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The SEAL's
Stolen Child

LAURA MARIE ALTOM

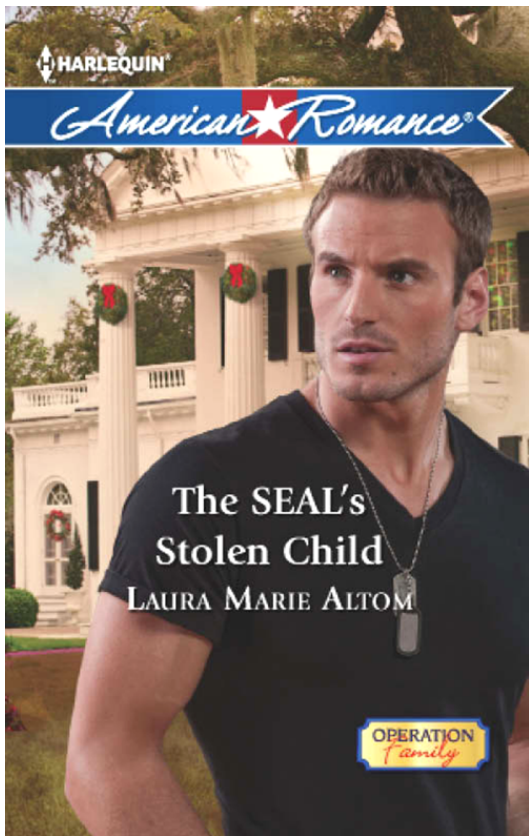
OPERATION
Family

Laura Marie Altom

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Аннотация

A Man On A MissionHe's defended his country and upheld the code of the Navy SEALs, but Garrett Solomon has never faced a mission quite like this. As teenagers, he and Eve Barnesworth were passionately in love. Eve's unplanned pregnancy only deepened his commitment to her. But Eve's powerful father, fearing a scandal, whisked her away. As far as Garrett and Eve knew, their baby had died – and with it, their love.Years later, the loss and betrayal still pain Garret deeply. Then comes shocking news: The child is still alive. Determined to find their stolen son, Garrett and Eve join forces. Working together is strictly business... until it isn't. Because it seems their powerful attraction – like the child they once thought was gone forever – is still very much alive.



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love. Eve's unplanned pregnancy only deepened his commitment to her. But Eve's powerful father, fearing a scandal, whisked her away. As far as Garrett and Eve knew, their baby had died—and with it, their love. Years later, the loss and betrayal still pain Garrett deeply.

Then comes shocking news: the child is still alive. Determined to find their stolen son, Garrett and Eve join forces. Working together is strictly business...until it isn't. Because it seems their powerful attraction—like the child they once thought was gone forever—is still very much alive.

“Want to dance?”

A slow song played and the floor filled with couples. The lighting was low and thousands of white Christmas lights twinkled on the wood-beamed ceiling.

“Ah, sure.” Garrett set his beer on the bar, then held out his hand to help her down. Eve's heels set her indecipherable stare at nearly his eye level, and wondering what was running through that pretty head of hers was making him nuts.

With his hands low on her hips and her cheek pressed to his chest, Garrett couldn't remember a time he'd been more confused. Holding her felt right. As if all that time between them had been erased and they were back in their high-school gym.

Could she feel the chaotic beat of his heart?

Eve looked up. Her eyes were shiny, but the hard set to her jaw said she wasn't about to let anything ruin their night.

He wanted to kiss her. Damn, he wanted to kiss her....

Dear Reader,

As I'm putting the final touches on Eve and Garrett's story, it's Mother's Day here in my "real" world. If you've read any of my previous books, you may have noticed I have an affection for children of all ages and when it comes to my own, I'm the world's biggest softy!

Because of my Mama Bear love for my brood, I struggled with the resolution to this story. While I won't give it away, it produced a surprising debate and made me really think about the way I might have handled the situation had it happened to me.

Especially on Mother's Day, I've always been happiest with my babies on my lap, but alas, they kind of grew up on me! My twins are twenty and my Russell will soon be twenty-one! When they were all little, I used to think those were the tough days, but now I know better. Diapers and late-night feedings have nothing on soothing broken hearts or proofing college papers.

My wish for all of you moms out there—and dads—is for you to always have your kids close, no matter their ages, if not physically, then at least in spirit. When it comes to love, as Eve and Garrett discover, no problem is insurmountable...just more of a challenge than they'd ever expected!

Happy reading!

Laura Marie

The SEAL'S Stolen Child

Laura Marie Altom



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After college (Go, Hogs!), bestselling, award-winning author Laura Marie Altom did a brief stint as an interior designer before becoming a stay-at-home mom to boy-girl twins and a bonus son. Always an avid romance reader, she knew it was time to try her hand at writing when she found herself replotting the afternoon soaps.

When not immersed in her next story, Laura teaches art at a local middle school. In her free time, she beats her kids at video games, tackles Mount Laundry and of course reads romance!

Laura loves hearing from readers at either P.O. Box 2074, Tulsa, OK 74101, or by email, BaliPalm@aol.com.

Love winning fun stuff? Check out www.lauramariealtom.com.

Competition for book dedications in this house is fierce, and this time, my not-so-little Terry won. He's had a rough year, but just finished a great semester at school and his father and I couldn't be more proud.

Love you, sweetie. I'm so excited to see what wonderful surprises your future holds.

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Chapter One

“Garrett, thank you for coming.” November rain fell in wind-driven sheets just beyond Barnesworth Mansion’s two-story colonnade. Eve Barnesworth leaned against the imposing mahogany door, fingering her triple strand of pearls. “Calling this moment merely awkward would be the world’s biggest understatement.”

He cleared his throat, brushing past her with a nod. “That

about sums it up.”

“Can I take your coat?” Ever the perfect hostess, Eve held out her arms, glad to replace the inevitable hell to come with routine.

He shrugged off his rain-splattered pea jacket, handing it to her with a half smile. In the eight years since circumstance ripped them apart and she’d left their small Florida town, Garrett had changed from boy to man. He seemed taller. He’d become a navy SEAL, and the breadth of his chest and shoulders told the story of how physically powerful he’d become. His hair used to be on the long side when she could’ve spent hours fingering his curls. Now he wore it in a painfully neat regulation crew cut that struck her as distant and cold as his impenetrable gray eyes. In high school, she’d known every nuance and expression of his dear face. With time and tragedy between them—and more anger than she’d sometimes thought her heart could bear—she doubted she’d have even recognized him as her first love had they met in a crowd.

