

JENNIFER
GREENE

THE
SOON-TO-BE-
DISINHERITED
WIFE



Desire

Jennifer Greene

The Soon-To-Be-Disinherited Wife

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SECRETS, LIES...AND MONEY Socialite Emma Dearborn's future was all planned out for her: the perfect wedding, the perfect husband, the perfect life. Then Garrett Keating returned. He wasn't about to let Emma go through with her farce of a marriage, and he set out to stop her...seduction being at the top of his list. But if Emma didn't walk down the aisle by her birthday, she stood to lose an inheritance worth millions. Just how far would Garrett be willing to go to have Emma? All the way to the altar?

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From the “People Are Talking”
Column of the
Eastwick, Connecticut, Gazette

All of local society is abuzz with rumors that the wedding of the year—between the heiress of a certain very old Eastwick family and her almost equally well-connected fiancé—might not happen.

Of course, this wedding has been postponed so many times that some people wondered whether the bride was really ready to get married. But we thought she meant it this time. The wedding invitations have been chosen, and all the arrangements—right down to the name cards and the place settings—have been made.

And yet we hear the bride-to-be is having second thoughts. Hmm... Could that have anything to do with the sudden reappearance in our little town of another man—a very handsome, very troublesome man the lady is rumored to have been, um... “involved” with years ago...?

The Soon-To-Be-Disinherited Wife

Jennifer Greene



Acknowledgment

Special thanks and acknowledgment is given to Jennifer Greene for her contribution to the Secret Lives of Society Wives miniseries.

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One

Emma Dearborn felt an itch. Not a little itch. A maddening, unrelenting itch—right between her shoulder blades, where she couldn't reach it.

Emma wasn't prone to itches and was almost never guilty of fidgeting, which was probably why she remembered experiencing the same terrorizing itch sensation before. It had only happened twice in her life. The first time, she'd accidentally driven her dad's restored priceless Morgan into Long Island Sound at Greenwich Point when she was sixteen. The car had been recovered; her dad nearly hadn't. The other time, her date for the annual Christmas cotillion had turned ugly, and she'd had to walk home in her long white satin dress and heels in a snowstorm, crying the whole time.

Since those days, of course, she was no longer a novice with driving or men. More to the point, the itch this time couldn't possibly relate to some impending traumatic event. Her life was going splendidly.

Impatiently she took a long gulp of mint-raspberry tea. Mentally she told herself to get over the damned itch and quit squirming. For Pete's sake, there was nothing remotely wrong. Everything around her reflected her serenely contented life.

"Emma?"

A basking-warm June sun soaked through the glass windows overlooking the pool outside. The Emerald Room was the one place in the Eastwick Country Club where members could dress casually. Today the pool was chock-full of kids fresh out of school and shrieking with joyful energy. Inside, moms in sandals and shorts elbowed with the business-lunch crowd in suits.

Emma, because she'd just chaired a meeting of the fund-raising committee, was stuck dressed on the formal side. Her light silk sheath was lavender-blue, not because it was her signature color. Emma objected to the whole pretentious concept of signature colors. Somehow, though, her closet mysteriously filled up with blues. Everyone else in the group was dressed more laid-back—not that anyone cared today about clothes.

The Debs had missed their traditional lunch last month—everyone was so darn busy!—which meant they all had to talk at once to catch up.

Harry, the bartender, had kindly reserved the malachite table by the doors, not just giving them the best view but also a little privacy for their gossip. Felicity and Vanessa and Abby were all there.

Emma's heart warmed to the laughter—even if that itch was still driving her crazy. The friends were closer than sisters. They'd all grown up together, attended the same private school, knew each other's most embarrassing moments—and tended to bring them out at these lunches. If the teasing ever lagged, there was always their debutante history to haul out of storage. What were friends for if not to savor and embellish the most mortifying events in one's life? And Caroline Keating-Spence had joined them for lunch this time.

"Emma, are you sleeping?"

Quickly she whipped her head toward Felicity, not realizing that she'd dropped out of the conversation. "Not sleeping, honest. Just kind of woolgathering what a long history we have together...how much fun we've always had."

"Yeah, sure." Vanessa winked to the rest of them. "She covered up nicely, but we all know she's engaged. Naturally she wasn't listening to us. She's at that moony stage."

Felicity chuckled. "Either that or that big clunk of a sapphire on her finger is blinding her. Hells bells, it blinds the rest of us, too. What an original engagement ring. But that's exactly what I was trying to ask you about, Em. How's everything going with the wedding plans?"

Again she felt that exasperating itch spider up her spine. This was getting downright crazy. Her engagement to Reed Kelly was yet another thing that was going totally—totally—right in her life. At twenty-nine years old, she'd stopped believing she'd ever be married.

Actually the truth was that she'd never wanted to be.

"Everything's going fine," she assured them all, "except that Reed seems to have arranged the whole honeymoon before we've finalized the wedding plans."

They all laughed. "You two have set a date, though, right?"

Another shooting itch. "Actually we've reserved Eastwick's ballroom for two different Saturdays, but between my schedule at the gallery and Reed's racing schedule with the horses, we still haven't pinned one down for sure. I promise, this group will be the first to know. In fact, you'll probably know before I do, knowing how fast this group picks up secrets."

They all chortled—and agreed—and then moved on to the next victim. Felicity, being Eastwick's foremost wedding planner—which meant that she excelled in both original extravaganzas and gossip—was always full of news.

As the freshest scandals were brought out to air, Emma glanced at Caroline, who seemed oddly quiet. Of course, it was hard to get a word in with the Debs all talking simultaneously, but Caroline hadn't joined in the laughter. And now Emma noticed her signaling Harry for her third glass of wine.

The itch was close to driving Emma to drink, too, but seeing Caroline guzzling down pinot noir distracted her. Heaven knew, the Debs had been known to enjoy a drink—and occasionally to overindulge. No one kiss and told in the group, not on each other. Emma wouldn't normally care if Caroline was gulping down the pinot noirs, but drinking was so unlike her.

Caroline wasn't one of the original core Debs group because she was a little younger. Emma had swooped her into the circle of friends, the same way she tended to peel wallflowers off the wall at social gatherings. Caroline was no wallflower, but there was a time she'd needed a little boost of self-confidence. Emma had gotten to know her well because of Garrett—Caroline's older brother.

Again Emma felt a ticklish itch. This time a familiar one. Although her heart hadn't dug up that old emotional history in a blue moon, Garrett Keating had been her first love. Just picturing him brought back that whole poignant era—the time in her life when she'd still believed in love, when she'd felt crazy-high just to be in the same room with him and equally pit-low miserable every second they'd had to be apart.

