan was her patient, Maggie made the rules. If only he wasn't so attractive... The lake setting should heal him, body and soul. And her therapy seemed to be working... except with the demons he faced at night. Sometimes the only way to soothe him was to slip beneath his sheets.

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Between the CEO's Sheets by Charlene Sands



“Are you in, or am I going it alone tomorrow?”

Gina made a split-second decision. She needed this job. “I’m in. Under one condition.”

Wade narrowed his eyes. “I don’t usually – ”

“We keep it strictly business. Agreed?”

Wade’s lips thinned, but Gina stood her ground and kept her focus on his unflinching face.

Finally Wade nodded. “I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do.”

Great, she thought ruefully. Wade hadn’t agreed to her terms at all.

House Calls by Michelle Celmer



What man in his right mind would pass up a few months alone with a woman like Maggie?

The kind of man who knew that she deserved better – that she would expect it. To her, he was just another damaged human being she could fix.

But this wasn’t about her. It was about him, and as much as he would have liked to deny it, he wanted his life back. If he did

go, and failed, he'd be no worse off than he'd been before. With her help, he'd at least have a chance.

“If you say no, I'll have to reduce myself to kidnapping. You don't want me to commit a felony, do you?”

An honest-to-goodness chuckle rose in his chest and it felt... good. It had been a long time since anyone had made him feel this way. “You win. When do we leave?”

Between the CEO's Sheets

CHARLENE SANDS

House Calls

MICHELLE CELMER



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BETWEEN THE CEO'S SHEETS

by

Charlene Sands

Dear Reader,

I've always wanted to write a story set on an island. What better place to put Wade and Gina than in a resort I've visited dozens of times during my life, Santa Catalina Island! I'd ride the express boat to make the twenty-two-mile journey from Los Angeles to dock at Avalon Bay, the crescent-shaped harbour that was once a pirate's hideaway.

And to make the story complete, I was fortunate to tap into the expertise of my lifelong friends Allyson and Ross Pearlman, owners of the real catamaran yacht, *Between The Sheets*. I thank them for their sailing tips, the inspiration for the title (I stole it!) and those wonderful times on the water. Thanks to them I had an easy time sending Wade and Gina off on their romantic and rocky adventure!

Sincerely,

Charlene Sands

CHARLENE SANDS

resides in Southern California with her husband and best friend, Don. Proudly, they boast that their children, Jason and Nikki, have earned their college degrees. The empty nesters now have two cats that have taken over the house. Charlene's

love of the American West, both present and past, stems from storytelling days with her imaginative father, which sparked a passion for a good story and her desire to write romance. When not writing, she enjoys sunny California days, Pacific beaches, and sitting down with a good book.

Charlene invites you to visit her website at www.charlenesands.com to enter her contests, stop by for a chat, read her blog and see what's new! E-mail her at charlenesands@hotmail.com.

To my husband, Don, sole owner of my heart.

And to Jason and Nikki, our wonderful children who always make us proud.

One

It was the last place Gina Grady wanted to be.

But desperation was an unwelcome persuasion. And Gina was just that: desperate. Her pride and determination also played in the mix.

She needed this job.

She needed to stay in L.A.

Gina was ushered into an empty office. "Mr. Beaumont will be right with you," Mrs. Danner from Human Resources announced before exiting the office, leaving Gina alone with her thoughts.

She walked over to the massive floor-to-ceiling window and took in the view from the twelfth floor of the trendy Santa Monica high-rise, praying the interview would go well. She shouldn't be so worried. Sam Beaumont had been her friend

once. He'd always been kind. Yet, having to take him up on his offer of a job at the Triple B ranked with her top-ten most desperate acts of survival. The Beaumont name alone caused her insides to quake and she wondered at her own sanity in coming. However, it wasn't Sam but his younger brother, Wade, she hoped never to cross paths with again.

The Pacific Ocean loomed on the horizon, the pounding blue surf and white caps filling the view. She shuddered at the sight, and shook off her thoughts of Wade. She had enough to worry about without letting old fears get the better of her today.

She owed money to a whole lot of people and they didn't give a damn that she'd been swindled by a con man she had once trusted as her partner. GiGi Designs, the company she'd struggled to conceive hadn't been given a chance. Her lifelong dream had been destroyed in the blink of an eye. All that she'd worked so hard for had come crumbling down around her.

Now Gina was even more determined to rebuild her clothing design business—from the ground up, if need be.

But first, she needed to pay off her debts.

Gina tidied her long dark hair, making sure it hadn't fallen from the tight knot at the back of her head, straightened her black pinstriped suit and took a seat in front of the massive oak desk, setting her black knockoff Gucci handbag on her lap. She waited for Sam to enter his office.

She closed her eyes to steady her wayward nerves. Calmer, she took a deep breath before opening them again. But when she

glanced down, she simply stared in disbelief at the nameplate outlined in solid brass on the desk:

Wade Beaumont, CEO.

“No!” Her heart thudding against her chest, she rose abruptly. She couldn’t bear to see Wade again, much less work for him. She couldn’t possibly swallow that much pride. She set her purse strap on her shoulder and turned to leave.

“Running away again, Gina?”

Stunned, Gina stopped abruptly and stared into the dark-green eyes of Wade Beaumont. His head cocked to one side, he was leaning against the door where she’d hoped to make her escape. He stared back at her, his lips curled into a mocking smile. “You do that so well.”

Gina kept her head held high and tried to appear calm while her insides quivered uncontrollably. She’d foolishly hoped that Wade had nothing to do with Triple B, but now she’d seen the folly in that.

But she couldn’t deny how handsome Wade was, standing there in a pair of black trousers and a crisp white shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He looked older, more mature and those bold green eyes—she’d never forget the way they use to soften when he looked at her. Or the way his strong body felt crushed up against hers.

Or the day, nine years ago, when she’d run away from him.

“I...this is a mistake. I shouldn’t have come,” she said on a breath.

Wade ignored her comment. “You applied for a job.”

“Yes, I, um assumed Sam would be running your father’s company.”

“Ah, so you didn’t think you’d find me here?”

Gina bolstered her courage as she recalled Wade’s onetime contempt for the company his father seemed to love more than his own two sons. Triple B was all Blake Beaumont had ever cared about. When she’d known him back in El Paso, she’d understood Wade’s retreat from both the company and his father. She’d never have guessed that he would be at the helm now. Never. “No, I didn’t actually. As I said, this is a mistake.”

Gina watched his mouth twitch. He walked around his desk and picked up her resume, reading it over carefully.

“I run Triple B now from the West Coast. My father’s dead and my brother’s remarried and living in Texas. The company fell into my hands some time ago.” He stared directly into her eyes. “I suppose you thought I’d work all my life on Uncle Lee’s ranch or wind up with a small place of my own back in El Paso?”

“Actually, I hadn’t given it much thought,” Gina said truthfully. She had thought of Wade countless times in the past—dreamed of him and wondered how his life had turned out—but she never cared what he did for a living. It had never mattered to her.

She’d met Wade while living with the Buckleys in El Paso for the summer. Sarah, her college roommate, had been there for her after her parents had died in a boating accident. Gina had been

on the boat, narrowly escaping death that day. Sarah had seen to the funeral, making all the arrangements. She'd held Gina tight, when the caskets were lowered into the ground. And after, when Gina had been uncertain of her future, Sarah had taken her home to El Paso.

The Buckleys' place neighbored Wade's uncle's ranch and the four of them—Sam, Wade, Sarah and Gina—had been inseparable. She came to depend on their friendship and slowly began to heal from her terrible loss, until the day when her world had come crashing down upon her once again.

And now, Wade sat down at his desk and leaned back studying her, his eyes raking her over. She felt exposed and vulnerable, yet unable to draw herself away from his intense scrutiny.

“You hadn't thought about me? Of course, why would you? My father took care of that, didn't he?” He gestured for her to sit down, not expecting an answer. “Take a seat. We'll do this interview.”

“No, I—I don't think that would be a good idea, Wade.”

“I thought you needed a job?” he said, narrowing his eyes on her.

“I do need a job.” She directed her gaze to his without apology. “Just not this one.”

He looked down at her resume. “You're more than qualified.”

Gina's legs wobbled, so she decided to take a seat, at least for the moment.

“You've got a degree in business. And then you went on to the

Fashion Institute. Did my father's money finance that?"

He asked that question so casually that Gina had to rewind his words in her mind to make sure she'd heard him correctly. Wade believed that she'd taken his father's bribe—dirty money that she'd never wanted—to stay away from him.

He believed it because she'd never denied it. She'd let him think that she'd been enticed by a large sum of money to leave El Paso.

But that hadn't been the case at all.

She'd run out on Wade for an entirely different reason. And to have Wade believe she'd accepted his father's bribery had guaranteed that he wouldn't come after her.

She'd hated what he'd done to her.

Hated the high and mighty Blake Beaumont even more.

But if given the choice all over again, Gina wouldn't have changed anything about that summer. Except the night that they made love. Though the sweet memories of the intense passion they shared were always with her, she wished she could take that night back.

Slinging her purse on her shoulder and holding her anger in check, she stood to leave. "I'm sorry," she said, and his dark brows lifted, lining his forehead. "For wasting your time."

Wade stood and glared at her. "You didn't. You're hired."

* * *

Wade watched Gina blink her gorgeous espresso eyes. Nine years had only added to her sultry beauty and it angered him that

she could still make his heart race. All Wade had to do was look into those dark, deceitful eyes and admire that voluptuous body and he had trouble remembering the pain she'd caused him. He'd taken her virginity and it had been the highest of highs, claiming her as his own.

She'd run out on him then, leaving town, without so much as a goodbye. She'd gotten what she'd wanted—a load of money from his manipulative father. But if money had been her goal she should have waited. No longer the poor young man working on his uncle's ranch, Wade was floating in cash. But she'd been bought off long ago and had caused Wade enough steaming heartache to fill a Mississippi riverboat.

Gina straightened her pinstriped suit, her chest heaving, the structured material unable to hide the fullness of her breasts. Wade looked his fill, watching the rise and fall as she tried to hide her hot Irish-Italian temper.

Rosy-lipped, with a full flush of color on her light-olive skin, Gina was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. From the moment she'd shown up in Aunt Dottie's kitchen with an offering of fresh Italian bread and homemade pasta sauce, Wade had been a goner. She'd knocked him to his knees.

“No. But thank you.”

She spoke the words carefully and instincts told Wade that she'd been tempted to take the job. Hell, one look at her and he knew he couldn't let her walk out of his office. Not until they finished what they'd started nine years ago.

“There’s a big bonus involved,” he said, catching her attention. Her brows lifted provocatively. He shrugged. “I’m in a bind. My personal assistant chose last month to get pregnant. She’s down with acute morning sickness and took disability leave. The other qualified assistants are busy with their own projects.”

“How big a bonus?” she asked. Wade knew he’d gotten her attention once again. Money, it seemed, spoke volumes with her. Why was he disappointed? He’d known the sort of woman she was, but he had to admit that back in his youth, she sure had him fooled. “It’s a thousand dollars a week to start and once the project is settled, win or lose, you get a ten-thousand-dollar bonus. But I’ll warn you, you’ll be working long hours. Take it or leave it, Gina.”

He could almost see her mind working, calculating, *figuring*. She must need a job badly. Wade had the upper hand and he knew it. She was tempted.

He sat down at his desk and rifled through papers, coming up with information on the Catalina project. He had figures to check and hours of work to do before making a bid on the biggest contract Triple B might hope to gain.

He felt her presence, breathed in the heady scent of her exotic perfume. His better judgment told him to let her go. He’d be better off not complicating his life by choosing to work alongside the only woman he knew who could turn him on with just one look. He’d had to sit down to conceal an unwelcome yet healthy erection that pulsed from underneath the desk.