He cleared his throat, his gaze landing on the entry hall’s chandelier. “You, ah, look well.”

“Thank you.” But have you bothered to take one long look at me since you stepped in the door? On such an upsetting occasion, it was understandable she’d be a well of emotions. Being on the verge of losing her father—her everything—was hard enough without tossing this reunion into the mix. Not sure what to do with her hands, she clasped them neatly against the small of her back. “Like I said on the phone, Daddy hasn’t even told me what

it is he has to say.”

“Right.” A nerve ticked on his hard, square jaw as Garrett nodded. “Well, I don’t mean to rush something like this, but your dad and I have never exactly been close and with me only in town on holiday leave, we’ve got a houseful of folks at Mom’s holding our Turkey Day dinner until I get home.”

“Of course.” Reading between the lines, Eve got the gist of Garrett’s words. He didn’t give a damn about her beloved father’s deathbed request to see him any more than he’d cared to talk to her all those years ago. “I’ll take you to Daddy’s room.”

* * *

TRAILING EVE UP AN ENDLESS flight of marble stairs, carefully avoiding the sight of her rounded derriere, Garrett Solomon might as well have been in the Buxton County courthouse for all the warmth this place contained. Because Eve’s father, Hal, had been Coral Ridge’s mayor—like her grandfather—for the past forty years, it’d been dubbed the Mayoral Mansion.

Garrett preferred the Snob Hill nickname one of his football pals had thought up. Regardless of the name, the sentiment was the same—enter the old place at your own risk. Garrett might be a SEAL now, but back when he’d been sixteen, sneaking up the servants’ staircase to Eve’s room, he’d had no idea how many years of torment the occupants of this house would cause him.

“Just a little farther,” Eve said, casting a half smile over her shoulder.

Right. The hall was wide enough to drive a VW Bug.

“Good. You’re both here.” Grim-faced Dr. Mulligan slapped his newspaper against the empty half of a brown leather settee. Garrett hadn’t seen the man since he’d broken his arm at thirteen. “Hal’s been calling for you, but gave me the boot.”

“Sounds like Daddy...” Teary-eyed, Eve hugged the salt-and-pepper-haired doctor. “I—I can’t thank you enough for being here. It’s been a horrible few days.”

“Agreed.” The doctor stood, pulling open double doors that led into a dark room lit only by a bedside lamp. Antiseptic overrode the more putrid smells of sickness and pending death. Countless missions had taught Garrett that death indeed had a smell and it wasn’t pretty.

A uniformed nurse sat near the patient, reading from the Bible. The old man had taken on religion a little late in life. “Mr. Barnesworth—” the woman moved to the foot of the bed, making room for Eve to stand near her father “—Eve is here.”

“Garrett?” The old man’s voice scratched as if he’d dined on sandpaper.

“I’m here.” Though Garrett preferred the shadows, he stepped into the lamp’s glow.

“Come closer,” Hal said after a few shallow coughs.

“Daddy—” Eve perched on the side of his bed, taking his hand “—we can come back later if you’re not feeling up for a talk.”

“Nonsense.” Waving toward the nurse and doctor, he managed through another round of coughs to dismiss them both. “Can’t die in peace with this on my heart.”

Garrett had been in a lot of strange places, but this one beat them all. The imposing, dark-paneled room housing a canopied bed suitable for royalty was about as welcoming as stepping into a museum exhibit. Not even the fire crackling in the hearth provided warmth.

“Go ahead, Daddy. Garrett and I are listening.”

“We a-alone?”

His daughter nodded.

“Your baby—” Hal surrendered to another fit of coughs.

The old man’s words tightened Garrett’s chest.

If prideful Hal Barnesworth hadn’t forced teenage Eve into some random, far-off home for unwed mothers, if Garrett had been allowed to care for her as he’d wanted, their baby might’ve lived.

“It’s okay, Daddy. I forgive you for making me go.”

With a violent shake of his head, the old man croaked, “No. N-not about that.”

Garrett wasn’t forgiving squat.

He might’ve been only seventeen when Hal told him his newborn son died, but that hadn’t lessened the pain. Even years later, during mission com-blackouts, his mind couldn’t resist playing a few rounds of what-ifs, plotting how different his life might be if not only his son had lived, but if Eve had cared enough about them both to stay in Coral Ridge.

“Y-your son,” Hal whispered. “I’m sorry, but—” More coughs erupted.

Silent tears glistened on Eve's cheeks. Garrett knew the right thing would be going to her, offering her comfort during this obviously difficult time, but his feet felt frozen to the floor. Eve and her father once made his life a living hell. Could he now be blamed for not caring if the great Hal Barnesworth lived or died?

"Daddy, please." Eve gripped her father's gnarled hands. "Save your energy. Maybe if you rest, you'll feel better?"

After a particularly violent round of coughs, the already gaunt man seemed to shrink within himself. "Y-your son isn't d-d-dead."

"Shh..." Patting his hands, Eve said, "You're delusional. My baby died a long time ago. Like you said, it was for the best, right? His poor little heart couldn't support him. It was good he didn't suffer."

Really, Eve? You're drinking that Kool-Aid? How had losing their son been a good thing?

"I l-lied." More coughs.

"About what?" Interest finally piqued, Garrett moved closer to the bed.

"Your son's alive. I—I took him. I—" More coughs made his next few words inaudible, then he rasped, "My precious E-Eve... I'm sorry... I l-love... f-for best." He took a few deep, gasping breaths, then passed out.

"Daddy? Please, wake up. Tell me what you mean." Eve wrapped her arms around her father, hugging him to her. "Dr. Mulligan!"

The bedroom's doors burst open as the doctor hustled to the bed. "What happened?"

"One minute he was t-talking—" Eve wiped tears from her cheeks "—and then he—"

The doctor brushed her aside to check her father's vitals. "His blood pressure's dropped substantially in the past hour. Exhaustion's taking a toll."

"Do something!" Eve shrieked. "Call an ambulance."

"I'm sorry." The physician took a stethoscope from his suit coat pocket, gently nudging Eve aside. "Your dad signed a living will. With cancer and now pneumonia, he knew his time was coming and wished no extraordinary measures be taken to prolong the inevitable."

With Eve sobbing, hands over her face, and the doctor and nurse hovering over Hal, Garrett wasn't sure what to do. No doubt the old guy's words were just crazy ramblings. Also, knowing Hal, he'd no doubt wake in the morning—a good thing as he had major explaining to do.