Everybody had to lose that silly idealism sometime, she knew. Still, she'd always regretted their breaking up before making love. Back then she'd held on to her virginity like a gambler unwilling to lay down her aces, yet so often since then she thought she'd missed the right time with the right man. Garrett's kisses had awakened her sexuality, her first feelings of power as a woman...her first feelings of vulnerability and surrender, as well. She'd never forgotten him, never even tried. She wasn't carrying a torch or anything foolish like that; it was just a first-love thing. He owned a corner of her heart, always would.... Abruptly Emma stopped woolgathering. Harry showed up at their table again.

The bartender served Caroline her third wine, which she immediately downed like water. Emma frowned. Everyone knew Caroline had had a rift with her husband, Griff, the year before—but they were back together now. Everyone had seen them nuzzling each other at the spring art fair as if they were new lovers. So what was the heavy deal with the wine?

"Murder!" someone said.

Emma's head shot up. "Say what?"

Abby spoke up from the corner, her voice a thousand times more tentative than normal. "You've had your head in the clouds, Em. I don't blame you, with a wedding coming up. But I was just telling the group what happened since I went to the police about my mother."

"The police?" Emma knew about Abby's mother's death. Everyone did. Lucinda Baldwin—alias Bunny—had created the Eastwick Social Diary, which had dished all the dirt on the moneyed crowd in Eastwick. Marriages, cheating, divorces, touchy habits, legal or business indiscretions—if it was scandal worthy, Bunny somehow always knew and loved to tell. Her death had been a shock to everyone. "I know how young your mom was, Abby. But I thought someone said she had a heart condition that hadn't been detected before, that that was what she died from—"

“That’s what I thought originally, too,” Abby affirmed. “But right after Mom died, I couldn’t face going through her things. It took me a while...but when I finally got around to opening my mom’s private safe, I just expected to find her journals and jewelry. The jewelry was there, but all her journals were gone. Stolen. They had to be. It was the only place she ever kept them. That’s when I first started worrying. And then, finding out that someone tried to blackmail Jack Cartright because of information in those missing journals added to my suspicions.”

“Abby’s become more and more concerned that her mom was murdered,” Felicity clarified.

“My God.” Scandal was one thing, but Eastwick barely needed an active police force. There hadn’t been a serious crime in the community in years, much less anything as grave as murder.

“I can’t sleep at night,” Abby admitted. “I just can’t stop thinking about it. My mom loved secrets. Loved putting together the Diary. And for darn sure, she loved scandals. But she never had a mean bone in her body. She had tons of things written down in her journals that she never used in the Diary because she didn’t want to hurt people.”

Emma groped to understand. “So that’s partly why you think she was murdered? Because someone stole those journals? Either because they wanted to use the information, or because they had a secret themselves they wanted covered up?”

“Exactly. But I still can’t prove it,” Abby said restlessly. “I mean, the journals are gone. That’s for sure. But I can’t prove the theft is related to her death. The police keep telling me that I don’t have enough to open up a new inquest. Honestly, they’ve been really nice—they all agree the situation sounds suspicious. But there’s no one to arrest, no suspects. I can’t even prove the journals were stolen.”

“But she’s positive they were,” Felicity filled in.

Abby nodded. “They had to be stolen. The safe is the only place my mother ever kept them. Unfortunately, the police can’t act just because I know something is true. There’s no evidence to prove my mother didn’t simply hide the journals somewhere else. And there isn’t a single suspect.”

The whole group clustered close to discuss the disturbing situation—and to support Abby—but eventually the Emerald Room filled up with kids and families. Serious talk became impossible. The women lightened up, chitchatted about family news, but eventually the group broke up.

In the parking lot Emma climbed into her white SUV, her mind spinning between Caroline’s troubling behavior at lunch and the worrisome suspicions about Bunny’s death. Still, by the time she turned on Main Street, her mood instinctively lifted.

Her art gallery, Color, was only a couple blocks off the main drag in town. Emma didn’t mind running the fund-raising committee for Eastwick’s country club or any of the other social responsibilities her parents pushed on her. If it weren’t for her parents—and a mighty huge trust fund coming to her on her thirtieth birthday—she couldn’t do the things she really loved. Most people never knew about the volunteer work she did with kids, but the whole community was well aware how much time and love she devoted to the gallery.

She parked in the narrow, crooked drive. The building was at the corner of Maple and Oak, and in June now, a profuse row of peonies bloomed inside the white picket fence. Typical of old Connecticut towns, Eastwick had tons of pre-Revolutionary history. Her building had once been a house. It was two hundred-plus years old, brick, with tall, skinny windows and a dozen small rooms—which was the advantage. Although something always seemed to need maintenance, from the plumbing to the electricity, she had a dozen rooms to display completely different kinds of artwork. Customers could roam around and examine whatever they liked in relative privacy.

By the time she bolted out of the SUV—and nearly tripped on the cobblestone steps—she was humming. A shipment of Alson Skinner Clark prints was due in late that afternoon. They needed sorting and hanging. And two weeks before, she’d come across an old Walter Farndon oil on canvas that was still stashed in the back room—her workshop—that needed cleaning and repair, which she

loved doing. And a room on the second floor was vacant right now, just waiting for her to set up a display of local artists' work, another project she couldn't wait to take on.

Her gallery rode the edge of making a profit and not. Emma knew perfectly well she could have run it more efficiently, but she'd always known she had the trust fund coming. It wasn't the money that mattered to her but the freedom to open up art to the community, to be part of making something beautiful in people's lives.

She'd never told anyone how important that goal of beauty was to her. The Debs would just roll their eyes at her goofy idealism. Her family would sigh as if she'd never understand practical reality—at least, reality on their terms. And maybe all of them were right, but when Emma opened the ornate red-lacquer door into Color, she felt a sweeping burst of plain old happiness.

"Hey, Ms. Dearborn! I was hoping you'd be back by midafternoon. You got that crate from New York you were waiting for. Came in FedEx before noon." Josh, who'd worked part time for her for years, blessed her with a shy smile. He was somewhere in the vicinity of sixty, skinny as a rail and paler than paint. Some said he'd been an artist once. Some said he was gay. Some said he'd had a too-long relationship with bordeaux. All Emma knew was that he'd walked in and started helping her when she first opened the place. He'd taught her tons.

"I can't wait to get into it. You can watch for customers up front?"

"Sure thing."

She glanced at her office, stashed her summer bag and spun around to zoom in the back room when the phone rang. When she grabbed it, she heard the familiar voice of her fiancé.

"Hey, sweetheart. I was wondering if you had time for dinner tonight. I'm tied up most of the afternoon but pretty sure I could make it into town around, say, seven."

Instinctively she twisted her arm behind her to claw at that strange, aggravating itch again. The restless, stressy feeling that had been bugging her for hours suddenly fiercely intensified. "Sure," she said. "How's your day?"

"Couldn't be better. Bought a honey of a stallion..."

Standing with the phone to her ear, close to the window, she ignored the itch and suddenly, slowly lifted her hand. The sapphire on her left hand was from Sri Lanka. Reed had taken her to a jeweler, shown her a bed of sapphires, only argued when she'd first tried to pick a smaller stone. The ring was more than a breathtaking gem. It was a symbol of something she'd been so positive she'd never have.