He must be crazy.

“I must be crazy, but I accept,” she said softly.

Wade lifted his head and nodded, more satisfied than he wanted to be. “I expect a decent hard day’s work from my employees. If you can manage that, you’ve got the job.”

Her chin jutted up. “I can manage that. I always give one hundred percent.”

Wade’s mind drifted back to his uncle’s barn that night so many years ago. She’d given one hundred percent of herself to him, generously offering up her body with passion and pleasure, but it had all been a trap.

This time, he’d have to be more careful.

“I’ll pick you up later this afternoon. Oh, and dress comfortably. We’ll be working at my home through the evening.”

Gina recalled Wade’s instructions and wondered at her sanity. She would never have taken this job if the compensation hadn’t been so tempting. She had debtors knocking on her door and that big bonus Wade had offered would surely keep them happy for a while.

She’d changed her clothes three times before settling on a pair of white slacks and a soft-pink knit top. She brought the whole outfit together with a matching short sweater. Comfortable, but still a professional enough look for a woman about to embark on a new job with an old lover.

Gina shook her head. She still had trouble believing she would be working with Wade Beaumont after all these years. He

resented her. She'd seen it in his eyes each time he glanced at her. No amount of Beaumont charm could conceal that look.

Gina lifted her briefcase filled with documents that Wade had asked her to review this afternoon. She glanced around the tiny guest apartment she lived in behind the large Spanish-style house in the Hollywood Hills. Once Wade saw where and how she lived, he would realize how desperate she'd been for this job. It was a tidy place with three rooms: a small cozy living space with one sofa, a kitchen that amounted to one wall of the living room with a range, a refrigerator and a café table for two, and a bedroom beyond that.

Her apartment suited her needs. She'd had to downsize everything in her life since Mike Bailey had betrayed her. They'd dreamed the same dreams, or so she had thought, and had gone into partnership together. The day GiGi Designs was born was the happiest day in Gina's life. The day she found out he'd absconded with all of her money and designs only compared with the day she'd had to leave El Paso and Wade Beaumont forever. She'd been heartbroken on both accounts.

Gina sighed and walked out the door, deciding to meet Wade out front. Not a minute later, he drove up in a shining black Lexus convertible. She watched him get out and approach her, his eyes focused on her clothes and she wondered if he approved of her choice of attire. Though not one of her original designs, she always chose her outfits carefully. When the door of the main house slammed, Gina turned her head to find the owner locking

up.

“Hey there, Gina. Are you going out?” Marcus’s eyes narrowed on Wade and she couldn’t help but laugh. Her handsome fifty-something landlord was always watching out for her.

“Yes, but it’s business. I have a new job.”

“Ah. Well then, good luck.” He headed for his car in the driveway.

“Ciao, Marcus. See you tomorrow.”

When Gina turned back around, Wade’s intense-green eyes burned into hers. “Do you live with him?”

Gina blinked away her anger. Wade had no right to ask her personal questions. She wondered why it mattered, anyway. He had nothing but contempt for her. “No. I don’t live with him. I live in the guesthouse in the back.”

Wade’s mouth twitched. “How convenient.” He put his hand to her lower back and ushered her inside his car. She took her seat and adjusted the seatbelt as Wade started the ignition. He took one last look at the house and gunned the engine. They drove in silence for a while, until he asked, “Is that guy married?”

Gina leaned her head back against the seat and smiled inwardly. Marcus and Delia had the kind of marriage her parent’s had had. That kind of love and commitment was rare and it saddened Gina to think that her parents’ love had been cut short by a freakish accident. “Yes, happily.”

“He’s your landlord?”

“My landlord and a very dear friend.”

Wade shot her another glance, this time with a dubious look in his eyes. Gina let the subject drop and stared out the window, her eyes focused on the mountain on one side of the road rather than the blue ocean waters on the other. As Wade drove down Pacific Coast Highway, the wind blew her long hair out of its tight knot.

Ten minutes later and completely wind-blown, Gina was pinning her hair back up, noting Wade’s eyes on her as he killed the engine. She marveled at the impressive two-story house that sat on a strip of beach in the Malibu Colony. Wade hopped out of the car and came around to open her door. She stood and looked around for a moment, her gaze traveling past the house to the surging surf and then beyond to the stunning western horizon. “All of this is yours?”

Wade grabbed her briefcase from the car then nodded, staring directly into her eyes. “It’s mine.” She shivered from the cold assessing look he cast her; a look that said, “It could have been yours, too.”

Or maybe Gina had imagined that. It had been nine long years and surely Wade hadn’t brooded over her too long. Handsome and successful, Wade wouldn’t have to look far for female companionship. He had all the markings of a man used to getting his way with women and with life in general.

Gina followed Wade through the front door and into a large vestibule. From there it seemed that she could almost touch the pounding surf as the shore came into view with brilliant

clarity through enormous windows. "Take a look around," he said without ceremony. "I'm going up to take a quick shower."

Gina watched him toss both of their briefcases down onto a soft moss-green L-shaped sofa before disappearing up a winding staircase. She felt safest standing there waiting in the safety of the living room, but curiosity forced her to walk through the French doors that led onto a sweeping veranda overlooking the ocean. Wade seemed to have all things necessary for the life of a single man; a hot tub surrounded by a cocktail bar sat in one corner of the deck while a fire pit took up the other corner. In the middle of the deck, patio tables and chairs were arranged to enjoy the view of waves crashing into the sand.

Gina walked to the wooden railing and closed her eyes. Taking a deep breath she tried to calm her jittery nerves, but the combination of deep waters and Wade was too much for her.

Wade approached with two glasses of white wine. He handed her one. "To unwind."

Gina accepted the glass, grateful for the fortitude, and both of them stood leaning on the railing, gazing out. "It looks peaceful here."

Wade sipped his wine. "Looks can be deceiving."

That's exactly what Gina thought, but she was thinking of the deceptive calm of the uncompromising sea. She was certain Wade meant something altogether different.

Rather than stare at the ocean, she shifted slightly so that she could consider Wade Beaumont. His dark hair, still damp from

the shower, was slicked back and tiny drops of water glistened on his neck. Late afternoon sunlight revealed a gleam in his eyes and highlighted high cheekbones leading to a beautiful mouth and the masculine line of his jaw. He had changed into a pair of tight-fitting jeans and a black polo shirt. Tan and trim with broad shoulders, his shirt couldn't hide the strength of his powerfully built chest.

Now, as in the past, Gina had trouble keeping her eyes off of Wade. He affected her like no other man ever had. Her heart pumped twice as hard when he looked at her and an unwelcome tremble stirred her body when he came near. In those clothes, he reminded her of the man she'd once known during a time in her life when she could enjoy carefree days and hot summer nights.

Gina took small sips of her wine. She wasn't much of a drinker and needed to remain in control. She couldn't afford any more slipups.

"Only one more sip," she said, "or my head won't be clear for business." Gina set the glass down on the table. Turning to Wade, she hoped that he would take the hint and lead her back inside so that they could begin their work together. She needed to prove herself on this job and, more importantly, she needed to keep her mind on business and not the glowing attributes of her new boss.

Wade didn't move from his stance by the railing. He shook his head, his eyes fixed on hers. "Sorry, Gina," he said, looking anything but sorry. "I can't work with you."

I can't work with you.

Gina blinked as Wade's words sunk in. A rapid shot of dread coursed through her system. She'd begun to think of this job as a means to an end. And she'd resigned herself to working with Wade, whether she liked it or not. Now, just like that, he dropped a bomb on her plans. What kind of game was he playing? She couldn't control the anger in her voice, "I thought you hired me today?"

Wade slammed his glass down on the top rail and turned the full force of his words on her. "Yes, I hired you. Did you think I'd let you walk out of my office without an explanation? Did you think I'd let you go again? You ran away from me nine years ago and I need to know why."

Two

Shocked, Gina stared into Wade's stormy eyes. When she finally spoke, it was softly and devoid of emotion. "We were young."

She had died that night. Leaving Wade had destroyed her and it had been a long hard road getting her life back. She didn't want to dwell on the past or how her friend Sarah had duped her into leaving Wade. The truth had come out a few years later, and she'd long since forgiven Sarah. But the fact remained: Gina had left Wade in El Paso after one secret, glorious night with him.

"Not that young, Gina. You'd graduated from college. We weren't exactly kids."

"My parents died that year. I didn't know what to do or how... or how I would survive."

“My father solved that problem for you, didn’t he? He paid you off. And you took the money and ran, for all you were worth.”

Yes, Gina had taken Blake Beaumont’s money. It had given her a way out of a very serious dilemma. She’d fallen in love with Wade and the night she’d given him her virginity had been wonderful. She’d hoped for a future with Wade, but thinking back on it now, she wondered if she’d been too clouded by grief to see the truth. Later that night all of her hopes had come crashing down around her.

Sarah was pregnant and she’d named Wade as the father.

Gina went to bed that night, tears falling uncontrollably and her heart aching at how she’d been betrayed by the one man who had given her a measure of comfort and happiness after the death of her parents.

Blake Beaumont’s offer had come at exactly the right moment. She’d wanted to hurt Wade for his calculated cruelty. She’d wanted to make him pay for his betrayal. She’d hated him.

She remembered so vividly standing there, face to face with the older man who had abandoned his two sons in favor of building his company. Triple B had been Blake’s passion, not the two sweet young boys he’d pawned off on his sister and her husband to raise.

Blake Beaumont slid an envelope her way. “Take the money and this airline ticket and leave El Paso. You’re a distraction Wade can’t afford right now. I sacrificed his childhood so that he would one day stand beside me and run the company and that

time has almost come. Sam, Wade and I, we'll build an enormous empire together. There's no room in it for you, dear."

Gina's first instinct was to rip the check up and toss it into Blake Beaumont's smug face. The selfish man wanted his son's full attention. He wanted to dictate his life—a life that didn't include love. Blake Beaumont had made it clear that he fully intended for Wade to immerse himself in Triple B. The only relationship he wanted for Wade was one of dedicated service to the company.

If her heart hadn't been broken, Gina would have laughed at the irony. Blake wanted her out of the picture but how would he feel knowing that it was really Sarah and her unborn child that would disrupt his plans? Gina had wished she could have stayed around long enough to see the look on Blake Beaumont's face when he realized his troubles were just beginning.

Gina accepted the check and ticket out of town. She knew Blake was too ruthless not to tell Wade about the bribe. And that's what she'd counted on.

Wade had a baby on the way with Sarah and that had been all that mattered. Sarah hadn't known about Gina's feelings for Wade and she'd kept it that way. By accepting his father's bribe, Gina guaranteed that Wade would stay in El Paso with his family. She'd hoped that he would realize his responsibilities to Sarah, too.

Gina lost contact with Sarah then, deciding to deal with her pain in her own way. She moved to Los Angeles and dug her

heels in, determined to make a good life for herself. It wasn't until a few years later that Sarah had come looking for Gina with the whole truth.

“Answer me, Gina. Why did you run away?”

“I had good reason, Wade. It's not important now. But you have to believe that leaving El Paso when I did broke my heart.”

“It broke your heart?” he said, coming to stand right in front of her, his anger almost tangible. “Funny, but I remember it differently. I remember you letting me strip you naked and take you in my uncle's barn. I remember every little moan, every whimper, every time you cried out my name. I never once heard you say your heart was broken and that you were leaving town the next day.”

Tears welled in Gina's eyes and her body trembled with unspoken grief. She had loved Wade then and had felt the cold slap of his betrayal. She shed tears all the way to Los Angeles, but had made up her mind not to look back.

“Wade, when I came to see you that night I didn't know I would be leaving so soon. I...wanted you.”

Wade let out a derisive laugh. “And Gina always gets what she wants, right?”