Garrett knew he should be comforting Eve, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He couldn't believe Hal Barnesworth might actually be dying, let alone that his confession may be true. Garrett's mind raced. His head knew this talk about their baby had to be just one more of Hal's manipulations, but why? What did he have to gain? If there was so much as a grain of truth to what the old man said, where was their son now?

Chills ran through him. So much emotion he feared he might

be sick. Forcing himself to hold it together, Garrett drew on his training to force deep, calming breaths.

To the nurse, the doctor said in a hushed tone, “Please put ointment on Mr. Barnesworth’s lips.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

Eve cried harder. “Ointment? Th-that’s all you’re going to do?”

The doctor ushered Eve into the hall.

Garrett followed, shutting the door behind him.

With his arm around Eve’s slumped shoulders, the doctor said, “You have to understand, little things that help him be more comfortable are all your father wants us to do. Even if he didn’t, drastic measures would only prolong the inevitable.”

Begrudgingly, knowing it was the right thing, Garrett went to her, attempting a hug, only she pushed him away. “You hate him. Don’t even try pretending you don’t.”

“Eve...” Not knowing what to do with his hands, Garrett crammed them into his pockets. “What I do or don’t feel for your father has nothing to do with what we just heard. Think about it. I don’t have a clue why, but your father has to be lying. You need to pull yourself together so when he wakes, we can drill him as to why he really wanted me here.”

“I agree. What he said c-can’t be true,” she managed to cry between more sobs. “Daddy wouldn’t do that to me. He wouldn’t be that cruel.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. You heard him—for the best? As

in just like he controlled whether or not you were allowed to have a relationship with me. Seems your old man's playing games all over again."

"Stop!" Eve turned her back on him, but Garrett wasn't having it. She wasn't running from this, the way she had after their son's death.

"I, ah, need to make a call." Dr. Mulligan waved his phone before leaving the two of them alone.

"Look—" Garrett placed his hands on her shoulders and gently turned her to face him "—I'm sorry your dad's sick. I know you two are close. But if there's even the slightest chance what he said is true, we have to find out more. Hopefully, Hal's going to wake up. And when he does, we have to question him for definitive answers. We—"

"What's wrong with you? He's dying. But if there's any hope of him hanging on, I can't risk upsetting him again."

The doctor had returned and now paused alongside Garrett. "Maybe it's best you leave. I'm going to give Eve a sedative, and my nurse will stay with Hal through the night."

Tossing up his hands, Garrett laughed. "There we go with that word again—best. Oh, I'll leave for the night but, Eve, you've got exactly twelve hours until I'm back."

* * *

GARRETT'S FAMILY MAY have been waiting for him, but considering he'd just come out on the wrong end of playing emotional catch with a grenade, he wasn't ready to see them.

He'd have liked a hard run to work off the tension knotting his shoulders, but considering the Thanksgiving Day weather, he opted for the less healthy alternative of Schmitty's.

The bar and burger joint was good and dark. High wooden booths allowed for privacy. Loud '70s rock made it damn near impossible to think. When the waitress stopped by his table, he ordered a pitcher of beer. But once she brought it, he was too shell-shocked to drink.

Hal's revelation had Garrett pissed. Actually he was beyond pissed. He had passed into some bizarre state he hadn't been in since he was seventeen and the old man told him his son had died. Logically, hearing the opposite should've sent his spirit soaring, but it wasn't that easy. On the off chance what the old man said had been true, even all-powerful Hal Barnesworth couldn't turn back time to rest that baby in Garrett's loving arms. And he would've loved his kid. Eve, too. They could've had it all, but their futures had been manipulated as though they'd been puppets on strings.

Their every choice had been stolen.

Worse yet, Eve seemed more concerned about her father's passing than the news that their son may actually be alive.

Chalk him up as a horrible person, but Garrett sure as hell wouldn't be sorry to see Hal Barnesworth go.

While all around him seeds of a good time were watered by beer and burgers into louder conversation and laughs, Garrett's mood grew proportionally darker. What if this was just the grand

finale to Hal's puppet show? Garrett wouldn't put it past him to lie for the twisted amusement of seeing Eve and Garrett dance. But if Hal had spoken the truth? That meant somewhere out there Garrett and Eve had a son. Garrett's Thanksgiving leave was only a week, which didn't offer much time to find a child gone eight years. Even if Garrett eventually found him, what happened then? Was the kid happy and healthy? Assuming he was, then what? There wasn't exactly an Idiot's Guide written on how to tell an eight-year-old you were his dad.

Covering his face with his hands, Garrett struggled to find answers where there were none. He'd hoped to seek solace in the pitcher on the table, but had yet to take a drink. In order to process Hal's revelation he needed clarity, not a good buzz.

After thirty more minutes staring at the initials carved into the backrest of the wooden seat across from him, he finally paid his tab and exited the warm bar.

The night had grown even more ugly, wind driving rain so hard against his face that the drops nipped like teeth. In the car, he couldn't focus. Soaked, cold, his hands shook so bad it was a battle to work his Mustang's manual gearshift. While his mother lived only a few miles away at the foot of Coral Ridge's lone hill, the few-minutes' drive lasted a minilifetime.

Finally, he parked in front of the modest ranch-style home where his mom lived alone since his fireman father had died while on duty a few years back. Having nagged Garrett for grandchildren, what would she think of this possible twist of

fate?

The Barnesworths were Florida royalty, local gods. After an obligatory round of questions ranging from what the house looked like to what designer Eve had been wearing, his mother finally got around to asking, “So? How was seeing Eve again? Is Hal as sick as she led you to believe?”

“Who knows?” Garrett shrugged off his coat, hanging it on a rack beside the door. “He’s for sure bad off, but I wouldn’t put it past him to rally, then live fifty more years just to torture me.”

“Oh, dear...” Dina Solomon leaned forward from her seat on the couch. “What did he talk about?”

Garrett sighed, wishing for privacy instead of an audience consisting of not only his mom, but maternal grandparents, his mom’s sister Carol, brother-in-law Todd and their son, Zane. “I’m not sure I should say. Probably his big confession isn’t even true.”

“Now,” Dina said, “you have to tell us.” The group sat in the formal living room near the fire, being teased by the rich scent of Thanksgiving dinner still on hold in the kitchen. His mom usually went overboard when it came to decorating for holidays and this one was no exception. Life-size stuffed pilgrims stood smiling in a far corner, framed by dried cornstalks and, of course, a stuffed turkey.

“Bet the old man left Garrett a bundle,” his twenty-year-old cousin Zane said.