She'd always been positive that marriage wasn't for her. She liked men fine and totally adored kids. But so many couples in Eastwick, including her parents, seemed more like business mergers than love affairs. Sex was a commodity pretty much like any other. Emma didn't knock anyone else's choices, she just never wanted that kind of life. Yet when Reed asked her to marry him, well...maybe he'd never made her heart race or her mood go giddy, but damn. He was such a good guy. Impossible not to love. When it came down to it, she'd easily said yes, recognizing that he was probably the only man she could imagine being married to.

Today, she felt no differently than she'd felt the day he'd slid the engagement ring on her finger.

It was just...she couldn't seem to quell the strange, edgy sensation of panic that had been hounding her mood for hours now. "I can't wait for tonight!" she assured him brightly.

But when she hung up the phone, guilt smacked her in the heart. What kind of goofy woman was she that she'd rather spend the evening unpacking old crates in the back of her gallery than go out to a romantic dinner with a man she loved?

Four-thirty in the afternoon, any weekday afternoon, always turned into a work frenzy. Garrett Keating had hired a driver about four years ago, not because he didn't enjoy driving himself—even in the craziness of downtown Manhattan—but because the crises automatically seemed to kick in during that late-afternoon time frame. This afternoon, typically, he'd left his investment-banking firm

less than ten minutes ago, yet his cell had rung nonstop. As he sat in the backseat, his briefcase was open and papers were scattered everywhere.

“Keating,” he barked into the receiver for the latest interruption.

An unfamiliar female voice answered. “Mr. Garrett Keating? Caroline Keating-Spence’s brother?”

Immediate worry clawed his pulse. “Yes. What’s this about?”

“Your sister asked us to call you. This is Mrs. Henry, the senior day nurse in ICU at Eastwick—”

“Oh my God. Is she all right?”

“We believe she will be, in time. But the circumstances are a little touchy. Your parents have been here, but they seem to upset your sister more than help. Because Mrs. Keating-Spence is in such a fragile state of mind, when she asked for you—”

“I’ll be there as fast as I can make arrangements. Which will be immediately. But what exactly is wrong?”

“I wouldn’t normally say over the phone if your sister hadn’t asked me to convey at least part of the situation. Her husband is out of the country. Her parents are possibly too upset to make the situation easier. So—”

“Just tell me.”

“She took in an extensive quantity of mixed alcohol and medication.” A short silence. “Her parents—your parents—are quite determined that your sister did this accidentally. No one on the medical staff has any doubt that your sister had to know exactly what she was doing.” Another short silence. “I believe it best to be blunt. When she first came in, no one was sure we could bring her back. That medical crisis is over now, but—”

“I’ll be there,” Garrett said swiftly and disconnected.

Ed, his driver, met his eyes in the rearview mirror. “Sounds like there’s a problem?”

“Yes. I have to leave town. Immediately. I’ll give you a list of things I’d appreciate your handling at the apartment...”

Garrett ran nonstop for the next few hours, fear and guilt shadowing his heart. He handled millions of dollars every day, juggled a pressure-cooker workload, so how had he failed so badly at finding a few minutes for his sister?

On the long, silent drive to Eastwick, he couldn’t stop thinking about Caro. He adored his sister. They’d always been thick as thieves, allied against parents who’d never had time or interest in raising children. When Caroline married, naturally Garrett had retreated. But a year ago, when he heard she was having trouble with Griff, he’d stepped back in, prepared to shoot the son of a bitch—any son of a bitch—who dared to hurt his sister.

All his life, though, he’d been better at work than relationships.

Business had been good, except that he’d always had a hard time putting a lid on his workaholic tendencies. Make one million, naturally he wanted to make five, then ten. He was generally connected to a computer or a phone twenty hours out of twenty-four. So maybe he had no love life or personal life, but he was thriving.

He was sure he’d been thriving.

But then Caroline had called four days ago and he just hadn’t found the time to call her back. She’d called again yesterday morning. He’d been planning to call her tonight. Really. For sure.

Only, damn it, maybe he’d have forgotten that the way he forgot everything else lately. Business had consumed him tighter than a tornado wind.

His sister, who’d always counted on him—who knew she could count on him, who’d never doubted he’d be there for her—had needed help. And he’d flunked the course.

By the time he reached the outskirts of Eastwick, night had fallen, his stomach was churning and his heart feeling sharp-sick. It wasn’t just guilt; it was caring. So many people believed he was

cold-blooded—and maybe he was; that was what made him good in business. But he wasn't cold about his sister. He fiercely loved her.

He'd just failed her this time. And he couldn't, wouldn't, forgive himself.

At the hospital he locked the car and jogged for the door, still wearing the navy suit he'd worn all day, not having eaten in God knows how long. He didn't care. He shot through the doors, jabbed the elevator button for three, ran.

He hadn't been home—much less near Eastwick General Hospital—in a blue moon and then some. But the structure hadn't noticeably changed since he was a kid. He'd have known his way around even if his family hadn't donated a wing or two over the years. Critical care was the isolated unit off the third floor in the back—the location chosen because it had a helipad on the roof.

The CC wing was quiet. The sound of machines and monitors made more noise than the patients. Lights dimmed after nine. He didn't immediately see a nurse or doctor, so simply hiked past each glass-doored cubicle, looking for his sister. The unit held only ten beds, usually more than needed even in emergency circumstances. Six beds were filled—not one of them with his sister.

Finally he found a doctor emerging from the last door. "I'm Garrett Keating. I was told my sister, Caroline Keating-Spence—"

"Yes, Mr. Keating. She was here until late this afternoon. We just moved her a couple hours ago to a private room."

"So she's better." For that instant, it was all he wanted to hear.

"You'll need to speak with her doctor, but the nurse will tell you her room—"

More rigmarole. More running. He took the stairs rather than waiting for the elevator—he'd never been good at waiting, and there wasn't a chance he could pretend to be patient tonight. Room 201. That's where they told him to go. A private room with a twenty-four-hour monitor. Garrett suspected the monitor meant that either his sister wasn't out of the woods yet or that they feared she'd try suicide again.

Even the nurse hadn't specifically used the word suicide, but Garrett immediately knew what she hadn't said—because he knew his sister. This last year, once she'd mended the breach with her husband, Caroline had seemed solid and happy, not as fragile as she'd been for so long. Yet Garrett knew her. How the baggage of their childhood had affected her. How deeply she felt things. How fiercely she hid those feelings.

Some people would never buy the farm, but Caroline was always someone who couldn't quite close the gate to depression.

He scraped a hand through his hair and suddenly halted outside 201. He felt as if he'd been running hell-bent for leather for hours, which was fine but not how he wanted his sister to see him. He forced himself to stand still for a few minutes, pull it all together, concentrate on pulling off an image of calm strength.