Gina hadn't gotten what she wanted. She'd lost her best friend that summer and the man she'd loved.

Wade had been so sweet, so caring. Once he kissed her and touched her skin, she'd reacted with primal, desperate need. She'd wanted Wade, thought maybe they could have a future

together. His every touch and caress excited her, warmed her, told her that she'd been smart to wait to give up her virginity to the right man. They'd spoken of love and the future in vague terms, the relationship too new to know for sure. But Gina fully believed that Wade Beaumont had been the right man for her.

"It wasn't like that," she said in a calm voice, one that she almost didn't recognize.

But Wade didn't really want her explanation. He wanted to lash out. "You were a virgin, Gina. Don't think that didn't weigh on me. I wasn't a boy. I was a twenty-one-year-old man. I didn't know if I'd hurt you physically or emotionally. I didn't know what to think. I was half out of my mind when I learned that you had left El Paso the next day, catching the soonest flight out of town.

"I made the mistake of telling dear old Dad that I'd found the right girl for me during a phone conversation days earlier. Even before we made love, I knew I wanted you in my life. Next thing I know my father makes a rare visit to El Paso. He couldn't wait to tell me that you'd taken a hefty bribe from him. The man was so damn cocky. He didn't realize that I'd hate him for his part in it. He thought I'd appreciate knowing that I'd been wrong about you. But it didn't matter anymore. I pretty much wrote you off as the biggest mistake of my life."

His harsh words cut like a knife. He didn't know the agony she had gone through that night, her emotions running hot and cold, thrilled to have finally given herself to him only to find out later that he had been deceitful. She managed to bolster her courage

and hoist her chin. “If that’s the case, why did you bother seeing me today? Why did you *hire* me?”

“Because Sam asked me to. I did it as a favor to him, Gina. And now we’re stuck with each other.”

She gasped silently from the immediate shock to her system. She’d seen Sam a few months ago, crossing paths with him at the airport, his new family in tow. They’d exchanged pleasantries and when he’d found out that she was living in Los Angeles he’d offered her a job if she ever needed one.

With her pride deeply injured, Gina shot back. “Consider yourself, unstuck. I won’t ask you to work with the *biggest mistake of your life.*”

Gina turned her back on Wade and walked toward the French doors. She wanted out, away from Wade for good. But just as she stepped inside the house, Wade grabbed her from behind, his hands holding her gently just under her breasts, the zipper of his jeans grinding into her derriere. She felt the pins being pulled from her hair, freeing the tresses from their knotted prison. Wade wove his hand in her hair and brought his lips to her throat, his voice a gruff whisper. “Don’t run away again.”

Gina’s traitorous body reacted to Wade and, angry as she was, she couldn’t deny the overwhelming heat pulsing through her. “You don’t want me here.”

“That may be true.” And then he added softly, “But I need you.”

Gina slammed her eyes shut. She felt herself softening to

Wade and when she turned in his arms to face him, she witnessed the depth of his sincerity. “You need me?”

She glanced at his mouth just as his lips came down onto hers. He cupped her face and deepened the kiss, slanting his mouth over hers again and again. Gina reacted with a little whimper, urging her body closer. His heat was a fire that burned her. And when she sighed, he took the opportunity to drive his tongue into her mouth, mating them together. Soon, Gina’s body swayed in rhythm and Wade wrapped his hands around her waist, his fingers pressing into the curve of her buttocks, drawing her closer.

She felt his erection, the hot pulsing need rubbing into her. Heart pounding out of control, she felt dizzy and wanted Wade with undeniable urgency.

“Yoo-hoo, Wa-ade? Are you home? I brought you chili, honey. Just the way you like it, hot and spicy,” the low throaty rasp of a woman’s voice startled Gina. She pulled away from Wade in time to see a young redhead coming up the deck steps from the beach. In a flowery bikini covered only by a hip-riding sarong, the woman held a hot bowl in her potholder-clad hands. She stopped up short when she reached the deck, finding Wade and Gina together. “Oh, sorry, Wade. I guess I had the wrong night. I thought we were on for the hot tub. My mistake,” she said casually. “I’ll just leave this here for you.” She set the chili on the deck table.

“Shoot, Veronica. Sorry. I forgot.” He winked at her and

smiled. "I'm working tonight."

"I can see that," she said, taking a quick glance at Gina, before backing down the stairs. "Don't work too hard, honey." Gina heard her chuckle as she disappeared onto the beach.

Gina stared at Wade and abruptly everything became clear. For a moment she thought that she was back in El Paso with the young, sweet man she had given herself to unconditionally. Suddenly, she felt foolish. And stupid for thinking that nothing had changed, when, actually, everything had.

She tried to brush past him to get away, but he was like a block of granite, too strong to move without his willing surrender. He reached for her arms and held her without budging. When she glared into his eyes, he shrugged and said calmly, "She's a friend."

Gina wasn't a fool. She doubted Wade had female "friends" who came over just for a quick meal and a splash in the hot tub. She shook her head adamantly. "I think not. I'd better go. Will you drive me home or shall I take a taxi?"

"Neither. We have work to do. When I said I needed you, I meant it. I need a personal assistant for this project and we have to catch you up on the details."

"You mean you'd give up your hot-tub date?" Her voice was deliberately rich with sarcasm.

"I just did, didn't I?" Wade shot back.

Gina bristled. "Yes, you did. You dismissed her quite easily. But what about what just happened between us? Can you dismiss

that just as easily?" His kiss had stole Gina's breath, but she had regained normal breathing.

Wade pursed his lips. He stared at hers, well-ripened and swollen from his powerful assault. "I never could dismiss you, Gina. You're hardly the kind of woman a man can forget."

"That does not answer my question."

"Listen, maybe I was out of line a minute ago. But I'm not kidding when I say I need you. As my assistant. We're setting sail first thing tomorrow so—"

Gina snapped her head up. "Setting sail? For where?"

"For Catalina island. You should have been briefed during the first interview with Helen in Personnel. It was a stipulation of the job."

Wade seemed full of surprises. First he stunned her with that incredible kiss and now this unexpected announcement of an island trip. "I wasn't informed about a trip."

"You knew about the latest project the company plans to bid on. It could be the biggest contract in Triple B's history and I intend to get it. It's right there in the file I gave you to review."

"Yes, but I didn't think—"

"It's the reason for the big bonus, Gina," he interrupted to clarify.

"But that's what I don't understand. That's a great deal of money for a trip to Catalina. It's only a few hours away. Surely, one day isn't worth such a large sum of money."

"One day? Gina, we'll be on that island for a minimum of one

week and I guarantee you'll be working long hours."

Gina slumped her shoulders. "One week?"

He nodded. "Seven days, including the weekend. So are you in or am I going it alone tomorrow?"

Gina slammed her eyes shut. She hated her own cowardice. She hadn't been on the water in any capacity since the boat accident that claimed her parents' lives. She'd dealt with the guilt at being the sole survivor, but she hadn't been forced to face her fear—until now. And she was ready. She'd been praying to find a way to conquer her anxiety and now she had the opportunity. If she didn't face her fears, she'd not only lose the revenue to rebuild her future, she'd lose part of herself all over again.

Gina made a split-second decision. She needed this job for more than one reason. But she would accept the position under one condition, and one condition only. "I'm in. Under one condition."

Wade narrowed his eyes. "I don't usually—"

"We keep it strictly business." Gina had allowed personal feelings to get the better of her in business once before and that had landed her with a pile of bills, slimy pawnshop receipts and creditors pounding on her door. She couldn't let that happen again to her pocketbook or her heart. "Agreed?"

Wade's lips thinned.

She stood her ground and kept her focus on his unflinching face.

Finally Wade nodded. "I won't do anything you don't want me

to do. Now, let's go over those files. I don't want to get you home late. We'll be setting sail at eight sharp."

Gina drew in a deep breath wondering how she would fare spending her days and *nights* with the only man who could anger her, confuse her and make her ache desperately for his touch.

I won't do anything you don't want me to do.

Great, she thought ruefully. She'd just realized that Wade hadn't agreed to her terms at all, but instead, issued her a challenge.

She felt herself slowly sinking and she had to paddle fast to keep from going under. Which was saying something for a woman who had a dire fear of water.

Three

The next morning, Wade watched Gina make her way down the ramp that led to his docking slip at Marina del Rey. He'd told her to dress comfortably for the trip over to the island but as he watched her descend the steps he was almost sorry he'd given her that instruction. Her flowery sundress hugged her body perfectly and the tight white jacket she wore only accentuated her full breasts and slender waistline. July breezes lifted the hem enough to show her shapely legs as she strolled toward him. She'd pinned her hair in that knot again, but the breezy weather wouldn't allow it and those chestnut tresses fanned out in tempting disarray. The vision she created of simple elegance and unquestionable beauty turned heads at the marina. Wade winced as he caught men stop what they were doing on their boats to watch her walk by.

Wade muttered a curse and told himself this was a business trip where he needed to keep his focus. He'd never let a woman get in the way of what was important to the company. Yet, when Gina approached his yacht he had a hard time remembering that. He peered up from the stern of the boat to greet her. "Morning," he said, none too pleasantly.

"Good morning," she said, but her eyes weren't on him, or his yacht. They focused off in the distance, to the ocean that lay beyond the calm marina.

"You're right on time."

She took her eyes off the ocean long enough to answer, "Thanks to the driver you sent to pick me up." She bit down on her lip and stood there looking quite businesslike, her chin at an unapproachable tilt and her stance slightly rigid. But that dress... that dress could make a man forget his own name.

"Come aboard," he said, putting a hand out to help her.

She scanned the length of the boat and drew a deep breath as if steadying her nerves.

"You haven't changed your mind, have you?" he asked.

She gazed once more at the ocean beyond the marina and shook her head, but her soft tentative answer left room for doubt. "No."

Wade gestured with his outstretched hand. "Come on, Gina. We have to set sail soon."

From the minute he'd seen it, Wade had known he had to own this fifty-two-foot Jeanneau sloop. It hadn't mattered that he

didn't know how to sail. He'd made it a hobby and a far-reaching goal to master the craft when he'd first arrived in California. And he'd never been sorry.

Gina's gaze scanned the deck and the steps leading to the quarters below. "I don't see the crew? Are they late?"

"You're looking at the crew."

Gina's dark almond-shaped eyes opened wide. "You?"

"Sam's the pilot in the family and I'm the sailor."

He stepped from the boat onto the ramp and grabbed the suitcase from her hand. "Come aboard and I'll show you around."

After a moment's hesitation, Gina accepted his help and he guided her down onto his boat, releasing her the moment her feet hit the deck.

"I had no idea this was how we would arrive in Catalina."

Wade had purposely left that detail out. He didn't know how she would've reacted to his sailing them across to the island. Some people got jittery when they realized only one man had full charge of the boat. But that was what appealed to him most about sailing—the solitude and the challenge of being at the helm. And since he'd had a hard enough time convincing Gina to take the job last night, he'd thought it best to leave their travel arrangements out of the conversation.

His old man once told him that timing was everything. Wade believed him. He knew that after that kiss last night and then the untimely appearance from Veronica, he was on shaky enough ground with Gina. She'd been ready to walk out of his life again.

But that kiss had him tied up in knots all night long. Gina had melted in his arms. That much hadn't changed. She'd tasted like wine, her lips soft and full and ripe. Her body molded to his, they fit each other like two puzzle pieces. He couldn't hide his reaction to her any more than she could to him. Wade had lost himself in that kiss and he realized that he couldn't let her go until they'd cleared up all of their unfinished business. Then and only then, would he say farewell to Gina for good.

"Can't say that I ever imagined I'd get you on Total Command."

Gina arched her brow. "Excuse me?"

"*Total Command*. The name of the boat. And the only way I operate these days.