“Put a sock in it.” Garrett thumped the back of the kid’s

head. “Well, I can’t believe it, but Eve and I might still share a connection.”

Ashen, his mother—the only person present who’d known what he’d been through—frowned. “What’s that mean? I thought this was the first time you’ve seen her since she left for—” she stopped herself from blurting where Eve had really gone “—finishing school?”

“It was.”

“I went to an Easter egg hunt on the mansion grounds when I was a little girl.” Grandma Fern sipped from her ever-present martini. The woman was already a touch senile. Why was his mom adding liquor to her already addled mind? “The gardens were like something from a fairy tale. Are they still as fancy?”

“I don’t know, Grandma. It was dark and raining.”

Dina adjusted the throw pillow nestled near the small of her mother’s back. “I’m sure they’re just as gorgeous as you remember.” To Garrett, she said, “Go on, hon. What did Hal say?”

Tired of keeping everything secret, Garrett told them the whole story—including Hal summoning him to the mansion to inform him his son had been stillborn. Eve moved from the unwed mothers’ home to an East Coast college prep school, then on to college. He hadn’t spoken to her since she’d left town carrying his son. “Tonight, Hal coughed so hard he could hardly speak, but what he did manage to get out...” Garrett shook his head. “Hal said my son’s alive.”

Garrett's mom clutched the gold cross she always wore on a thin chain around her neck. "I have a grandson. Where is he? I want to see him now."

"Slow down." Garrett helped himself to someone's abandoned glass of white wine. "I'm having a hard time believing this is even true. If it is, our son may be out there, but Hal didn't say where. I'm going back in the morning. Hopefully, he'll tell us more. But my gut feeling is that it's a lie."

"Hal wouldn't lie on his deathbed. You'll find your son," Garrett's grandpa Ira assured him.

"Where's Eve now?" his mother asked.

"I assume with Hal. Best as I could, I tried comforting her, but she pushed me away."

"As much as we all want you here," his grandmother said, "you should go to her. I remember when her mother died like it was yesterday. Marianne Barnesworth was a lady through and through. Each public appearance, she and Eve were always matching, only Eve had that blond hair of hers fastened up in a big bow. When Marianne died in that car crash, the whole town nearly shut down. And the funeral—saddest thing ever. Eve looked so small and alone. Those horrible photos of her standing graveside were published in most every paper in the state. Such a fragile little girl."

"Yeah—" Garrett shook his head "—well, now she's all grown-up and more than ever, wants nothing to do with me."

* * *

AT 1:57 FRIDAY MORNING, Eve's father died.

She refused the sedative the doctor had left and dismissed the nurse. What she needed was privacy—not coddling.

Hugging a bottle of merlot, grateful the staff and her father's longtime housekeeper, Juanita, were off with family for the holidays, she returned to her father's room. The coroner had taken her father's body a while ago and the nurse had changed the bed linens and removed all signs of this having been a makeshift hospital room. Even the sick scents had been sanitized away. Now all that remained of her once strong father was the faint trace of his spicy cologne.

Seated in a wing chair before the dancing fire, Eve poured the wine, but left her glass on the side table, too exhausted to lift it to her mouth.

Eyes closed, she struggled to wrap her mind around his words. Your son isn't dead. I lied. For best.

"Daddy," she whispered, "how could you?"

With her father's cancer, her divorce from Matthew only a year behind her, two miscarriages before that, she was afraid to hope she might truly have a son. For so long her mind had been focused on grief, she was afraid to even hope for light.

Lately, aside from work, it seemed her life had been nothing but a succession of grief-filled episodes. It'd been so long since she'd truly been happy, she feared permanently losing her smile.

But with this news...

She fumbled for her wineglass, taking a fortifying sip.

She'd loved Garrett more than she'd thought it possible to love. The only time she'd ever fought her father was when he'd sent her away. How different would her life be had she stayed? Faced the ridicule of her classmates and no doubt the whole town? How hard could it have been compared to losing Garrett? Their son?

My father. His admission compounded the pain of her most recent loss. Not only was he physically gone from her life, but she wasn't sure he was the man she'd forever admired. Forget the fact he was her dad—the one person she'd always believed unconditionally had her back. Where was his soul? Who told his own daughter her child died, then justified it by saying it was for the best? When was a lost child ever best?

Eve pressed the heels of her hands to her forehead and struggled to make sense out of a night that'd been sheer chaos.

Abandoning her wine, Eve sought her room—not the nondescript luxury guest room she'd slept in since leaving Matthew the year before, but the space she'd occupied in what felt like another life.

As dusty and disorganized as the place felt in her mind, it came as a shock to find it in pristine condition—as if none of the memorabilia, pictures and uniforms had actually been used, but were merely props for a catalog diorama.

Eve fingered her cheerleading skirt, recalling the thrill of working the crowd at her first varsity game. Of Garrett kissing her after that game. He'd scored his first varsity-team touchdown and she'd rewarded him with what started out to be seven kisses,

but ended as so much more. Her gaze skipped to history and chemistry texts that'd never been returned. To snapshots of her friends making faces in the locker room before that long-ago season's first basketball game. Garrett's Christmas gift—a giant stuffed alligator—still sporting his big, red bow. Folded love letters that'd been passed during class were in a box she'd decoupled with magazine clippings she'd found in Coral Ridge High's blue-and-gold colors.

Having left school in January, she'd never gotten yearbooks for her junior and senior years, but as she perched on the foot of her bed, she flipped through page after page of sophomore memories, chest aching when tracing Garrett's image on the page they'd shared for being on the homecoming court. Funny how pics of her ex-husband, Matt, only made her angry. Seeing Garrett reminded her how rich and full her life at fifteen had been compared to now.

Two pages were dedicated to the class trip they'd taken to Disney World. Space Mountain had not only terrified her, but given her a wicked case of motion sickness. Garrett hadn't pressed her to get over it, like some of his jock friends. He'd bought her a Sprite with his precious lawn-mowing money, then held her hand while they'd explored what most of their crowd considered to be the more childish sections of the park. They'd ridden the boats on the "It's a Small World" ride five times, always laughing and singing along. That day, with Garrett by her side, she'd felt like the luckiest girl alive. Like nothing or no one

would ever break them apart.

Throat aching for the many losses she'd suffered, she touched the tip of her finger to the phone number he'd childishly written on the photo sideways up his tie. They'd moved, necessitating the change to his home line. He'd wanted a cell, but his parents refused. How many times had she called? Lying on her pink striped comforter, talking with him until his mom yelled for him to go to bed.