A nurse buzzed past him. Then two aides. He took a step toward the door, when suddenly a woman walked out of Caroline's room. She almost ran straight into him—would have if he hadn't instinctively reached out to steady her.

Her head shot up. A mane of silky dark hair fell to shoulder length, framing a cameo face—elegant bones, huge eyes bluer than violet, a pale mouth with the lipstick worn off.

Her striking looks would have ransomed his attention even if he didn't know her...but he did.

Her name didn't pop into his head in that second, probably because, hell, his mind was gone after these past stress-packed hours. Yet stress or no stress, he immediately remembered her eyes. He remembered kissing her. He remembered dancing in the grass at midnight, remembered laughing... the way he never seemed to laugh with other people, not then or now. But she was different. She'd made him laugh. Made him fall harder in love than a crash.

Of course, that was aeons ago.

A lifetime and more.

“Garrett,” she said gently. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Emma.” He’d known her name all along. It was just that the memories had rushed into his head faster than the prosaic facts. “You’ve been with my sister?”

“Yes. It’s past visiting hours, but...” She hesitated. “I think no one wants to leave her alone. Your parents were here until about a half hour ago. In fact, I just stayed in the hall—but I heard her talking, realized she was upset. So when I saw them leave, I went in. I didn’t know what else to do. Except try to be there for her. She’s fallen asleep now.” Again she hesitated. A wisp of a smile softened her face. “It’s good to see you.”

“Not under these circumstances.”

“No. In fact, I remember your saying you’d never come back to Eastwick if you could help it.”

He remembered that suddenly, all too well. It was why he’d broken it off with her all those years ago—because he’d rather give up anything, everything, than live in this damn town. But that was how he’d felt at twenty-one, an age when everything was an ultimatum. An age when you assumed you didn’t need anyone ever. An age when it was so amazingly easy to be self-righteous.

Now he looked at Emma and thought she’d grown into her looks. She used to be lovely, but she’d gone far beyond lovely now. She was wearing blue pants, a dark cotton sweater. Dressed comfortably for a hospital visit, nothing fancy, but her choice of clothes showed off her long, lean body. There was pride in her posture, in her eyes. A poise she’d never had as a girl.

A loneliness.

She looked as if she wanted to say something else, but then shook her head. “You’ll want to go in to see her. And I’m just leaving—”

“Emma, if you wouldn’t mind...”

She cocked her head.

“I do want to see her. Right now. But if she’s fallen asleep, could you wait just a couple minutes? I’d appreciate hearing your impression of what the situation is—”

“Her doctor can tell you the facts. I really don’t know—”

“I’ll get all that. But I’d like the opinion of a friend. That is, if you can spare the time? I realize it’s already late.”

“Of course I can spare the time,” she said.

Again she offered him a smile. A smile like a gift—that’s how he used to think of smiles and laughter from her. She’d given him so much, so freely from the heart. Every moment with her had been like discovering something he’d never known he’d missed.

Just seeing her face brought that feeling back.

But then, of course, he strode in to see his sister.

Two

Emma paced the hallway outside Room 201, glancing at her watch every few minutes, thinking that she shouldn't stay. It wasn't as if she were direct family, not to Garrett or Caroline. She had no real business being here. She was just a friend. And she couldn't help feeling awkward because of her history with Garrett.

But then he stumbled out of Caroline's room, and her breath caught just looking at him.

He wasn't that brash, sexy boy she remembered, the one whose kisses made her knees knock, made her pulse zoom, made her feel like a woman for the first time. But damned if the look of him didn't send a crazy rush straight to her hormones.

He'd looked like Keanu Reeves as a boy. He was still tall and lean, still had the dark hair and magnetic eyes. Wearing an Italian suit and linen shirt, he radiated sophistication—even as rumpled and exhausted as he obviously was. Even whipped, though, she saw the power in his face, in his eyes.

Their history suddenly pinched her heart. He'd fiercely wanted to get out of Eastwick back then—primarily to escape his overbearing, controlling parents, a problem she could positively relate to.

She'd wanted to matter more to him, to factor more in his decisions. And hadn't. It wasn't as simple as escaping problems for Garrett. He used to wear a T-shirt that said *It's More Fun To Play In The Deep End*. And that was him. He'd never wanted an easy life, didn't expect one. He wanted to carve his own niche, to take all the risks, to make a mark with his own name on it.

Emma knew from gossip that he'd gone after his goals with both resolve and ambition—and never looked back. Even so, he didn't look so much like a high roller in the investment world now. Closer up, she could see the pinched lines around his mouth, the anxiety and worry in his expression.

"Thanks for waiting," he said.

She matched his subdued tone. "I'm guessing Caroline's still asleep?"

"She's out for the count. I didn't want to leave her...but there doesn't seem any point in sitting there when she's so deeply under. And I have to believe she needs the rest."

Emma nodded in agreement. "I'm guessing you rushed out of New York this afternoon? Have you had a chance to get any dinner?"

He shook his head. "But I don't want to go far. If you don't mind, I just want to talk to you for a couple minutes."

"Sure. The hospital cafeteria is pitiful, but we should be able to scare up a sandwich or something reasonably edible." She realized he didn't want to be farther than running distance from his sister, but it wasn't that hard to persuade him into a quick snack.

The food choices in the cafeteria were as ghastly as she'd promised. The best he could choose was a dry turkey sandwich on dry whole wheat, stale chips, a cup of pitch-black coffee. But Emma coaxed him to carry it outside, away from the sterile hospital smells and sights. Just beyond the side doors was a mini landscaped garden with cement benches in the moonlight.

"Feels good," he admitted, taking one of the benches. Both of them inhaled the fresh air. A security light beamed enough reflection so they weren't sitting in darkness yet felt the freedom of the shadows. Emma could almost see him relax—or try to.

"I keep thinking this is my fault," he confessed. "Caroline called me twice this week. I was busier than hell, got the messages, just planned to call her back when I had time. She never said it was important or critical, but when the hospital called, my heart just seemed to leap in my throat." He sucked in a breath, turned to look at her. "Would you tell me what you know?"

Emma only wished it were more. "I see her quite often—in town or at different functions. We're not as close as sisters, but I've thought of her as a friend for years, Garrett. I'd have hoped she knew she could turn to me. But the only recent trouble I knew she had was with Griff, and that was ages ago."

He nodded, unwrapped the sandwich, sighed at the look of it and then crunched down. “That was my impression, too. That the marriage had healed up. Caroline had told me more than once that they were happier than they’d ever been.”

“That’s how it looked to everyone. They’ve been like newlyweds in public. I’m assuming someone told you that he’s gone right now. A three- or four-week trip to China, I think someone said. But Caroline never said anything about any trouble since they reconciled.”

“Griff always traveled. I thought that was one of the problems between them originally—all his time away from her, overseas.” Garrett gulped down another dry bite of sandwich. “I don’t think he’s been gone like this in a while, though. And it’s really rare that he couldn’t be reached by phone.”