Gina cast him a disapproving look.

"Listen, I'll get us both to the island safe and sound. There's no need to worry." Wade picked up her travel bag and stepped down into the living quarters of the boat first and reached for her hand. She advanced carefully down the steps. But when the boat rocked slightly, she lurched forward. Wade grabbed her and their eyes met as their bodies collided. Intense heat sizzled between them. She was soft where she needed to be soft, and firm in all the right places. Wade held her for only a second before stepping aside.

He showed her the open space that would serve as a living room and then they walked through the galley where he had fixed them a mid-morning snack of fresh fruit, cheese and coffee.

Next he explained about the VHF radio and the SSB,

the Single Sideband system used for a wider perimeter of communication. He'd even explained to her how she should call for help in case of an emergency. "But don't worry about that. The weather is clear, the wind perfect, I'm in good health and we'll be in Catalina before lunchtime."

Gina nodded, but he didn't miss her wide-eyed expression when he described to her how she could reach the coast guard if necessary.

"And what's in there?" she asked gesturing toward a doorway.

"The master bedroom and bath. There's two more bedrooms on the opposite end of the boat."

"You don't expect, uh, you don't expect me to sleep down here."

Wade wouldn't get a lick of work done if she did. "That's not in your job description. You'll have a room in the finest inn on the island."

"And you?" she asked. "Where will you be?"

"Right here. I stay on the boat when we moor. I don't get as much time as I'd like on the boat. So I've set up an office in one of the spare bedrooms."

He guided her back to the stairs, catching a whiff of her perfume, some exotic fragrance that reminded him of sultry tropical nights. As she climbed up the steps to the top deck he admired the wiggle of her bottom and those long tanned legs as he followed her up.

"Ready?" he asked.

She drew another deep breath into her lungs then put on dark sunglasses. She looked mysterious in them, a superstar trying to conceal her identity. And in a way Gina was a mystery to him. He didn't know her mind, how it worked, what made her tick. He'd known her body and, hopefully, would try his best to know it again, but he would never believe he knew what she was thinking. He refused to make that mistake again.

Wade prepared the yacht for their departure, untying the ropes and setting the sails. Soon they were moving through the marina, past the rocks that harbored the bay, picking up wind that would take them into the Pacific Ocean.

Gina shook with fear the moment the boat began its journey out of the calm marina waters. She took a seat in the cockpit area as salty sea spray lightly drizzled her. With slight desperation she tried to block out images of the last time she'd been on the water, the last time she'd seen her parents alive.

She prayed for enough courage to sustain her through this trip and placed her faith in Wade and his sailing abilities. She watched him move along the sheets and sails, making adjustments and setting the course.

In faded blue jeans and a white tank, Wade might have looked like a typical sailor except his muscles strained harder, his body held more steadfastly, the concentration on his face appeared deeper than on any man she had ever known. Studying his fluid movements along the rigging, Gina could only admire him.

His kiss last night had been *something*.

But it had meant nothing to him.

I need you.

Yes, she understood that he needed her as his personal assistant, a right-hand man and a secretary all rolled up in one. He didn't need her in any other capacity. Not in the way she had needed him nine years ago.

Wade took his place behind the wheel and they sailed in silence for a short time. The boat rocked and waves smashed up against the hull as they sailed along. Gina shuddered, unable to suppress the trembling of her body.

Wade turned at that very instant, catching her in a moment of fear. Their eyes held for a moment before he angled around again and Gina hugged her middle, tamping down the tremors that passed through her.

A few minutes later, Wade left the wheel and handed her a life jacket. "Put this on. You'll feel better."

Gina didn't bother to protest. He was right. But though wearing a life vest might help with her fear, it wouldn't erase the memories she had locked away that were surfacing. She put her arms through the armholes and closed the jacket taut.

Wade helped her fasten the snaps and tied it for her. And when she thought he would return to the wheel, he surprised her by taking a seat by her side. "Feeling seasick?"

She shook her head. Her queasiness had nothing to do with the motion of the sea. "No."

"You're trembling and pale, Gina."

“I’m not—”

“You are.”

“No, I meant to say, I’m not seasick, but this is the first time I’ve been on the water since...the accident.”

Wade’s dark brows rose. He appeared genuinely surprised.

“I realize that this is the ocean and the accident happened on a lake, but—”

“You haven’t been on the water since?” he asked.

Gina closed her eyes. Memories flooded in of the ski boat, the laughter, her mother’s smiling face and then...the collision. Gina went flying into the water, out of danger. Her parents hadn’t been so lucky.

She shook her head and stared at the hands she’d placed in her lap. “No. I haven’t had the courage. It’s been almost ten years.”

“So, why now?” Wade asked softly.

But she sensed he was really asking her, “Why me?” Why would she take her first boat trip with him? She’d been desperate for work she’d wanted to tell him. She needed the money and was determined to start her business again, without anyone’s help this time. She’d been betrayed, but not destroyed. She wouldn’t give up, and if that meant facing her fears, then so be it. She peered into a face filled with concern, an expression reminiscent of the sweet, caring Wade Beaumont she’d once known. “It’s time, Wade. That’s all.”

Wade leaned back in the seat and put his arm around her. “That’s not all. Tell me about the accident.”

“I—I don’t talk about it.” She’d never really spoken about that day except with a support group that had really helped and understood what she’d been through. Losing both parents had been devastating enough, but to be the sole survivor of the crash that had taken four lives had been equally difficult. The result was major survivor guilt.

“Maybe you should. Maybe it’ll help you overcome your fear of water.”

She shook her head and gazed out upon the open sea. “I doubt that.”

Wade took her hands in his and the look on his face, serious but earnest, urged her on. “Try, Gina. We’re going to spend a week on an island surrounded by water. There’ll be times we’ll have to come back to the boat.” He cast her a slight hint of a smile. “I can’t have you fainting on me.”

Gina peered into his eyes. They were warm with concern. But she wondered if that look was about keeping his personal assistant calm or if it was truly for her benefit.

He squeezed her hands gently, coaxing the words that she hadn’t spoken to anyone but her support group. “It was Memorial Day weekend,” she began, “and we never once thought to worry about drunk drivers on the water...”

Emotions rolled in the pit of Gina’s stomach. She’d purged herself of her burden, sharing the events of that horrible day with Wade. He’d listened to her as she tried to communicate without tears, but at times her voice broke and she choked up. Wade sat

there with a soothing arm around her shoulders, listening. And when the last words were out of her mouth, he thanked her for telling him.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked.

Gina nodded feeling a small sense of relief. “A little.”

He stood and peered down at her. “You need to eat something.”

“No,” she said, placing a hand to her stomach. “No, I couldn’t.”

“If you don’t want to eat, there’s coffee down below.” He glanced at the blue skies overhead then looked into her eyes as if deciding what was best for her. Then he took hold of her hand, guiding her up. “You look tired, Gina. Take a little rest. Get away from the water for a little while.”

He spoke softly and his tone comforted. She thought she could fall for him again—if she hadn’t sworn off men completely and if he would always look at her like he was now, without contempt and regret in his eyes. “Maybe I will go down below.”

He walked her to the steps and turned, tugging her close. She nearly bumped into his chest when the boat swayed. He steadied her with both hands on her shoulders then, with a slant of his head, brought his lips to hers. The kiss was brief and chaste and when it was over she gazed deeply into his eyes and smiled.

Wade looked off toward the horizon a moment then returned his focus to her face with narrowed eyes. His soft expression turned hard once again.

“Don’t think I gained any satisfaction seeing fear in your eyes or hearing pain in your voice, Gina. I’m not that big a bast—”

Gina pressed her fingers to his mouth. “I know, Wade. You’re not—”

He pulled her fingers from his lips. “I am. Make no mistake. But I draw the line at preying on another’s weakness. Take that as fair warning.”

Gina shuddered at Wade’s harsh tone. He’d let her glimpse the man he’d once been, but only for a moment. The young man she’d fallen in love with was gone, she feared, forever. And she’d had everything to do with his demise. “Consider me fairly warned.” She turned to walk down the stairs, feeling Wade’s penetrating gaze following her every step of the way.

Wade guided the boat toward the mooring can in Avalon harbor on Catalina island and set about tying the lines to secure the boat from bow to stern. The trip had been uneventful, the weather calm, the sailing smooth. But his passenger had yet to return to the deck.

With the dinghy ready to take them ashore, Wade made his way to the cabin below. The galley was empty, the food he’d set out was untouched and there was no sign that Gina had even been there.

With a curious brow raised he walked to his master bedroom and bath, finding that room empty as well. He’d have guessed as much and smiled to himself, but his smile faded quickly when he finally found Gina, sprawled out on the bed in the guestroom.

“Gina,” he said quietly.

When she didn't rouse, he entered the room and gazed down at her, lying across the bed, her hair in a tangle, the dark tresses half covering her beautiful face. The dress she wore rode up her thigh, the material exposing thoroughly tanned, shapely legs. She'd kicked off her shoes and made herself comfortable on the dark-russet bedspread. She looked peaceful and more tempting than a woman had a right to look. Hell, even her polished scarlet-red toenails turned him on.

Her eyes opened slowly, as though she'd sensed him watching her. With a sleep-hazy sigh, she stretched her limbs, reminding him of a cat uncurling after a long sleep.

“Mmmm...Wade,” she purred and continued that long slow sensual stretch while keeping those lazy half-lidded eyes on him.

God, she was sexy.

But deceitful, too, he reminded himself. He could scarcely believe he'd hired her. She was his employee now and one he wasn't sure he could trust. But his brother Sam had vouched unconditionally for her. “Give her a chance, Wade,” he'd said. And Wade had because of Sam's request. But the truth was that if she'd walked into his office without the benefit of his brother's recommendation, he would have hired her anyway. They had unfinished business. Period.

“I'd love to join you, Gina,” he said softly, meaning every word, “but we've got a full day ahead of us.”

“Oh!”

Gina bounced up from the bed, realizing where she was and with whom. Wade enjoyed every second of that bounce and struggled to keep his lust from becoming visible. Wouldn't take much to throw all rational thought out the porthole and spread his body over hers.

"Sorry, Wade." She untangled the hair that had fallen into her face. "I guess I fell asleep. The rocking of the boat..."

She bent to put her shoes on and treated him to a luscious view. From his position, the dress barely contained her full breasts when she leaned over.

"This is embarrassing," she said. "I've never fallen asleep on the job."

"I won't hold it against you. Anytime you want to slip into one of my beds, feel free."

Gina rose then and looked into his eyes. "Too bad we have a full day ahead of us," she bantered back, repeating his words.

Wade hid his amusement.

"Are we on the island?" she asked.

Wade shook his head. "Not yet. There's a little matter of a dinghy ride to the dock."

The sleep-induced rosy color drained from Gina's cheeks. "How far?"

"Not far," he said. "We'll be ashore in less than five minutes."

Gina groaned and Wade almost felt sorry for her.

"That's five minutes too long."

"Gina, you're gonna have to trust me. I'll keep you safe."

She angled her chin and probed him with those dark sensual eyes. “Trust goes both ways, Wade. Do you trust me?”

Wade held her gaze for a moment then refused her an answer and walked out the door.

Trusting Gina had never been an option.

Four

Gina held her breath through most of the dinghy ride to the mainland. Wade glanced at her from time to time, but his primary focus was on getting the small boat to shore and mooring at the dock. Once there, he secured the dinghy and stepped off the boat with her suitcase, then reached for her hand. “You okay?”

Gina nodded. “I will be as soon as my legs stop trembling.”

Wade glanced down and raised a brow. “They look fine to me,” he said, with a gleam in his eyes. “Come on, let’s get you settled into your room.”