Eyeballing the phone on her nightstand, knowing Garrett's mom still lived in the same house, Eve couldn't help but wonder if the family number was also the same. If so, who would answer? Dina? What would she say? If Eve asked for Garrett, would his mother pass him the phone?

As badly as she'd earlier wished to be alone, she now craved her old boyfriend's company—not for any romantic sentiments—all of those were long gone. More to verify she hadn't been dreaming. That there really was a chance she might be a mother.

On autopilot, she lifted the handset. The low, flat dial tone seemed to fill the room, much the same as her pounding pulse reverberated in her ears.

Chapter Two

Garrett planned to be at Eve's by sunrise, but his mom talked him into the more reasonable hour of nine. A mistake. In the night, Hal had indeed died. The place now crawled with attorneys and funeral-home suits.

Upon ringing the front doorbell, he'd been greeted by a

uniformed maid, then shown to the solarium. “Ms. Barnesworth will be with you shortly.”

“Thanks.”

This had been Eve’s favorite room. Was it still?

Garrett had to admit, it was pretty cool. Outside, it was fifty and raining, yet in here the weather was always in the balmy eighties, smelling of loamy earth and sweet orchids. Beneath the domed glass ceiling resided a tropical rain forest, complete with palm trees, blooming hibiscus and a pair of huge, red lorries. He couldn’t believe the birds were still alive. What were their names? Rhett and Scarlett? Brick paths meandered alongside a slow-moving stream. In the massive room’s center were wrought-iron tables surrounding a splashing, three-tiered fountain.

Garrett had a seat, trying to let the soothing surroundings calm his erratic thoughts. What if Hal’s deathbed ramblings were true, and he and Eve did share a son? He was no P.I., and didn’t have a clue how to find a child who no doubt Hal had wanted to remain lost.

“I almost called you.” When Eve appeared, his pulse soared. She wore a figure-skimming black dress and matching pumps. Her long blond hair had been restrained in a fancy updo he didn’t much like. This flawless woman wasn’t the Eve his memory knew. He’d first loved her messy, wearing her red-and-white cheer warm-ups with a crooked ponytail, painting homecoming posters while sitting on the gym floor. A lousy painter, she’d always managed to get more on her and her surroundings than

whatever she was supposed to be creating.

“Why didn’t you?”

She shrugged, joining him at the table. “What would we have said? All of this seems easier handled in person.”

“Probably true.”

Hands clasped, she said, “Daddy’s lawyer will be here soon. I find it easier to think out here than in my father’s office.”

“Agreed. Last time I was in there wasn’t good.”

“What did he say?”

Her question and overall fragility threw him off guard. How many times had he rehearsed what he’d do should their paths ever cross? Yet now, all of that escaped him. Her complexion pale, body rail thin, his sole thought was to wonder when she’d last had a decent meal.

Garrett cleared his throat. “Hal told me our baby died and that you’d chosen to complete your basic education in a Connecticut finishing school. Had Google been what it is now, I probably could’ve found you, but...” He shrugged. “Water under the bridge.”

She stared past him, deep into her own world. “I was so devastated over losing the baby, I just did what I was told. To go from feeling life growing inside you, to grueling hours of lonesome labor, only to come out on the other side with my arms empty, I...”

“For what it’s worth, I hurt, too. I used to have nightmares you’d died. I spent so much time moping my folks took me to a

shrink. I know you loved your father, but I've gotta tell you, the man meant nothing but trouble to me.”

“Good. You're both here.” Barry Stevens had been Hal's personal attorney, friend and Coral Ridge bigwig for decades. Every edition of the Coral Ridge Gazette carried an ad for the guy's law firm featuring the Scales of Justice, along with Barry's meticulous swoop of white hair and supersize smile. Though they'd never formally met, the lawyer extended his hand and worked his trademark smile as if they were long-lost friends. “Garrett, good to see you. Each and every one of us here in town is darned proud of all you've accomplished.”

“Thank you, sir.” Garrett would've preferred a more flippant retort but, for Eve's sake, kept his sarcasm to himself. If he'd been president, it wouldn't have been good enough for Garrett to be with Hal's little girl.

“Okay.” Barry set a few files on the table before taking his seat. “Eve has filled me in on her father's deathbed confession and in doing so, I believe, given me just cause to break attorney-client privilege.”

“Wait...” The comprehension of this suit's admission hit Garrett harder than any stray bullet. So it was true? He actually had a son? Mind spinning, chest tight, he found it hard to breathe. During the endless night, he'd convinced himself the whole thing was a cruel joke. That in the morning, Hal would pop out of bed with his pompous barrel laugh, bragging about how he'd gotten them good. “You knew about this from day one, yet did nothing

to stop it?”

“Slow down there, partner.” Barry tidied his files. “My hands were tied.”

Eve started to cry.

“The only thing Hal told me—and this was only after a couple glasses of Macallan Scotch—was that your son hadn’t died. I pressed him for more, told him you both had a right to know, but he admitted neither of you had even wanted the baby, so this resolution was best. Absolved you both from any guilt, so you’d feel free to get on with your lives.”

Barry reached out to comfort Eve, but she pushed him away. “Don’t touch me.”

The lawyer held up his hands. “I’m sorry. I advised Hal he’d handled the whole situation poorly, but he was insistent no one ever know.”

“Where is our son now?” Garrett pressed clenched fists to his knees. There was so much he wanted—needed—to say, but what would going off on this guy solve?

“God’s honest truth?” Barry’s expression was sober. “I don’t have a clue.”

* * *

“HOW COULD HE DO THIS to me—us?” Seated in her father’s oversize leather desk chair, Eve felt lost. Barry and his crew had long since left and she’d learned Hal had preplanned his funeral down to which hymns he wanted sung and what he wanted to wear. She’d known her father liked to be in charge,

but one more revelation about just how controlling he truly had been might send her over the edge.

Garrett glanced up from the file he sifted through. “Wish there was something I could say or do. Pretty much from day one, I didn’t hit it off with your old man, but I get how to you, he hung the moon. You’ve gotta feel like you’re losing him twice.”

“Yeah.” It was uncanny how even after all the years between them, Garrett still knew her thoughts. Much more time together and they’d be back to finishing each other’s sentences. “Find anything?”

He flashed her a half smile. “You own a cabin in Aspen.”

“Swell.” Covering her face with her hands, she sighed. “All this money, yet I’d trade every cent to turn back time.”