“I’m sure he’ll get here as fast as he can.”

“Right now the only question that matters is why’d she do this? What could possibly have been so wrong that she’d consider taking her own life?” Garrett bunched up his paper plate and napkin. “If somebody hurt her, I’ll find out. Believe me. But right now I don’t have the first clue what could have been so bad that she felt driven to do this.”

It wasn’t a pretty picture, Garrett confronting someone who’d hurt his sister. Emma thought his lean build, elegant suit and urban appearance were misleading. If she were stuck in an alley with a muscle-bound guy versus Garrett, she’d take Garrett anytime. His backbone had always been steel, his character too stubborn to ever back down—even when he should.

“She hasn’t been confiding in anyone,” Emma said. “We’ve all asked each other. Everyone wants to help and feels badly. But maybe she’ll start talking now that you’re home.” She hesitated. “I don’t want to say anything negative about your parents, but it’s been pretty obvious that she hasn’t wanted to see them or say anything to them.”

“No surprise there.”

He didn’t say more on that subject, but he didn’t have to. Emma knew his parents. His Keatings were similar to her Dearborns. Both families had serious money. Both families push-pulled their offspring to play the dynasty game by their rules.

Garrett had never been sucked in. Not the way Emma knew she had. But she’d stayed single, fought all her parents’ efforts to marry her off, as a way of drawing the line on their control. They’d ardently wanted her to marry into a “good family,” have offspring to carry on the Dearborn legacy.

Sometimes Emma felt as if Eastwick had a bit in common with medieval castle life. The wealthy crowd she’d grown up with had believed that sex was a commodity, that a “smart” woman made a good match, using any and all tools she had. The women in her pack knew early on that a woman was expected to sexually please a man. It was part of the job—a woman’s job to attract and keep the alpha guys in the pack.

Maybe that was the real world. That’s what people kept telling her. So many people seemed to think that women prettied up relationships by calling them “love,” when reality was survival, and survival for a woman meant nailing the best provider. Sex was a powerful tool for a woman to use to catch the best guy. Friends thought of Emma as naive for believing otherwise. She never argued with them. She just didn’t want to live that way. Maybe there was no fairy tale, but she preferred to live alone than invite a sexual relationship where her performance came with a grade attached.

“What?” Garrett asked her. “From the expression on your face, something’s on your mind.”

She shook her head with a wry smile. Heaven knew why her mind had curved down that road, except that she’d wanted to give Garrett a chance to finish his mini meal in peace. And being with him had provoked memories of that wild, crazy excitement she’d felt with him—nothing to do with grading cards or skills or sex being a commodity. She’d just fiercely wanted him with all her young seventeen-year-old body. But that was a goofy thought path, especially for this moment, when he had so many serious things on his mind. “Where are you staying while you’re home?” she asked him.

“With the parents.” He sighed. “To be honest, staying there’s my last choice in the universe. But at least to start with, I need to get a better picture of what’s going on with my sister. They may not be close to Caroline emotionally, but I’m still hoping they have some clue.”

“It just won’t be restful staying with them?”

“To say the least.” He turned, and it was as if he temporarily forgot all his family worries. Not for long but just for that moment, he looked at her face framed in moonlight, her quiet smile. And suddenly there just seemed the two of them alone in their own private universe. “I’m glad I ran into you.”

So blunt. So like him. “Likewise. It’s good to see you again. Not under these circumstances, but—”

“I’ve thought of you. So many times.” He never dropped his eyes. “I know I hurt you, Emma.”

“Yup. You did. But there’s been a lot of water under the bridge since then. We were both young.”

“I cared. In fact, I loved you.” Again his gaze seemed to sweep her face, her hair, her mouth. All of her. “Don’t think I didn’t. It was never that I wanted to leave you, wanted to hurt you. I was just frustrated and angry at the life I felt forced into here, always at war with my father. I couldn’t stay here.”

“I understood then and now, Garrett. The hurt’s long healed, honestly.” She smiled. “To tell you the truth, I think of you, too. Once the hurt healed...they were just good memories. Nothing like that first feeling of being love, is there? It’s the kind of memory you can take out on a rainy day and just...enjoy.”

“Trust a woman to soften it up. What I remember was a sexual high so damned painful I’m positive I came close to dying from it. All those Friday nights we took a blanket to Silver Point... Remember that? I’d go home and spend the rest of the night in a cold shower.”

She laughed. “Yeah, right.”

He was smiling, yet his eyebrows suddenly lifted in a curious expression. “You don’t believe me?”

“I believe you’re full of the devil, no different than you always were.” She was a long way from the shy teenager who blushed when a guy tried a little flirting. But somehow the look in Garrett’s eyes—the electric energy of being with him again—was putting a hot sizzle in her pulse. She was too physically aware of him for comfort. Quickly, competently, she steered him away from personal topics.

It worked. In fact, it more than worked. As the minutes passed, she felt relieved they’d found a way to talk naturally together again. He obviously needed and wanted to get back to his sister, but these few moments with some fresh air and a little food had eased the taut strain in his expression. He’d so clearly needed to climb off the anxiety train for a bit. So she told him about the current scandal in town—Bunny Baldwin’s death, the infamous missing diaries, everyone worrying about what secrets Bunny had known, Jack Cartright being blackmailed and his marrying Lily and how much happiness had come out of that horrible mess in the long run....

She didn’t talk long, just enough to fill him in on the town’s personalities. The instant he started to look restless, she stood up, and then swiftly so did he.

“I know,” she said without his having to speak up. “You’re going back to Caroline. And I need to head home and get some sleep.”

“I do need to get back upstairs. But for all this catching up, I still didn’t take the chance to ask anything about you.” Quick as a sliver, he asked, “So—you aren’t still on the loose, are you? You in a good marriage?”

“I’m engaged.” The instant the words came out of her mouth, she felt a flush of guilt because, damn, she hadn’t thought of Reed in hours now. Not that she’d done anything wrong. She hadn’t touched Garrett or kissed him or done anything suggestive in any way.

Yet the instant she said engaged, his expression immediately changed. It wasn't as if he stopped smiling at her, but...the lights went off. He quickly closed a door on possibilities that, until that instant, she hadn't realized was open.

Yet on her drive back to the art gallery, alone in the dark, she admitted fibbing to herself.

She might not have touched Garrett, but she'd thought about it.

She might not have taken his personal comments seriously, but her heartbeat had been galloping like a young girl's.

She might not have done anything wrong, but her disloyalty to Reed was still real. And wrong.

Most of the time she lived at her parents' house, where she had a private suite of rooms on the second floor. Often enough, though, she worked late at the gallery and then just stayed in town. Tonight it was already too late to drive home, so she let herself in the back door of Color and slipped off her shoes.