Gina got control of her legs once she’d reached solid ground. The sun shined in the clear-blue sky and children’s laughter rang out from the nearby beach. Catalina island was a nest for summer travelers wishing to get away from the daily grind of the big city. The mainland, visible on a clear day, was just twenty-two miles away. As they walked along the sidewalk, Spanish influences surrounded them, marking some of the history of the island. She noted a lovely tiled fountain bubbling up with a cool spray in the middle of a circular paved drive. Wade stopped for a minute in front of the fountain.

“Santa Catalina was originally named after Saint Catherine, the patron saint of spinsters,” he said. “Lucky for my company, the island is now a resort for lovers.”

“So the developer wants the resort to be known as an elite honeymoon destination?” she asked.

Wade nodded. “Can’t think of a better place locally. Most of the hotels have no phones and televisions in the rooms. People get real creative to entertain themselves. This whole island spells romance.”

Gina nodded as they walked past a row of swaying palms, the gentle sea breeze blowing by, the scent of sand and surf filling her nostrils. She supposed for most people that potent scent meant fun and sun and time away from the hassles of everyday life, but a resort surrounded by water only reminded her of things she’d rather forget.

Within a minute they were at the quaint town of Avalon and Gina looked down a long avenue, which she deemed to be the main street of town. The shops and cafés faced the water and swimsuit-clad vacationers swarmed them as others biked their way down the street. The only other vehicles on the busy thoroughfare were canopied golf carts. Wade continued to lead the way but soon stopped again, this time at a hotel. Villa Portofino. “Here we are,” he said. She looked up to see a hotel with all the trademarks of Italy.

Gina nodded. “Nice.”

“None better, unless you take a trip to Tuscany.”

Gina eyed him carefully, wondering why he'd picked such an expensive place for her to stay. This was just business and she would remind him of that again, if she had to. "So your hotel will have competition."

"Not at all. We plan to build a lavish honeymoon resort with pools, tennis courts and a golf course. The Portofino is a great little beachfront hotel. It won't give us any competition at all. This is where our employees stay when in town working on the project. You won't be disappointed."

Disappointment was the furthest thing from her mind when she entered the Bella Vista suite. True to its name, the suite's wraparound balcony had a grand view of the lush hillside as well as the Catalina harbor. A king-size bed in the center of the room faced a large built-in fireplace and a table for two adorned by a vase filled with tropical flowers. The bath was full-size and encased with fine Italian marble. The whole suite was larger than her tiny guesthouse in Hollywood.

Wade set her bag down and walked to the window to stare out at the harbor. He'd waved off the bellboy, insisting on bringing her up here himself. "It's a far cry from El Paso."

Gina sucked in her breath. What could she say to that? Wade had made something of himself, despite his father's meddling. He was his own man and he'd made the West Coast Triple B a success. Gina couldn't argue with that. "I liked El Paso, Wade. It was the best summer of my life."

He whipped around to stare into her eyes. "I thought so, too..."

once.” His eyes hardened on that last word.

Gina remembered her final week in El Paso. Sarah had been gone during that time, traveling from Dallas to Austin with her mother to interview for teaching positions. Mr. Buckley had been busy at work and Gina had been left pretty much on her own.

After their work was done on their uncle’s ranch, Gina would meet Wade and Sam for ice cream or a movie or just to talk. But before long, it was only Wade coming around. They’d gotten close that last week, closer than she might have imagined, spending all of their time together. And they’d fallen in love over hot-fudge sundaes, hot summer walks and hot sizzling kisses.

No one had really known that their friendship had escalated. It hadn’t been a secret, but they hadn’t made any announcements either. Certainly Sarah hadn’t known. Gina hadn’t the time to confide in her and when she’d returned from those interviews, Sarah had been edgy, anxious and unhappy, until she finally revealed her pregnancy to Gina and her parents.

Gina bit back her need to tell Wade the entire truth about Sarah. But destroying his friendship with Sarah wouldn’t make up for what Gina had done. She hadn’t trusted Wade and she *had* taken his father’s money and left El Paso. Her reasons wouldn’t matter to him, because Wade was a man who expected total loyalty. She had loved him back then, very much. But he wasn’t the same man she’d fallen in love with. And she wasn’t the same woman. The years had taught her hard lessons.

“What now?” she asked.

Wade became all business again. “Now? We have a late lunch meeting with James Robinique from the Santa Catalina Island Company. It’ll take a few hours.” He glanced around the room. “Enjoy yourself. Because after that, we’ll be working our tails off.”

Gina nodded. At least now they would get down to business. She never minded hard work. “How should I dress?”

Wade toured her body with a possessive eye. “Robinique is a lusty Frenchman with an eye for beauty. It won’t matter if you wear a burlap sack, he’ll still want to get you into bed.”

Gina’s mouth gapped open as Wade strolled out the door. Had that been a warning? Or had Wade coaxed her into coming here for an entirely different reason? She knew how important this project was to him, but enticing an island dignitary wasn’t in her job description.

Gina couldn’t believe it of Wade.

But the thought niggled at her far too much.

She grabbed a down pillow and flung it at the door Wade had just closed. The pillow smacked almost silently before falling to the floor, but it was enough to satisfy Gina’s frustration.

“There, now I feel better,” she muttered, wishing she had a burlap sack in her wardrobe. Because if she had one, she would surely have worn it just to spite Wade Beaumont.

A little later, Gina unpacked her bag, making sure to hang all of her clothes up carefully. She’d only brought one suitcase, packing enough clothes for the week, but she could make her

wardrobe last two, if need be. She knew how to accessorize, how to mix and match and stretch out her clothes for maximum versatility. She prided herself on that. She loved design. She loved to create and one day, she vowed, her creativity would pay off.

A cooling breeze lifted her hair and she strolled to the wide French door Wade had opened, but instead of closing the door, she stepped outside. On a breath, she leaned against the balcony railing and gazed out at the ocean, tamping down shivers of fear, realizing that she'd crossed this ocean today with Wade by her side. She'd spent the better part of the trip below deck, but regardless of that, it was a first step to overcoming her fear.

Here she was on a small stretch of land, completely surrounded by water, working for Wade Beaumont. "Who would have guessed," she whispered into the breeze. She was living through the two scenarios she dreaded most. And the one man she hoped to never see again had orchestrated both.

Gina decided on taking a leisurely shower, luxuriating in the scented soaps, oils and body washes provided. Feeling rejuvenated, she sat down at the dressing table and brushed her long hair, deciding on another upswept do, this time leaving strands of hair down to frame her face. She used a little mascara on her eyes, highlighted the lids and put on a light shade of lipstick.

She decided on a conservative black pencil skirt and white-linen cuffed blouse to wear for the lunch meeting. Gazing in

the mirror, she nodded in approval. This was business and, despite Wade's cutting remark, she wanted to appear every bit the professional.

An hour later when Wade knocked on her door, she was more than ready. "I'm all set," she said, opening the door.

Holding a briefcase in one hand and wearing equally professional dark trousers and a white shirt, he had a no-nonsense appearance: tall, dark, imposing. *Handsome*.

He made a quick sweep of her attire and she bit back a comment about burlap as he glanced down at her black-heeled sandals. "We have some walking to do."

Gina lifted one leg and twirled her foot. "These are the most comfortable shoes I own."

Wade arched a brow, taking time to stare at her toes. "Tell me that once we're back and I might believe you. Let's go."

She grabbed her purse, locked up her suite and Wade guided her downstairs with a hand to her back. "We'll go over the details once again about the Santa Catalina Island Company," he said as they walked along the streets.

Gina had read much about it in the reports, but Wade insisted on going over all pertinent information, more to reaffirm his knowledge, she believed, than to clue her in. He would do all the talking. Gina was there to take notes and provide any assistance Wade needed.

Wade explained once again how important this lunch was. The island company had been granted more than forty-thousand

acres dedicated to conservation. Rarely did they agree to any building on the island. Anything proposed had to be in tune with the land and provide sanctuary for the wildlife and flora. The developer had sealed the deal, but Mr. Robinique needed to hear the plans directly from each contractor—whoever convinced him that the land would be best protected would gain the upper hand and have the best chance at winning the contract. Robinique's influence over the final proposal couldn't be discounted. Wade had three competitors, he reminded her, but only John Wheatley of Creekside Construction could truly compete with Triple B.

They climbed a hilly street to reach the snug Harbor Inn and, once inside, Mr. James Robinique rose from his table to greet them. He shook hands with Wade and then smiled at Gina.

“This is my assistant, Miss Grady,” Wade said.

Gina offered her hand and Robinique took it, clasping both of his over hers. “It's a pleasure,” he said, his blue eyes never wavering.

Gina smiled at the good-looking Frenchman, taken aback by how young he appeared. From Wade's accounting, she'd expected a more mature man. But James Robinique appeared no older than her. He clasped her hand a little longer than she deemed necessary and slowly removed it from his. When she took her seat, the two men also sat down.

Once the meals had been ordered and served, the two men enjoyed healthy portions of halibut sautéed in wine sauce and conversed while Gina nibbled on her chicken salad. Wade drank

beer on tap and Mr. Robinique sipped on pinot grigio. Gina opted for iced tea. She was on the clock and taking copious notes.

“Let me assure you that we have every intention of preserving the environment on the island. As you can see from the architectural layouts, there’s a bird sanctuary on the grounds, not one tree will be downed and we have enhanced the outer perimeters with ponds and streams that will add to the island’s beauty and invite the natural inhabitants.”

With the layouts spread across the table, Robinique looked over the designs, making mental notes, nodding his head as Wade continued to make his case.

Gina jotted down his comments and questions, something Wade had asked her to do. Wade was nothing if not thorough and he wanted no stone left unturned.

Gina had to admire Wade’s tenacity. He went after what he wanted without compromise. To hear him talk, you’d never guess that the resort—which would house seventy-five rooms, forty deluxe suites, six eloquent cottages, a horse-filled stable, three pools, tennis courts and a golf course—would disrupt the land in any way.

Yet, Mr. Robinique wasn’t a pushover. He didn’t appear completely convinced. He had specific, detailed concerns pertaining to the ninety acres in question. Wade admitted that he must do one more survey of the land before he could satisfy those questions.

Robinique agreed to meet with him later in the week,

suggesting that Wade make use of the nearby stables to go over the entire acreage.

When Wade nodded in agreement, Robinique glanced at Gina. She had stopped writing and he spoke directly to her with just a hint of a French accent. “What do you think of all this, Miss Grady?” With a wave of his hands, he gestured to the plans.

“I think Mr. Beaumont and the staff at Triple B have worked diligently to try to satisfy both the developer and your company.”

He kept his focus on her and smiled. “And I think Mr. Beaumont has a loyal employee.”

Gina lifted her lips.

Wade kept his gaze tightly fastened to Robinique.

“Tell me, Miss Grady, are you through now, taking all those notes?”

Gina glanced at Wade. He nodded and she slipped the notepad into the briefcase. “Yes, I think so.”

“Then your work is done for the day?”

“I’m not sure.” She looked at Wade.

“If you are satisfied with the presentation, then I would say that our work is done for now,” Wade offered. “But we will meet again later in the week.”

“Then, we are finished,” Robinique said, “unless you would care for coffee and dessert?”

Wade shook his head and looked at Gina. She too, shook her head. “No, thank you.”

When Robinique stood, Wade took his cue and the two men

shook hands. "I'll call you soon," Wade said, lifting his briefcase.

"I will expect your call," James Robinique replied, then turned to Gina. "Excuse me, Miss Grady" he began, his eyes a striking blue when focused solely on her, "but I cannot let you go without offering you our island hospitality. Would you care to join me for a drink later this evening?"

Gina felt Wade's eyes on her. He had a way of doing that, blatantly watching her with those intense-green eyes. But it was the charming blue eyes on a man with impeccable manners that had caught her off guard. Wade's words from earlier today flitted through her mind.