“What would you do different?” He moved on to the next folder in a cabinet filled with hundreds—none labeled.

What a loaded question.

Would she go back far enough just to claim their baby? Or further still so that they’d never shared their first joke, kiss or attempt at making love?

“More like what wouldn’t I do?” Cheeks superheated, she dived into her own file relating to the buying and selling of Exxon stock.

“You regret us ever being together?”

“I didn’t say that.” She moved on to the next file. “I just meant I’ve made a lot of mistakes.”

“One of them being me?”

“Seriously?”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t the one who for all practical purposes vanished. If you’d wanted, you could’ve found me a dozen different ways.”

“It wasn’t that easy,” she lied. So what if she had called him or written? What good would it have done?

“My point, exactly. Because from my way of thinking, if you’d have told me where you were, I’d have done anything in my power to get you back. Hell, steal a car if I’d had to. That’s how much you—” Suddenly he slapped his latest file to the finished stack and pushed himself up from the floor. “I’ve gotta get out of here. Clear my head.”

“Garrett...”

The look he shot over his shoulder was painfully cold. “What?”

“Nothing.” Coward. Tell him how your dreams had been filled with just such scenarios. Of him riding to your rescue and the two of you, with your sweet baby, all living happily ever after. “Are you coming back? We still have days’ worth of paperwork to sift through.”

“Yeah. I’m just going for a walk. Unlike you, I finish what I start.”

* * *

GARRETT KNEW HIS WORDS were a low blow. Maybe even cruel, but Eve acted as if she wasn’t even human. She might’ve shed a few polite tears over her father dying, but beyond

that, she struck him as unflappable. Oh, her fragile appearance told him she possessed a full set of emotions, but she wasn't giving them away for the mere price of asking.

He'd loved her more than his own life.

Not only had he lost his son, but her.

Such plans he'd made for the three of them. He couldn't afford college—at least not right away, but their town had plenty of good factory jobs that would have allowed him to set them up in a starter apartment. Eve could've stayed home with the baby, or if she'd wanted, his mom probably would've watched their son to allow Eve to work at a part-time job. Sounded sappy, but while they might not have been living in a mansion, their little home would've been rich in love.

Gunmetal-gray sky threatened rain, and Garrett jogged back to Eve's. The sooner they found their son the better. If there was one thing this unexpected reunion had taught him, it was that his instinct to never trust the fairer sex—with the exception of his mom—was right on target. Eve's lack of communication hadn't just hurt him all those years ago, but annihilated his old way of life. He'd abandoned plans for finding a job, instead opting for the navy in the hopes hard work and a little adventure might raze the girl from his head. Only after entering the SEAL BUD/S training program had he been pushed to the point that he'd been physically incapable of thinking about Eve or their son. Only then had his healing begun.

What he'd never expected was that seeing her again would

open old wounds.

Just as rain started to fall, Hal's housekeeper let him inside. Juanita had emigrated from Cuba and worked at the mansion for over twenty years. Round and perpetually smiling, she sported as many wigs as varieties of cookies he remembered her baking. Today, she'd gone for a full mane of red curls. "Miss Eve is napping, but she told me to tell you go in office and I bring you snack."

"Thanks, but I'm okay."

"Okay," she said with a firm nod and toss of her curls. "I bring sandwich."

Laughing, he knew no matter how much he'd learned during years of combat, when it came to battling Juanita, he'd never win. Which begged the question, how was Eve so dangerously thin?

After forcing down a hoagie, Garrett returned to work on Hal's files. How he'd run this town for so long when his own effects were in chaos was another mystery. He must've bought manila folders by the thousands, cramming them all into a few cabinets with seemingly no order. Stock certificates were housed alongside a newspaper clipping of Eve marching in a parade. If there was information to be gleaned in this office, it wasn't going to come easy.

"You're back." Eve still wore her dress and heels, but her once smooth hair was mussed. Had she actually succumbed to a nap?

"And?" She'd expected him to bolt.

"You're right, you know." Slipping off her heels, she curled

onto the end of a leather sofa, drawing an afghan from the back to cover her legs. The night was cool enough to warrant a small fire in the hearth, which Garrett easily could've accomplished. Might be petty, but in their battle, he'd already given her too much ground. No way was he also volunteering to make her more comfortable. "I'll admit, back then, I owed you some sort of explanation—at the very least, a proper goodbye."

"I'm good. You don't owe me squat."

"Then why so bitter?" Her voice was soft, so soft. Just as he remembered, only throaty, sexy. Trouble was, she'd already destroyed him once and he damn sure wouldn't let her again.

"Why do you think? After eight years of mourning my son, I discover he's alive, only I don't have a clue where. My whole adult life I've trained to efficiently solve any problem, but this..." He shook his head. "We should hire a P.I."

"No. I'd like this handled as discreetly as possible. Losing my dad is painful enough. I don't want our search for our son to become a public spectacle. And for the record, you don't have to take your anger out on me. I'm just as much a victim as you. Daddy may have meant well, but that doesn't excuse him for committing a horrible wrong."

"True," he conceded. "But I'm not the one in my twenties, still calling a conniving old man Daddy. He committed a crime—against both of us. It doesn't matter whether he meant well or not. Had the man survived, I'd have had him charged with kidnapping."

“Please, Garrett,” Eve quipped, “don’t hold back. Let me know how you really feel.”

* * *

“GEEZ, MOM.” GARRETT SAT at the kitchen table and shoveled leftover turkey and gravy into his mouth. “I get that Eve loved Hal, but she seems to accept what her father did. Like she’s resigned to the fact that what’s done is done and there’s nothing she can do about it.”

Nursing her coffee, his mom asked, “You think she’s wrong? That it will somehow serve her to hate the father she’s only just lost?”

“What’s the matter with you?” Eyes narrowed, Garrett dropped his fork to his plate. “Buying in to the whole Barnesworth small-town royalty facade?”

“Only because you’re understandably on edge, I’m going to let that slide. I know next to nothing about Hal, but as your grandmother already told you, Eve’s mother was an amazing woman. She did wonderful things for every charitable organization in town—nearly the whole state. All I’m saying is that I admire Eve for keeping her cool. In less than twenty-four hours, she’s lost her father, gained a son and become the head of a miniempire that employs half this town.”

Garrett helped himself to cranberry salad. “Thought old Hal was mayor.”

“He was, but he also owned the canning and shoe factories, as well as at least a dozen other businesses all over Florida.

Last I heard he has contracts with several big-name New York designers who want their brands made in the U.S.A.”