Several years before, she'd converted a small anteroom off the first floor into a home away from home. She kept books, cosmetics, several changes of clothes there, but the room had slowly been filling up with the oddest assortment of treasures. A two-centuries-old Chinese desk, candles wrapped in a necklace of amethysts, a white fur rug by the bed, a narrow Louis XIV mirror...She shook her head at the wild assortment often enough. They were things she loved, but they certainly didn't represent any standard decorating style. The silliest of all was a framed sign—*Shall We Dance in the Kitchen?*—that meant nothing at all, except that sometimes she wished she were that whimsical and romantic. Or that she could be.

Plunking down on the bed, she kicked off her shoes and phoned her parents to let them know she'd be staying in town, then got ready for bed and switched off the light. She was beat, yet somehow she lay there for hours, staring at the film of white curtains whispering in the window. Garrett refused to leave her mind.

It made no sense. He was the wrong man. Reed was the right man, the man she was supposed to be marrying. So why couldn't she stop Garrett from haunting every corner of her thoughts?

In the morning, she promised herself, she'd call Reed. First thing. And until then, she mentally slapped herself upside the head and determined to squash her shameful attitude.

At least she tried to.

Garrett hadn't meant to doze off, but he must have. Because when he opened his scratchy eyes, his neck and knees were cramped from sitting in the straight-back chair. The wall clock claimed more than an hour had passed...and his sister's eyes were open.

He lurched out of the chair, exhaustion forgotten, as he picked up Caroline's hand. He hated hospitals. Never knew what to say or do. But one look at his sister—her face as pale as the sheets, and the sad look in her eyes scaring him—and he wanted to shoot someone.

"Garrett." She said his name as if trying to talk through a mouthful of fuzz. Still, her frail voice managed to communicate relief and love at seeing him.

"I'm sorry I didn't call you back. Beyond sorry," he said fiercely. "I don't know why you did this, sis, and I don't care. I'll help you make it right."

She tried to shake her head. The effort seemed to exhaust her. "You can't. But...glad you came." She licked dry lips. "Love you."

"Love you, too. I want you to rest. We don't have to talk about anything until you're ready. I just want you to know that I'm here. I'll be here. And I won't let anyone pressure you about anything, I swear—"

"Garrett..." Her fingers closed weakly around his wrist. "I know you want to help me. But you can't fix this. No one can. I did something...terrible."

She fell asleep before he could ask anything else, before she could try saying anything else. Garrett wasn't used to anything shaking him, but the defeat and fear in his sister's voice rattled him hard. He sat there, worrying up a storm, until a nurse came in and shooed him out.

He'd have battled the nurse—and won—if he thought there was anything further to gain from staying with Caroline. But right then it was obvious she needed rest more than anything. And if he wanted a chance to get to the bottom of his sister's mess, he needed to get some rest himself.

The Keating estate was a short five miles from town, a two-story brick house set on a hillside, with a curved deck and a sculpted sloping lawn. It loomed in the moonlight like a gothic castle. He used his old house key, let himself in the kitchen entrance and immediately stepped out of his shoes, not wanting to wake his parents or any of the household staff.

It struck his ironic sense of humor that he used to tiptoe just like this when he was a teenager sneaking late into the house. One step into the living room and his big toe crashed into a chair leg. That was a *déjà vu*, too.

Moonlight flooded in the windows, so that once his eyes adjusted he realized his mother had redecorated again. The decor this time seemed to be some French period. Lots of gilt and tassels. Lots of mean furniture legs. Very elegant, if you went for that sort of thing. Garrett didn't, and his toe was stinging like a banshee.

"Garrett!" His father switched on the light from the paneled doors at the stairway.

"Dad." He offered the hug, knowing his father wouldn't think to. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't." Merritt wore pajamas, but his iron-gray hair was brushed, his eyes tired but alert. "Your mother and I are both up. Waiting for you. Hoping you'd gotten something out of Caroline that we didn't."

Upstairs, his parents had a mini living room off their sleeping quarters. Whiskey was poured, neat. His mother pecked his cheek, then curled on the couch in the window seat by the bay windows. "I hope you talked to her," Barbara said immediately.

Garrett plunked down on an oversize footstool. He wasn't about to replay his sister's words. "I stayed for a few hours, but she was sleeping deeply."

"I just don't understand why she'd do this to us!"

Garrett didn't expect either parent to ask how he was, how his life was going. The conversation was immediately about them. "Caroline didn't do anything to you. She did it to herself."

His mother rubbed her temples as if she were at the end of her rope. "That's the point. That's the exact point. Everyone will talk. Especially with all this scandal about Bunny's death and those diaries... Now there's just more fuel to the gossip fire. People could think we did something, when you know we gave that girl every advantage a daughter could possibly have. I swear, Caroline was selfish from the day she was born—"

"Mom. She's troubled. She has to be in major despair over something or she'd never have done this."

"Oh, pfft." Barbara stood up, waving her glass. "She's spoiled and wants attention. Like always. She doesn't think of me or your father. Or our reputation in the community. She has everything she ever wanted in this life, but does she ever think of us?"

Okay. He'd been in his parents' house all of ten minutes and already he wanted to smash a wall. That fast, he remembered why he'd left Eastwick and never looked back.

Later, though, when he lay in bed in the spare room, he recalled how hard it had been to leave his younger sister alone back then. And more than that, how painful it had been to leave Emma.

Right now it just didn't matter if his parents drove him as crazy as they always had. He couldn't leave his sister to the wolves. Until her husband came home from China—and until Garrett was certain she was going to be all right—he was staying here. Which meant he had to find a way to make his business work here for an indefinite period of time.

Before drifting off to sleep, Emma's face whisked into his mind again. Her thick, glossy hair used to swish all the way down her back. Now she wore it shoulder length, but it was still like moonlight on black silk. So raven-dark, so rich, yet with light in every strand. Her soft mouth was as evocative as it had always been. So were those unforgettable eyes, so deep blue they were almost purple. Eyes a guy could get lost in.

God knows he had.

It still puzzled him that she hadn't looked at him like an engaged woman.

And that her classy clothes showed off a successful, poised woman...yet that wasn't how she'd looked at him either.

From the first second their eyes met, he'd suddenly remembered rolling in the grass with her. Stealing kisses after football games. Pressing her up against the locker after school, feeling her breasts against his chest, pretending to be talking about homework. She'd blush and flush and fluster, but then she'd look at him from under those thick black eyelashes. Teasing him. Emma had loved turning him on, loved the power of it, the fun of it, the joy of it. They'd tempted wicked every which way from Sunday. She'd made him hotter than fire—and far more frustrated.

She'd been shy back then, but there'd been no guile to her, no ability to hold back. For sure there'd been no distance. There'd just been all that honest, helpless young-woman heat in her eyes. The dare-you-to-melt-my-bones look. She'd turned him into putty.

And he'd loved dying from all those hard-ons with no release.

But hell and damnation, if she was engaged, how come she'd still looked at him that way? Unguarded, winsome...as if she were dying to feel those feelings again. With a man. With him.