Lusty Frenchman.

Burlap sack.

Get you into bed.

James Robinique was certainly charming, but Gina wasn't interested in him. At one time in her life, she might have agreed to spend some time with the handsome man. Now all she wanted was to do a good job. She was here on business and she needed to keep her head in the game. She opened her mouth to answer, but Wade beat her to it.

"I plan to keep Gi-Miss Grady busy most of the night...*working.*" One side of Wade's mouth quirked up.

James Robinique blinked his eyes, then darted a glance her way before looking at Wade with a hint of envy. "I see. You are very dedicated then."

Wade nodded. "This project is important to my company."

Robinique gazed at Gina again, this time with more discerning eyes. “Yes, I can see that.”

Gina’s face flamed but, lucky for her, she’d always been able to hide her embarrassment under her olive complexion. Inside, she fumed. Wade had practically announced that they were lovers and all three of them knew it.

Nothing was further from the truth. Despite her need for job security, she couldn’t let Wade get away with this. “I’m sorry, Mr. Beaumont, but I must take some personal time today. I’ve suddenly developed a terrible headache.”

Blinding anger offered up the courage she needed to march out the front door of the restaurant and never look back.

* * *

Gina walked along the main streets of town until her feet ached, her anger ebbed and her heart had stopped racing like she’d just run a marathon. She peeked into shops but had no urge to stop. When tourists smiled at her she didn’t smile back. She felt trapped on this island. Trapped in a job she shouldn’t have taken—one she couldn’t afford to lose.

She’d been out for two hours, enough time to simmer her hot Irish-Italian temper. She headed back to the hotel, contemplating a quiet night with a good book. As soon as she entered her suite, she kicked off her shoes. One flipped up and back hitting the wall behind her, the other slid across the floor to meet with another pair of shoes—a pair of *man’s* shoes.

She looked up.

“Where the hell have you been?” Wade’s angry voice startled her. He glared at her, arms folded, his face as firm and set as his tone.

“What are you doing in here?” she asked, none too pleased to find her boss invading her private space. “How dare you show up in my room like this!”

“You’re on company time, Miss Grady. And this is a company suite.”

“Oh, no. No way, Wade. This is my room and while I’m on this island, you have no right entering it without my permission. You’re not paying me enough to...to—”

Wade stepped closer, until he was nearly in her face, his green eyes, holding hers, his voice menacing. “Sue me.”

Gina blinked. Anger she’d ebbled earlier rose up again with striking force. She turned her back on him, opened the front door and spoke with a quiet calm she didn’t know she possessed. “Get out.”

Wade strode to the door and, staring into her eyes, shoved it shut. “No one walks out on me, Gina. And no one dismisses me.”

“You’re so wrong. Maybe I can’t throw you out of here, but I’ve already dismissed you.” On shaky legs, she moved away from the door, away from him.

“What’s got you so riled up anyway?”

Gina twirled around. Was he serious? Didn’t he know how he had portrayed their relationship? “You deliberately let Robinique believe we were lovers, Wade. You staked your claim, though

nothing's further from the truth. But more than that, you had no right to make that decision for me."

"Sleeping with Robinique would compromise the company."

He *was* serious. He'd actually thought she would— Furious, Gina calmed herself and took a different approach. "Quite the contrary, Wade," she began with a slow easy smile, "if I slept with him, the company would only benefit."

Wade couldn't really argue with that, though it galled him just thinking about Gina with James Robinique. Visions of making love to Gina, her soft pliant body meshed with his as they laid down on a soft cushion of hay, were never far from his mind. He remembered her, every inch of her, all too well. That night in El Paso had been magical. Though not experienced, Gina had pleased and pleased him like no other woman had. "So, you're willing to take one for the team, so to speak?"

Her dark espresso eyes turned black as ink. She stood barefooted, hands on hips, looking at him with defiance. Only the king bed separated them and Wade's thoughts turned to it and how making love to her here would be on a soft mattress and silky sheets.

Gina's voice was deceptively calm, but the fury in her eyes gave her away. "I came here to work with you. Whether you believe me or not, I can be trusted. And if you'd given me the chance, you'd have seen me refuse Mr. Robinique's offer. I have no intention of sleeping with him or any other man. So no, I wouldn't have taken one for the team, Wade. Not like that. Now,

please, it's been a long day. If there's nothing else you need from me, I'd like you to leave."

Wade stood his ground. He'd never trust Gina again, but he felt great satisfaction knowing that she would have refused Robinique. Though she'd been wrong on one account. She would sleep with one man while on this island. "Sorry, sweetheart, but you're forgetting who's the boss. And there is something else I need from you. I wasn't lying to Robinique when I said we'd be working into the night."

Gina's ire seemed to vanish. "Oh?"

Wade headed for the door. "We have a dinner meeting in exactly two hours. Be ready when I pick you up."

Gina stood there with a confused look on her face, her eyes softening, her rigid body relaxing. He glanced down at her red toenails and had never wanted a woman more.

Wade whipped the door open and exited.

Before he told her what he really needed from her.

The dinner meeting, held at a small eatery on Avalon's main street boasting buffalo milk, ended after ten o'clock. Gina had eaten quickly and immediately returned to taking notes. Wade had set up this dinner with local shop owners and proprietors to gain their support and trust, to get to know them, to assure them that if Triple B won the bid, their workers would add to the economy and not cause any trouble. Gina learned from day one that Catalina island thrived on the tourist trade. It was essential that there be no unsavory incidents and no bad press on the

island. Wade was smart enough to know that, to understand their concerns.

When all was said and done, Wade escorted her outside and, as they headed toward her hotel suite, he asked. “How do you think that went?”

“By their own admission, not one of the other builders had approached them. Your assurances went a long way. I’d say you scored points.”

Wade nodded. “I want to be on friendly terms when we win the bid. Our crews are the best, but get a bunch of men working in a confined area for too long and that might spell trouble. They needed to know I’d do everything in my power to keep things running smoothly.”

“I think you convinced them.” Wade wasn’t just blowing smoke. Gina really believed he meant what he said. Nine years ago, she would never have believed that the roughriding rancher with the sweet nature would become such an astute businessman. She never pictured him in that role. Yet here he was, talking the talk, making the deals. Gina shook her head.

Wade caught the slight movement. “What?”

“Nothing, really. It’s nothing.”

Wade was silent for a while, then before they reached her hotel, he stopped. “I could use a drink. There’s a nightclub up the street known for their tropical drinks. Care to join me?”

Gina hesitated. A nightcap sounded wonderful. She’d had a tumultuous day. She was physically exhausted but the idea of

relaxing with a piña colada and some good music sounded great. “I bet the music’s real loud.”

“Probably,” Wade replied honestly.

Gina nibbled on her lower lip. “It’s probably crowded.”

“Without a doubt.”

“Am I on the clock?” she asked. Looking into Wade’s beautiful green eyes what she really wanted to know was if his request had been a demand of the job or a simple invitation.

Wade shook his head. “Not at all. I don’t like to drink alone, but if it’s not what you—”

“I could use a drink, too.”

“Great. Let’s go,” he said, with a pleased look on his face. They strolled up a slightly inclined street and, somewhere along the way, Wade twined his fingers with hers and they entered the nightclub hand in hand.

For Gina, it felt as natural as breathing.

Five

“I want to make love to you,” Wade whispered in her ear, his warm breath combined with those softly spoken words caused havoc to her nerves and brought tingles to her toes.

With her arms wrapped around his neck, their bodies brushing, swaying to the jazz band’s bluesy sensual ballad, Gina rested her head on his shoulder. After two piña coladas, her brain was fuzzy, but not fuzzy enough to disregard what was happening between them. She was fully aware of what Wade wanted. “It’s not in my job description,” she whispered back softly.

She felt Wade's smile. It was difficult not to feel the same arousing sensations, not to succumb to his body heat or the pressing evidence of that desire. Gina wanted him, too.

"I told you before, you're not on the clock, Gina."

Wade dropped his hands down lower on her back, his fingers splaying across her derriere. He made soft caressing circles as he drew her closer. "Remember how it was between us, Gina? It can be that way again."

She shouldn't allow him such liberties. The fact remained that he was still her boss. They had a job to do here on the island. But the sensations swept through her with blinding force. His touch heated her, his words enticed her and his hard body stirred her softer one. She raised her head from his shoulder to look into his eyes.

It was a mistake.

Wade's intense gaze blazed into hers, before his lips came down in a soul-searing kiss, right there on the crowded, smoky dance floor. They kissed. And kissed.

Gina's body ignited, but dire warnings fanned the flames quickly. She couldn't allow Wade in. Not again.

She shoved at his chest and pulled away from him, her body swamped with heat, defying her reasoning. "I didn't come here for this," she breathed out. "It's not a good idea."

Wade reacted immediately. "I can't think of a better one."

Rather than make a scene right there in the nightclub, Gina moved off the dance floor. She walked outside, letting the

cool sea breezes clear her head. Wade was beside her instantly. “You’re still a liar, Gina.”

Gina scoffed and began walking down the street. “Your bedside manner needs improving, Wade.”

Wade kept pace, his hand placed possessively on her back. “There’s not a damn thing wrong with my bedside manner. And you’ll find that out as soon as you stop lying to yourself and admit what you really want.”

Gina heaved a big sigh, her head in as much turmoil as her quaking body. “What I *want* is to go to bed. Alone.”

Wade curled a hand around her neck, bringing her face close, as he came around to block her from walking past him. She was forced to look into those smoldering green eyes.

They stood under the moonlit night sky with twinkling stars overhead, right outside the entrance of her hotel. “Sorry, sweetheart, but what you want is for me to crawl up inside your sheets, strip you naked and rock your world.”

Gina’s mouth opened. Then closed.

“It’s going to happen, Gina. Bank on it.”

He left her standing on the front steps of the hotel, captivated by the steamy image swirling around in her head, more angry than she ever remembered being and wishing that, more than anything, Wade Beaumont had been wrong.

Wade dressed in a pair of Wranglers, faded not by the manufacturer, but by hard work and long wear, a plaid shirt and his Stetson. He put on his boots and left *Total Command* to pick

up Gina this morning.

Although clothes didn't make the man, Wade was comfortable in these, the old standbys, the worn leather of his boots and the soft cotton of his shirt reminding him of his time at Uncle Lee's ranch in El Paso. He wasn't that young man anymore. Time, with all the hardships, heartaches and headaches, had a way of changing a man.

His heart had hardened. And he knew it. He was relentless when he wanted something. Maybe that much of his old man had rubbed off on him. Wade wanted two things. He wanted to win the bid on the Catalina project and he wanted Gina.

Neither one would escape him. He would see to that.

He knocked on her door at precisely 8:00 a.m.

When she didn't answer, he knocked again, harder.

"Are you looking for me?"

Wade whipped around in the hallway and caught Gina's unfettered expression. She hadn't recognized him, that much was obvious. And once she had that genuine look vanished.

"Oh," she said, standing there, her breaths coming quickly, with sweat on her forehead, dressed in killer shorts and a white spandex top. "Wade, I didn't—"

"Do you run?"

A quick smile curled her lips. "I try."

They stood silent for a moment, gazing at each other, but Wade couldn't miss Gina's probing eyes and those few rapid blinks as she took in his appearance, as if trying to figure out

which man he really was: the fast, hard businessman or the easy, kind cowboy she'd once known.

The confusion in her eyes bothered him, so he ignored her expression and swept his gaze instead to her long legs, and tanned smooth skin. More leg than she'd allowed him lately. And as his gaze traveled upward, he noted her breaths coming fast and the spandex top unable to confine the swell of her breasts and the damned enticing tips of her erect nipples.

Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She looked sweaty and hot and sexy enough to have for breakfast.

"I thought I had an hour before going to the stables," she said, opening the door to her suite and entering.

Wade followed her inside. "You do, but we need to eat something first. I ordered room service. Breakfast will be here soon."

In a single fluid move, Gina pulled the elastic band from her hair and chestnut strands flowed onto her shoulders, framing her face. "Let me guess, last night you didn't want to drink alone and today you don't want to eat alone."

Wade shrugged off her comment as he tossed his hat onto her bed. "Doesn't figure for me to eat alone when I have a beautiful assistant at my disposal."

"I may be at your disposal in business, Wade, but that's the extent of it."

Again, he ignored her. "You look *hot*."

Gina frowned. "I know. I'm hot and sweaty. I must look a

mess.” She ran her hand through her hair in an unconscious move that had Wade approaching her.

“Not a mess.” He strode the rest of the distance separating them, facing her toe to toe. “*Sexy as hell.*”

Gina blinked then captured his gaze as well as his meaning. She backed up a step, her tone filled with warning as she shook her head slightly. “Wade.”

Wade reached for her waist, encircling his arms around her and pulled her close. A combination of female and salty scents drifted up as she looked at him with hesitation in her eyes.

“Don’t fight it, honey.” Wade swooped his mouth down and took her in a long, slow, deliberate kiss that had her molding her body to his. A little moan escaped her throat when Wade cupped her buttocks, pressing her to the juncture of his thighs.

She fit him perfectly. She always had. Immediate heat swamped him and his groin tightened envisioning her on the bed with him, just a few feet away. He’d wanted her, wanted *that* ever since she’d walked into his office a few days ago.

A knock at the door broke the moment.

Wade winced at the bad timing. And, as he tugged his mouth from hers, he whispered, “Room service.” Wade had a notion to send the waiter packing and finish this. Just as he began to utter those commands, Gina backed away.

“I—I need a shower.”

Wade glanced at her chest, the tempting swell of her breasts straining against her spandex top with her breathes coming hard

again, only this time, he knew her fast breathing had nothing to do with the run she'd just taken. "So do I—a cold one."

Gina's gaze slipped down to his jeans, her eyes riveted below his waist.

Wade ground out a warning. "Don't tempt me, Gina."

"I never mean to."

That was the problem. Gina, just being Gina, was enough of a temptation. Didn't matter what she wore, how she looked, Wade found himself wanting her, no matter what. She was beautiful to him. That much hadn't changed. From the moment he'd set eyes on her almost ten years ago, he'd wanted her. Had to have her.

The only difference between now and then was that now he knew he'd have her but he'd never keep her.

The knock came louder this time, announcing, "Room service!"

Wade let out a deep sigh, restraining his desire. "I'll get the door. You get your shower."

Gina nodded and, without a word, entered the bathroom. After a second, he heard the decided click of the bathroom door's lock.

Gina mounted a bay mare, fitting herself as comfortably as she could on the saddle. It had been almost ten years since she'd ridden a horse. She'd been taught by the best; Mr. Buckley, Sarah and Wade all had a hand in teaching her how to ride. But she was rusty and uncertain.

"Don't let her know you're nervous," Wade said, gripping the

reins, holding the mare steady from the ground. Gina took a deep breath and nodded.

“You’d think a girl born and bred in Texas would know more about horses than how to hang onto the saddle horn.”

Wade grinned. “You were from Austin. That doesn’t count.”

“Austin was full of horses.” Gina tipped her chin up in defiance.

“Right. And you rode how many?”

Wade didn’t wait for an answer. He handed her the reins, then swung his long legs up and over his saddle, mounting a tall dappled-gray mare. “Follow my lead. Loosen up on the reins and use only slight motions to guide the mare. You’ll do fine.”

“I can’t take notes and ride. Why do you need me?”

“I need another pair of eyes.”

Gina doubted that. She knew for certain that scores of Triple B’s finest—from architects to financial accountants—had surveyed the property already.

“Ready?”

Gina squirmed once more in her saddle and adjusted the straw hat Wade had purchased in town for her. “Ready.”

Wade made a soft sound to his mare and with just the slightest click of his boot heels, the horse took off. Gina’s mare followed and they rode off the stable grounds and away from the road, heading further into the interior of the canyon.

Ten minutes later, Wade reined his horse to a stop. Saddle leather creaked when he turned around in his seat. “Take a look,”

he said.

Gina's gaze flowed in the direction he was pointing. They had steadily climbed and had come to a low rise that overlooked the entire town of Avalon and the crescent-shaped bay below. From this distance and under clear-blue skies, the ocean seemed less threatening with a throng of boats harbored in the stunning turquoise bay. "It's remarkable."

Wade agreed with a low grumble. "It's hard to believe this place once was home to pirates and trappers."

"Yes, but I can picture it, can't you? The wildness here, the untouched land and those men coming here, some for honest work, others to do harm or hide out."

Wade cast her a long thoughtful look, his eyes narrowing as if picturing it. "Yeah, I can see that," he said, his lips quirking in a distant smile, before turning back around.

Once again he *looked* like the Wade she'd known in El Paso, only more mature, stronger, more capable, if that were even possible.

"Not much longer now," Wade said, as they passed oaks and sage and tall limber stalks of sun-yellow and white poppies.

They met up with a road again and Gina saw the gates that led to a clearing. No Trespassing signs cordoned off the area.

Wade dismounted and used a key to unlock the chains on the gate before mounting his mare again. Gina followed him inside.

The clearing where the resort was to be built was anything but clear. Tall cottonwoods blocked the sun, natural formations

jutted up from the earth and canyon walls provided the backdrop.

“The architects have done a great job in preserving most of what you see. We won’t down these trees. They’ll be a natural part of the landscape. Out there in the distance, a wildflower meadow allows just enough land to build the main hotel and facilities. About half a mile down the road there’s a secluded cove that we’ll utilize for special occasions and weddings. You name it. This is the first project I’ve been involved with where the land dictates the building, instead of the other way around. I think Robinique understands that.”

Wade spurred his mare on. “Come on. I need to see it all one more time and get your opinion.”

“I’ve seen the plans on paper, Wade. But it’s hard for me to picture it. Seems like this place needs to stay untouched.”

“*Nothing* stays untouched, Gina.” He cast her a narrow-eyed look from under the brim of his Stetson. “I learned that lesson a long time ago.”

“So as long as it’s going to be *touched*, you might as well be the one doing the touching?”

Wade stared deeply into her eyes, capturing her and making her flinch from his intensity. “That’s right.”

Heat crept up Gina’s neck. She wanted out of this conversation, knew she should let the comment go, but she couldn’t. Wade had twisted her words and suddenly they weren’t speaking about the land any longer. She fought her rising anger. “When did you become so ruthless?”

Wade's voice held contempt. "You know the answer to that."

Gina slumped in the saddle. Telling him the truth now wouldn't do any good. Wade had changed. He was a man walking in the shadow of his father. He was just as driven, just as bitter. Getting involved with him again would be a big mistake. She'd already had a bad relationship with one unscrupulous man and she feared Wade Beaumont, too, would only use her then toss her aside.

Gina kept Sarah's secret close to her heart. It wasn't her secret to divulge anyway. If Sarah wanted Wade to know the truth, then she would tell him in her own time. Long-standing friendships were at stake here and Gina wanted no part in destroying Sarah's relationship with Wade. Gina was the outsider and she would always remain so. "We'd be better off just sticking to business, Wade."

Wade cocked his head and sent her a crooked smile. "That's all I was talking about. Business."

Gina's temper rose with lightning speed. There was no stopping the rage within her. She silently cursed Wade and his infuriating hold on her. She needed to get away from him. She kicked her mare's flanks just as a wild hawk swooped down from a cottonwood. The horse reared up in fright—nearly tossing Gina from the saddle—then her front hooves landed hard onto the ground and the mare took off running.

Startled, the reins dropped from Gina's hands. She grabbed for the saddlehorn, bouncing on the seat as the mare raced across

the meadowland. Her hat flew from her head as she hung on.

She heard Wade's commands from behind, knew he was racing behind her, trying to catch up. Gina held on for dear life. Her shoes came out of the stirrups from the turbulent ride. She lost her balance in the saddle and her grip on the horn. Within seconds, she was tossed off the horse.

She hit the ground hard.

Dazed from the fall, she heard Wade's footsteps fast approaching. And then he was leaning down beside her with fear in his eyes and a voice filled with gentle condemnation. "Damn it, Gina. You're always running away."

Six

With her head pounding, her body twisted and the air knocked out of her, Gina squinted into the morning sun. Wade moved to obstruct the light, his tone fierce but his hands gentle as he touched and surveyed her body for injuries. "Did you hit your head?"

She gazed into his eyes as his fingers searched for a bump. "I have a hard head."

"Tell me about it," he muttered, yet the softness in his eyes belied his tone. When he didn't find a bump on her head, his hands traveled to her face, gently turning her right to left, searching for injury. "Can you untwist your body?"

Gina did exactly that. She straightened her form then winced. "I'm sore, but at least everything's moving."

He frowned and spoke quietly, "The fall won't really hit you

until tomorrow.”

Gina looked up into his eyes. She liked what she saw there. In an unguarded moment, Wade let down his defenses and she witnessed the depth of his compassion. “You mean I have aches and pains to look forward to?”

“Remember when I tried to break Rocket? That horse wouldn’t give in. He must have thrown me a dozen times.”

Gina nodded, recalling Wade’s determination to break the wild stallion his uncle Lee had captured in the mountains. After several bronc-busters had tried, his uncle Lee had just about given up and had been ready to turn the stallion loose. But Wade had been more stubborn than the stallion and had finally tamed the beast. “I remember that you had trouble walking the next day.” Then it dawned on her. Slightly panicked, she tried to rise up. “You’re not saying I’m going to feel like that?”

Wade placed a calming hand to her shoulder. “Hold still, honey.”

In one grand sweeping movement, Gina was lifted up into Wade’s arms. She automatically roped her arms around his neck. He carried her to the shade of an ancient oak.

He felt solid and warm and, when he peered down at her, she couldn’t miss the concern in his beautiful green eyes.

“You’re not as tough as you let on,” she whispered near his ear. “Sometimes, I see the man you were in El Paso, Wade.”

“I don’t think he exists anymore, Gina.” Wade pitched his Stetson and Gina watched the hat land near her mare’s hooves.

It was so telling, so obvious what that toss of the hat meant. Wade didn't want to go back. He'd moved into the role of a high-powered executive and was comfortable there.

She let out a quiet sigh. "A girl can hope, can't she?"

Wade stared into her eyes for a long moment and nodded then lowered down to sit against the base of the oak, keeping Gina firmly in his arms and on his lap. "Are you hurt? Do you feel dizzy?"

She shook her head, "I'm not hurt at all. My head's fine. You can let me up now."

"I can't," he said.

Her brows lifted. "Can't?"

"Don't want to, won't."

He smiled, right before his lips touched hers. The brush of his mouth over hers sent warm comforting shivers throughout her body.

She wound her arms tighter about his neck and he deepened the sweet kiss, coaxing her mouth open. From there, Wade took complete control, mating their tongues in a slow fiery seduction while his hand stroked her face then her throat. Gentle fingers traveled lower, unfastening the top buttons of her blouse.

Wade had her in his arms, at his mercy. Gina couldn't fight her desire any longer. She was where she wanted to be. The Wade she'd known was still there, inside, somewhere in the soft caress of his eyes, in the caring way he held her and in the coaxing brush of his lips. She wanted Wade Beaumont to return. She wanted

the man she'd once loved. She'd do anything to bring him back to her.