Snorting, he said, “That supposed to make me feel better? That the lying old coot was at least patriotic? This is your grandson. Why aren’t you more upset?”

“I am, but it’s complicated.” She rubbed the back of her neck before leaving him to refill her coffee. “When you told me and your dad Eve was pregnant, we were both so afraid for you. Had you two married, the odds against you would’ve been nearly insurmountable. Who knows? In a way, though it was unspeakably cruel, maybe Hal did do you two a favor. Can you honestly say you’d have made it through BUD/S with a newborn and wife?”

* * *

ON THE MORNING OF EVE’S father’s funeral, the same church she’d been married in was now packed to standing room only. More people who’d come to show their respects lined the street outside. The same organist who’d played for the last Florida gubernatorial invocation hammered away on old Southern hymns. Considering her father had made all of his own plans, she’d have thought he’d hire a New Orleans jazz band. But then as much as he’d enjoyed a party, that would’ve been too much of a spectacle. He’d also enjoyed the nice, solemn ceremonies of life, so why wouldn’t he also enjoy them in death?

As much as Eve longed to give in to the ball of emotions souring her stomach, she stayed strong as she knew her father

would've wanted. Contrary to what Garrett believed, she refused to think her dad deliberately set out to hurt either of them.

The scents of roses, lilies, carnations and a dizzying assortment of other arranged flowers made her head pound and eyes water to such a degree she could hardly see the words on the hymnal's pages. It was only her allergies making her a wreck. No matter what, she refused to give in to her grief in this too public arena.

At the service's end, the funeral director whisked her into a white limo for the short trek to the cemetery where her father had wanted to be buried next to her mother in the family tomb.

Eyes stinging and throat hurting, she remembered sitting in the same spot over a decade earlier, only at least she'd had her father's hand to hold. Now she sat alone.

Though the day was sunny, a brisk, cold wind whipped the open tent sheltering the mourners. Tuning out the pastor's words, her mind's eye saw her father speaking what she now knew had been his last words.

I lied. Your son's alive. I took him.

She didn't want her thoughts to go there. Instead, she wanted to remember happy times. The two of them traveling to Europe together. Sharing morning tea in the solarium. She refused to think of him shrunken and sallow in his final days. He was the most powerful man she'd ever known and she'd been so proud to be his daughter. But now...

I lied.

Now a seed of doubt had been planted as to whether or not her father's motives had been pure.

Above all in life, evident by a funeral larger than any the town had ever seen, Hal Barnesworth valued his standing in the community. His reputation and pride. Had she returned home with a baby, his efforts to spirit her away to deliver her son far from his beloved town would've been for naught. Everyone would've known what an awful parent he'd been. After all, who didn't keep close enough watch on their teenage daughter and allowed her to end up pregnant?

He'd been ashamed of her and her actions and hid her away as surely as he would've a poor business decision.

Horrified by the emerging picture of who her father really was, she brought trembling hands to her mouth. When it came to his negative opinion of Hal, Garrett had been right. Was he here? Watching her? Thinking her a fool?

A gust of wind toppled the portrait of her father that he'd wanted displayed on a stand beside his casket. Though the funeral director leaped to action, promptly setting it back in place, Eve found the incident apropos. A symbol of how her mighty father had fallen—at least in her eyes.

Garrett, are you out there? Somewhere in the crowd?
Did she want him to be?

Thankfully, the service soon ended and Eve went through the motions of placing a white rose the pastor handed her atop her father's casket, then thanking the crush of well-wishers for

coming.

A Palm Beach caterer was setting up an invitation-only reception at the house, but all she wanted was to escape.

Voice hoarse from the sheer number of people she'd spoken with, she was unprepared when a stocky man approached, flashing her a Miami Herald press badge. "Eve Barnesworth?"

"Y-yes."

"I wonder if you might confirm a story I've got a lead on."

"Excuse me?"

"My source says your father employed a number of illegal immigrants, but bribed local officials to look the other way. Care to comment?"

Knees rubbery, Eve searched for something to steady her, but found only air. How could this day get worse? How insensitive was he to bring up such a hot-button topic here?

"Ma'am, a quote from you on this matter would be ideal, but this is going to make headline news regardless. Your father was a very well-known man."

"Please," she managed to whisper, world spinning. Unable to remember the last time she'd eaten, Eve struggled to stay on her feet. "Just go. I have nothing to say."

"Sure you do. Now that you're in charge of all Barnesworth holdings, you really gonna let Daddy get away with something like this when he repeatedly touted how his products help support the good ol' U.S.A.?"

"Please, would you—"

“Back off,” Garrett said, suddenly at her side. She leaned into him, beyond grateful for his strength when she had none.

“And if I choose not to?” the guy taunted.

Garrett made his decision for him—flattening him with one punch.

Chapter Three

“Do you have any idea how bad this makes our whole team look?”

Garrett winced, lowering his cell when his commanding officer, Mark Hewitt, grew so loud Garrett heard him just fine with the phone being nowhere near his ear.

“AP picked up the story—SEAL Slams Reporter at Funeral. It’s everywhere.”

“Sorry, but the guy had it coming.” Whether his actions had been proper or not, Garrett figured the guy was lucky he’d gotten off with only one punch. Poor Eve had been a trembling, crying mess that Garrett had taken her straight home to his house—not hers. Hal’s lawyer and Juanita were handling the reception. Dina had ordered Eve to the sofa, where she now slept.

“Agreed, but you know better.”

“Sorry,” Garrett repeated, hoping with enough contrition this would all go away. “What do you want me to do?”

Sighing, his CO said, “You’re already on holiday leave for a few more days. Make it a few more weeks till this all dies down.”

“You got it.” Nice. Especially considering Garrett needed time to search for his son.

After five more minutes of hearing Mark lecture, Garrett finally was granted permission to end the call.

He found his mom out back, weeding. “Aren’t you cold?”

“Nah.” Kneeling in front of a baby banana palm, she rocked back on her heels. The wind had died down, though it was still chilly. When they’d moved to this house, he’d been midway through high school and had resented leaving the home where he’d grown up. Not only were there mature flower and vegetable gardens, but he and his dad had built a tree fort in their old yard that the kids living there today still enjoyed. Judging by how great this place now looked, his mom had put in a lot of gardening time. Back then, she’d told him the new yard would one day be beautiful, and as usual, she’d been right. “After all the rain we’ve had, feels good getting out of the house. How’s Eve?”

“Sleeping. You think I was wrong for letting the reporter have it?”