You're imagining all this, he told himself—and knew it was true. He was soul-tired, beyond the ability to think clearly. He needed a good night's sleep—and then he needed to concentrate on his sister.

Not on a woman who was already claimed by someone else.

Three

A few mornings later, Emma stood outside Color with a contractor. She'd been running nonstop, organizing her traditional art show in July, when she'd run into a major maintenance problem.

The contractor hiked up his jeans. "Actually, ma'am, the house didn't suddenly start to sink on that side. The problem was likely developing over a long period of time."

"Well, no one noticed it before." Emma wanted to tear out her hair. A maintenance problem certainly wasn't news. Two-hundred-year-old houses regularly developed ghastly ailments. If it wasn't dry rot one year, it was corroded wiring or termites the next. "I just can't have a big mess right now! Can we put off the work until October?"

"Well, I wouldn't, ma'am."

"You call me ma'am one more time and you won't see October, either," she said crossly, and sighed. "Okay. Let's hear the plan."

"Yeah, well, we're gonna put up new house jacks. Take down your old porch pillars. Reframe pillars around the new house jacks, but hinged, like, so they're accessible. That way we could do this slow, push up that second story a smidgeon at a time. Don't want to crack this pretty foundation, now, do we?"

Emma's eyes narrowed. He was so twinkly. "But why did the house decide to sink now?"

"Taking a wild guess now...but probably because the house is older than the hills and then some?"

"Easy for you to joke. You're going to charge me, what, five figures?"

"Yup, in that general ballpark," he confirmed.

And there was the real rotten apple. Her thirtieth birthday was on August thirty-first—so close now, but not close enough to access the trust fund her grandmother had established for her. In the meantime, she knew her parents would float her the money, but there was always a heavy price tag for those gifts.

To add to the morning's confusion, Josh chose that moment to poke his head out the back door. "Mrs. Dearborn's on the phone, Emma—"

"If you don't mind, just tell my mom I'll call her back, okay? Thanks—"

She'd barely given the contractor the okay to destroy her spring budget when she noticed a woman pause at the gate of the white picket fence. The woman was so familiar and yet not. Years before, Emma had attended high school with a girl who had curly, waist-length hair; wore wildly unconventional clothes and had an irrepressible rebellious streak. This woman was groomed to the teeth, a grown-up debutante by Eastwick standards in every way, yet there was just something... "Mary?" she called out hesitantly. "Mary Duvall? Is that really you?"

"I was wondering if you'd recognize me," the woman said.

"As if I could ever forget you!" Emma flew across the lawn to whisk open the gate and draw her old friend into a huge hug, the day's frustrations immediately forgotten. "I thought you were still in Europe, living the high life. It's wonderful to see you!"

"You, too, Emma. And God, I could smack you. You're as beautiful as ever, except..." Her old school friend laughed as she noted the bit of clay under Emma's fingernails. "What's this?"

"I volunteer a couple of hours a week at the local grief center, working with the little ones—and I mean really little ones, the pre-K set. I do finger painting with them or drawing or clay. Love it..." She chatted on a moment more, trying to absorb the changes in her old friend. Mary had disappeared right after graduation to go party in Europe. She was an artist, Emma had heard. It was just...unnerving to see her dressed like a dowager going to a tea party when she'd always been so flamboyant and unconventional. "What are you doing in town? Any chance you're back for good?"

“I have no idea how long I’ll be here. Right now I’m just here for my grandfather. He’s not well. At his age, there aren’t a lot of great choices, you know? But he can’t be alone, so I’m just going to live with him for a while.” Mary motioned to the Colors sign. “The last time I was home, your gallery was just a dream.”

“She’s still my dream,” Emma admitted with a chuckle and then snapped her fingers. “Say, did you bring any work home with you? Anything you’d like me to display? I have a room for local artists, but especially for you, I’d always find a special spot.”

“Maybe. I did bring some work with me. I figured I’d be sitting with my grandfather a lot, so I might as well set up an easel while I was home.... In the meantime, what’s new with you? Married now, kids or anything?”

“Engaged. To Reed Kelly.”

“You’re kidding! Reed, the horse breeder? The racehorses—”

“Yup, that’s him.”

“He was older than us in school, so I didn’t know him well, but I always thought he was such a great guy—”

“He is, he is....” Yet Emma felt a sudden odd itch in the middle of her back. Nothing painful. Just as if a mosquito had suddenly nailed her.

She purposefully ignored it and talked a few more minutes with Mary until she had to leave, and heaven knew Emma had mountains of work still waiting for her. Messages had accumulated in her office—three from her mother. A fund-raiser her mother wanted to attend, a ribbon cutting on a new boutique, a reception for a visiting senator. Nothing Emma wanted to do. All, she suspected, that she’d get roped into. Josh was framing a set of canvases in the back room—stealing her favorite job, or so she teased him.

She’d just run outside to accept a delivery from UPS when she spotted Garrett hiking down the walk of the real-estate office across the way. He turned in the direction of her gallery—probably because his car was parked on Maple—yet he seemed to glance in her direction almost instinctively.

His smile was immediate. His stride quickened. By the time he’d crossed the street, she had the oddest sensation that he’d been taking her in, head to toe. As a boy, he’d always had those bedroom eyes—but teenage boys always had their minds on one thing. It was completely different feeling assessed—and appreciated—by a man who knew women, who knew how much fun—and how dangerous—the right kind of chemistry could be.

She wasn’t usually self-conscious about her appearance, but this was one of her free days. She’d not only started the morning working with little kids but had also expected to spend the rest of the day with boxes and frames and ladders. Her hair was casually pinned up with a simple enamel clip. She was wearing lipstick and her grandmother’s star-sapphire earrings, but that was it for the fussing. Her twills were ancient, her purple shirt too oversize to be flattering. Yet he seemed to think she looked good, because a sexual charge kindled in his eyes.

She felt exactly the same potent charge...and it scraped on her conscience. That first night, she had excuses—his sister was ill, she hadn’t seen him in so long, she was tired, all that stuff. But now she knew that sizzle was strong, knew it wasn’t right, yet awareness of him still tiptoed up her senses like a wicked secret.

Even so, when she realized that he was obviously headed for her, she did the hospitable thing and met him at the edge of the yard.

“Amazing what riffraff this neighborhood attracts,” she teased.

He laughed. “So this is your gallery?”

“Sure is.” She hesitated, not wanting to invite trouble but feeling the increasing need to understand why he still had such a tormenting pull for her. “I’ve got a mountain of stuff to do—bet you do, too—but come in if you have a few minutes. I’ll get you a cup of coffee, show you around... How’s Caroline?”

He sucked in a breath. “Not great. She’s still not talking—but something clearly happened to her. This isn’t like a chemical depression. Something specifically had to trigger this, something that’s killing her. You haven’t heard any gossip in town?”