He slipped his hand inside her blouse. She moaned when he touched her breasts, remembering those fingers, gentle yet rough against her skin. She strained against him. He took more, easing her bra down, cupping her, flicking her nipple until she moaned louder, feeling the pulse of his erection against her thigh.

When he broke off the kiss, they looked deeply into each other's eyes. "Definitely feeling dizzy now," she whispered softly.

Wade smiled again and spoke in a low, raspy voice. "You want me."

It wasn't a question but a statement of fact. One she couldn't deny. "Yes."

Wade kissed her again and palmed her breast until spiraling heat curled up from her belly.

"This is a long time coming, Gina."

He pressed her down lower on his lap and, leaning over her, he slipped his hand under the waistband of her jeans, his fingers trekking slowly, teasing, tempting, until finally he reached her.

Gina welcomed him. His touch, the stroking of his fingers as they kissed, brought damp moist heat and an ecstasy she'd only known in his arms.

Suddenly, Wade froze, his head shooting up and he muttered a foul curse.

"What is it?" Gina asked, stunned by his quick abandonment.

"Security jeep. Coming from down the road. They must have

seen the gate unlocked.”

He lifted her off him and together they stood facing each other, Gina’s clothes as disheveled as her mind.

“Get dressed,” he said. “I’ll go meet them. Explain who we are.”

No words came. She could only nod.

Wade plucked his hat from the ground, yanked it onto his head and strode over to his horse. Before mounting, he turned to her with deep regret in his eyes, as he watched her button her blouse. “One of these days I’m going to make love to you in a damn bed.”

Wade escorted Gina back to town, leaving her in front of the hotel. She’d been quiet on the ride back to the stables and then, as they walked back to the hotel, she hadn’t said more than a few sentences. Wade wasn’t in the mood for talking either. He’d had a few choice words for the security guards who needed convincing that he wasn’t a trespasser. Their interruption had cost him. His desire for Gina had gone unsatisfied and that made him want her all the more.

It irritated the hell out of him how much he wanted her. She couldn’t be trusted and he’d never forgive her for her betrayal, so why wasn’t he satisfied with all the other women he’d had in his life?

“Take a few hours to rest. We have a late lunch meeting. I’ll go to the boat and do some work. I’ll be back later to pick you up.”

Gina nodded, but kept her eyes from meeting his. “Okay.”

Wade cupped her chin and forced her to look at him. “Are

you up for it?”

She shot him a look of defiance. “I came here to work, Wade.” She backed away, releasing his hold on her. “So yes, I’m up for it. But back there, that was a mistake. We’ve both changed. We’re not the same people we were when we knew each other in El Paso. You’re paying me to be your personal assistant. I don’t believe sleeping with the boss is in my job description.”

Wade tamped down rising anger. “*That* had nothing to do with business or the fact that I’m your boss. As I recall, you said yes and couldn’t wait for me to get into your pants.”

Gina’s dark eyes went wide. She lifted her hand and Wade warned her with a searing glance not to even try it. When she lowered her hand, she spoke with quiet calm, her words more potent than any slap to the face. “I thought I saw an inkling of the man you once were, Wade. The man I wanted above all else, the man who was kind and generous and caring. But I was mistaken, you’re *nothing* like him.”

Wade jammed his hands in the back pockets of his jeans, watching her spin around and walk into the hotel lobby. Her words stung but he wouldn’t be played for a fool ever again.

No matter how much he wanted her.

* * *

Wade poured himself a whiskey on the rocks, something that always soothed his bad temper, and took a seat at his desk. He let the mellow rocking of the boat and the fresh sea breeze calm him for several minutes before opening his e-mail account. He

punched in his password and viewed more than a dozen messages forwarded to him from Triple B.

As he went through half of them, all having to do with the Catalina project, Wade came upon one message he hadn't expected, from Sarah Buckley.

He hadn't spoken with Sarah in over six months. They'd always remained friends, but ever since that episode with Gina years ago, their relationship hadn't been quite the same. He'd left El Paso shortly after that tumultuous summer to work at Triple B with his father. Maybe his imagination was in overdrive, but whenever he had visited his uncle and aunt in El Paso, he'd also made a stop in to see the Buckleys and, oddly, they'd been slightly distant, polite but not as friendly as he remembered. And Sarah, too, had seemed more cautious with him.

He punched in and opened the e-mail.

Wade, I know you're out of town, but it's important that you call me when you return. We need to talk.

Always,

Your friend,

Sarah

Wade sipped his drink, staring at the message for a moment, making a mental note to call Sarah once he returned to Los Angeles. Right now, he had enough to deal with, Gina being right up there on his list.

He realized his approach with Gina had been completely wrong. She wasn't an easy female to figure out but he did

know that when she was backed into a corner, she came out fighting. Though she was as headstrong and volatile as she was beautiful, Wade wouldn't let her get away this time around. She had become nearly as important as the Catalina Project and both were challenges he fully intended to win. He finished his drink, took a quick shower and changed into different clothes. Before meeting Gina at the hotel, he had one important errand to run.

Gina glanced at the digital clock on the bed stand. It was ten minutes after two and Wade was late. It wasn't like him to be late for a meeting.

She glanced at her reflection in the framed beveled mirror, straightening out her tan skirt and cream knit shell top. She tossed the short tailored jacket she'd donned minutes ago onto the bed and headed to the wraparound balcony for a breath of fresh air.

Her nerves had been wrought ever since she'd come to this island. The trip over here in Wade's yacht had nearly done her in and she hadn't thought things could've gotten any worse. But they had.

She didn't know where she stood with Wade. He was her boss, that was a given. He wanted to be her lover. That's where it all got confusing. She knew enough not to get involved with him romantically, yet when he kissed her and touched her tenderly, memories flooded in, sweet hot wonderful memories of the times they had shared in the past. Gina had succumbed to him earlier today and the heat of his touch still sizzled on her lips and other

highly sensitive parts of her anatomy. Wade had left his mark on her body.

A light-hearted tap on the door surprised her. She strode the distance wondering who it could be. Certainly Wade's knock had always been more commanding. When she opened the door to her suite, she stood in awe, looking at a smiling Wade, dressed in khaki shorts and a tan polo shirt, black beach sandals on his feet.

"Our meeting was cancelled," he said, walking in holding a shopping bag. "I figured we both could use some down time."

"Down time?" Gina asked, confused by Wade's uncharacteristic light mood.

"Yeah, you know...relax, soak up some sun, enjoy the beach."

Gina stared at Wade. "That sounds nice," she fibbed. The last place she could relax was staring out at the fathomless ocean. "But I'm afraid I didn't bring 'down time' clothes with me. Sorry, you'll have to go it alone." She sent him a small smile.

Wade lifted up the bag. "That's why I brought this."

Gina watched him set the bag on her king-size bed. "Oh, I was hoping that was lunch."

Wade shot her a sweeping glance, his eyes raking in her body from top to bottom. "Depends on how you look at it."

"What? What did you bring me?" Gina walked over to the white bag and tossed the contents onto the bed. Swimsuits, sarongs and fancy rhinestone flip-flops scattered. Gina lifted up a pure-white dazzling bikini. "A thong?" She turned to face him. "Not on your life."

Wade laughed. "I had to try." He gestured to the others. "What about the black one?"

Gina eyed him cautiously, before picking it up and scanning it over. The bikini had a tad more material than the thong, she noted. She shook her head. "You don't know my size."

Wade stepped closer to her and looked into her eyes. He spoke softly, with confidence. "I know your body, Gina. They'll fit."

Heat rushed up, warming her throat and blistering her face. Once again she thanked the Almighty for her olive complexion. At least she could hide her blush from Wade, if nothing else. She set the suit down. "I'd really rather stay in."

Wade folded his arms across his middle. "Okay, we'll stay in." He glanced at her then the bed. "What do you suppose we can do in here all afternoon?"

Gina flinched. "I wasn't inviting you."

Wade took a seat on the sofa, his arm spread along the top cushion. "Gina, what are you afraid of? We'll go down, have lunch at a café, then relax on the beach for a few hours."

"You know I don't like the water."

"You traveled twenty-two miles over that water to get here."

"I know. I'm dreading the trip back." Just the thought brought shivers.

Wade pointed to the clothes on the bed. "Try the red one, Gina. It's a one-piece."

Gina glanced at it and frowned. "With more cutouts than Swiss cheese."

“You noticed that, too?”

Wade didn't even try to hide his amusement. “Come on, Gina. You must be starving by now.”

Gina's stomach rumbled quietly. Thankfully, Wade didn't seem to hear. She was hungry and it seemed the only way to get Wade out of her hotel room was to leave with him. “Okay, fine. I'll wear the red one.”

Gina grabbed the swimsuit, a multicolored sarong and sparkling rhinestone flip-flops and stomped into the bathroom, ignoring Wade's satisfied chuckle from the sitting area.

She knew he'd be right. Everything he bought would fit her. Perfectly.

Gina sipped her piña colada, the coconut-and-rum tropical drink sliding cold and smooth down her throat. Wearing the cherry-red swimsuit underneath the sarong cover-up, she faced Wade from her seat at the beachfront café, surprised at his casual demeanor. He'd dominated the conversation, opening up to her about his time at Triple B working with his father, learning the business, then taking over after his father died and Sam remarried and started a new life at Belle Star Stables. He'd filled her in on his life from the time he left El Paso to the present. Of course, she was certain that he'd left out choice bits about his love life and he'd skirted the issue about their onetime hot and steamy relationship.

If he'd wanted her to relax, he'd succeeded. The two empty piña colada glasses in front of her might have had something do

with it as well, but Gina wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

"So what about you? What did you do once you landed in Los Angeles?" he asked, his tone light, his eyes holding nothing but curiosity.

Gina had always wanted Wade to understand what her life had been like before and after she met him. There had been so many things left unsaid. Perhaps now was the time, after all this time, to come clean, at least partly. She'd always wanted Wade's trust and maybe this was the first step in gaining it back.

"I'd always liked Los Angeles. Sarah and I roomed at UCLA for four years together. We were girls from two different worlds. Though I was raised in Austin, my parents were city folks. They owned a small Italian restaurant. My mother was a terrific cook."

"As I recall, so were you."

"Thank you. It was a family-run operation. I worked there until I left for college."

"And after college, when you left El Paso, what did you do?"

Gina peered at Wade. He'd just polished off a sandwich and was working on the fries and his second beer. Because she didn't find any sign of resentment, any hint of a trap, she continued. "I looked for work and did some odd jobs here and there. Nothing too stimulating, but all the while I'd been working on clothing designs. That's when I realized I'd probably wasted four years of my life in college. I should have been following my heart. I entered the Fashion Institute and loved every minute of it. When I got out, I ventured into my own business. Or at least, I tried."

“What do you mean, you tried?” Wade asked. “What happened?” He plucked another fry up and shoved it into his mouth.

Gina took a deep breath and surged on. “I didn’t have any money, so I took on a partner. A man. He seemed to have more business sense than me, some really good ideas. We took out loan after loan to fund our venture. I...trusted him.”

Wade took a pull from his beer. “Mistake?”

“Big, big—huge—mistake.”

Wade set his beer down and leaned in, his elbows braced on the table now. “I’m listening.”

“He stole my designs and every bit of money we’d borrowed. I have no idea where he is or what happened to him.”

Wade studied her a moment as if sorting something out in his mind. “Were you involved with him?”

Gina paused, hating to admit this to Wade. She’d been such a fool. “Yes. He was charming and so easy to be with...a charming con man.”

Wade sat back in his seat, looking at her. “I get it now. Why you took the job working for me.”

“I’m in debt, Wade. I owe a lot of people a lot of money.”

“You shouldn’t have to pay it all back.”

Gina bit her lip, and swallowed. “Some of the loans were in my name only—a good many of them.”

Wade nodded and had her gratitude for not telling her what a gullible fool she’d been.

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