“Tons of it. But nothing ever about Caroline. Everyone likes her, Garrett. And everyone was hoping she and Griff would get back together when they hit that rough patch.” She led him inside. “Has anyone reached her husband yet?”

“They keep trying. Messages have been left at all his contact points, so it’s just a matter of him checking in. Deep inside China, communications just aren’t what they are here.”

Josh poked his head out to say hello. She brought out a mug of java for Garrett, then got trapped on the telephone with a customer. By the time she caught up with him, he’d obviously been freely wandering around. “My God, Emma, what you’ve made of this place.”

His enjoyment buoyed her spirits as nothing else could have, so she couldn’t resist showing off some of her favorites. Right inside the lobby was a fish tank—not filled with fish but with a mermaid sculpted in marble and inlaid with precious and semi-precious stones. “I found the artist—and this crazy, wonderful piece—in a tiny jewelry store in upstate New York.”

“One of those who-can-believe-it kind of things? She’s...riveting. Hard to take your eyes off her.”

That was exactly how Emma had always felt. “Come on, I’ll whisk you around upstairs.”

She didn’t have to coax him. Today he was wearing casual chinos, a dark polo. As a teenager, he’d been a workaholic and a hard-core overachiever yet always friendly and gregarious. He was still easy to talk to, but maturity had given him an inner quietness. His emotions didn’t show the way they used to. He had that mover-and-shaker look, that kind of virile, vital energy, even with his emotions locked out of sight. She wondered—she hoped—that he’d found someone to love him. Really love him. Because he seemed vitally alone.

Beware, whispered her hormones.

But she was aware now and had every intention of being careful.

Surely it wasn’t wrong to feel compassion for him, though. His sister was in the middle of a frightening crisis, after all.

She showed him her Oriental lacquer room and the long, skinny hall where she displayed a range of Oriental carpets. She reserved the far east room for women’s art—sculptures, oils, watercolors, cameos of women in all shapes and forms. The west room across the hall echoed a range of art about males—men sleeping, studying, working, fighting, enjoying guy hobbies. Down a few doors was her “room of light,” which displayed work with gems.

“Sheesh, Emma. You’ve put together the most unique gallery I’ve ever seen,” he said. “The way you present everything is just...fun. But it’s also thoughtful and interesting.”

“Quit being so nice. It’s going to my head.” But damn, it was nice to share her love. She’d put a ton of thought into every room, every piece she used for display, every artist she chose to represent. “Hey, you haven’t said what you were doing at the real-estate office. You suddenly thinking about buying property in Eastwick?”

“When hell freezes over,” he said wryly, but he motioned to the sheaf of papers under his arm. “I picked up a list of short-term rentals from the agent.”

“I thought you’d planned to stay home?”

“So did I.” His tone was rueful. “I should have known that wouldn’t work. But now that I’ve been around Caroline, talked to her doctors, I’m afraid I’m going to be here for a while. At least a few weeks.”

“Oh, Garrett. You’re that worried your sister isn’t going to recover from this?”

“I just don’t know. In fact, all I know is that I can’t leave her. And I’ll likely get on better with my parents if I’m not under their feet—and they’re not under mine.” He walked into the upstairs bathroom—just to see what she’d done in there, as if he knew she’d done something. And she had.

The ceiling was a mural of graphic comic art, all superheroes. He came out chuckling—and claiming to have a crook in his neck—but he pretty swiftly returned to their conversation.

“Anyway...I decided I’d better look for some alternative living arrangement. So far, though, I’m not thrilled with the places the real-estate agent came up with. All of them are a distance from town. I don’t want that, don’t want to stay in a hotel either. It’s easy enough for me to fly or helicopter into New York several times a week. All I need is a simple place to set up a temporary office. A bed, a mini kitchen. Some quiet. A place to set up a computer, fax, printer, that sort of thing. I don’t want anything fancy or far.”

She frowned thoughtfully as she led him back downstairs. “If you want a place in town, I actually know of one. Just two doors down, in fact.”

Garrett raised an eyebrow. “The agent claimed there was nothing close in town.”

“That’s because it’s not on the formal market.” She explained the situation. Most of the old homes on the block used to be residential, but they’d been gradually turning into businesses—lawyers, accountants, psychologists, brokers, that kind of thing. Not the kind of commerce that required big parking needs, but quiet enterprises that were willing to maintain the historical flavor of the buildings. “Anyway, my neighbor, Marietta Collins, is a holdout. She rented her upstairs to a boarder, a writer, only he recently moved. She didn’t list it because she only wants to rent to friends of friends. I have no idea what the place looks like, Garrett, so maybe it won’t suit you at all. But if you like, I could call her...”

He did like. It only took Emma a second to dial and find out the place was still available for rent. Garrett blinked at the price.

“I can’t imagine why she’s giving it away.”

“Well, it could be a clunker. But I think she just really wants someone she can trust living above her.”

“Good thing you had pull, huh?” From the amused sparkle in his eyes, Garrett was obviously not used to anyone having to pull strings for him—likely it was usually the other way around.

“Well, you’d better see it before you get your hopes up. You might decide the real-estate agent had better ideas for you.”

“There really isn’t much to rent. You know how Eastwick is. Everyone wants to own. And no one’s looking to encourage transients.”

She had to laugh at the idea of Garrett being considered a transient. And though he expressed concern over stealing any more of her workday, she walked over to the place with him. She knew Marietta would be uneasy without a personal introduction—and she was also a little worried what she might have gotten him into. If the place was a disaster, she didn’t want him to feel obligated to take it because of her.

Marietta Collins took one look at Garrett, beamed and promptly gave them the key to check out the upstairs at their leisure.

Emma’s impression of the apartment was the opposite of Garrett’s. “Well, it isn’t exactly a garret, Garrett, but—”

“That pun is sick. I’ve always liked a sick sense of humor in a woman.”

She had to chuckle—but the apartment was hardly what Garrett must be used to. A few centuries before, the structure had been a tavern where customers slept upstairs—apparently next to each other, since there was only one main room. Obviously the details had been modernized, but the core architecture had been preserved. The mellow old floorboards creaked and groaned, but they’d obviously been treasured, because they were polished to a high gleam. Honey-pine paneling framed a small stone fireplace. The bathroom was strictly utilitarian, but the tiny kitchen area had an eating nook tucked under a graceful Palladian window, shaded by giant elms just outside.

“The furniture’s the pits,” Emma said ruefully.

Garrett was checking out every window view. “Spoken like a woman,” he teased. “There’s a couch and a chair. What more do I need?”

“Some lamps. Some pictures. Some rugs,” she fussed.

“It’s got a decent desk.” He motioned to the relic that may—may—have been a teacher’s desk in some century past. Emma loved antiques, but in this case she thought someone should have had the sense to throw it out—in that same century past.

“I guess I just assumed there’d be a separate bedroom.” Instead a double bed was tucked in a side alcove, slanted under the eaves.

“This way there’ll be lots of airflow. Ideal in the summer.”

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