“Honey...” She took a few beats to answer. “You know I’m not big on violence, but in this case...”

“My thoughts exactly.” He sat on the wood bench his father’s firehouse crew had presented them with. His dad used to spend hours out here. His family and his garden were the only things he’d put above his job. What would his pop have thought about all this? Telling his folks he’d gotten Eve pregnant had been one of the hardest things Garrett had ever had to do. They hadn’t been overjoyed, but made it clear they’d stand by him no matter what. Given the chance, would he be that good of a dad?

“Say we find our son,” Garrett said to Dina. “What then? I’m assuming he was adopted. If he’s living in a good home, I can’t see ripping him away from all he’s ever known. But on the flip side, if we find he’s not in an idyllic situation, then what?”

“Pace yourself, hon. Let’s tackle one problem at a time.”

* * *

EVE WOKE NOT sure where she was. Then she spotted Garrett lightly snoring in a recliner. A huge cat sprawled across his lap, purring so loud Eve heard him from across the room. Fat Albert was still alive? They’d found the Maine coon tail as a kitten under the football-stadium bleachers. She’d wanted to keep him, but her dad refused. Garrett’s parents had recently lost their dachshund and were happy to take in the stray.

The whole Solomon house might’ve been small enough to fit in the ground floor of her home’s east wing, but the decor’s warmth made the space infinitely more inviting. The rooms were painted in soothing pale blues and yellows with most of the artwork either homemade needlework or paintings. Tables and shelves contained haphazard piles of books, and plants thrived on every windowsill.

Though Eve had missed her father’s funeral reception, oddly enough, she wasn’t sorry. Even if there hadn’t been that scene with the reporter, she didn’t feel emotionally strong enough to handle countless one-on-ones with family friends. As much as she valued their condolences, her father’s deathbed revelations left her in an odd place. While she was mourning, she was also

angered and saddened by her father's deception. Toss in the possible illegal-immigrant scandal and it was too much.

Rising silently, she folded the quilt she'd been covered with, then went in search of Garrett's mom.

"Sleeping beauty!" Dina called from across the backyard. Neat weed piles told how she'd spent her afternoon. "Come look at these elephant ears. Last time you were here, I'd just planted them from bulbs."

Eve fought fresh tears. Her pregnancy and subsequent disappearance couldn't have hurt only Garrett. Understandably, Dina would also have been justified in being upset. How kind she was to not show it.

"They're lovely." Eve fingered the enormous leaves, breathing deeply of fresh-turned soil.

"Garrett still out?"

"Yes." The memory of him with his cat made Eve smile. "I can't believe you all still have Fat Albert—and he's bigger than ever."

"Us Solomons—" Dina tugged extra hard at a dandelion "—keep what's ours."

"If that was a dig about—"

"Stop right there. I may dig in my garden, but conversationally, I keep things on the up-and-up. If I have something to tell you, you'll know. All I meant was that whether it be a stray or the grandchild I've long dreamed of having—once you and Garrett bring him home—I'm going to hold on to my grandson for all

I'm worth."

"Assuming we find him..." Garrett crossed the lawn. "You need to follow your own advice, Mom, and take this one step at a time."

Eve asked, "When do we stop talking about finding him and actually start our search?"

* * *

"SURE YOU'RE UP FOR THIS?" Garrett asked the next morning in Eve's entry hall as she gathered her purse and a light jacket. As usual, she looked dressed for a corporate board meeting in a cream-colored suit with her hair once again up. He was glad. It made her less approachable and therefore less appealing—at least that was the line he fed himself. She was still a beauty.

"I'm excited." She managed a forced smile. "But truthfully, also a little scared. I haven't been to that place since we lost our son."

"You'll be okay." Had they still been a couple, he'd have pulled her into a hug, or maybe just held her hand. Some small sign to show her he cared. The thing was, they weren't in any way connected other than by their shared past, which left him in an awkward spot.

"Here you yummy snacks." Juanita handed him a bulging paper bag. "Sandwich and cookies."

"Thanks." He accepted her gift and had no problem giving her an impromptu hug. Today's wig was straight, long and blond.

Drawing back he winked. “You’re looking good. It’s a long drive to Savannah, and this will come in handy. Ready?” he asked Eve.

An hour later, silence had moved past awkward to just plain annoying.

On a bare stretch of interstate, he angled to face her. “Look, it’s been a while since we’ve really talked. How about filling me in on what you’ve done for nearly the past decade.”

She’d been staring out his Mustang’s window, but now glanced his way. “College at Brown.”

“Nice.” He passed a slow pickup.

“Daddy—Dad—went there.”

“Sorry about that dig. I get calling Hal Daddy is a Southern thing.”

She’d retreated to focusing on the passing scenery. “I joined a sorority, but looking back on it, I’d have been better off on my own. I spent too much time wondering if all those girls somehow knew my dirty secret. Which in retrospect, I can thank my father for. Had he let me have our baby at home, sure, gossipy tongues would’ve wagged, but once the shock wore off, everyone would’ve accepted our child. It incenses me how many years I lost due to feeling like a second-class citizen. Like just because I’d gotten knocked-up in high school, I wasn’t good enough to keep company with so-called ‘nice girls.’”

“Don’t hold back,” Garrett teased.

“Sorry,” she said with a shy smile, “but it actually felt good getting that out.”

“Don’t apologize to me. You’re preaching to the choir on believing you should never have left Coral Ridge, and there sure as hell isn’t a statute of limitations on hurt feelings or anger.”

“True...” When she met his gaze, his stomach acted funny. Lord, but she was a fine-looking woman. Somehow she managed to pull off regal, cute and smoking hot all at the same time.

Attempting to get his mind off how awesome he used to feel kissing her, he said, “I remember Mom telling me you’d been married. Guess it was quite the social event in Coral Ridge.”

Eve groaned. “Another mistake. Met Matthew my junior year. We shared some fun times. He was president of Dad’s old fraternity and during a parent weekend, Matt earned Hal’s seal of approval and that was that. We married right after graduation—of course Dad had the whole thing planned. Aside from picking my dress, pretty much everything else was set.” Eve paused, looking slightly ashamed. “Is there anything in my life I haven’t let my father do?”

Garrett fought the urge to clasp her hand. “I’m assuming your divorce was at least your idea?”

She laughed. “Daddy still has Matt on his Christmas-card list.”

Dodging a fast-food bag that’d blown into his lane, Garrett mused, “At least you won’t have to worry about that anymore.”

“You’re so not funny. Anyway, my degree is in marketing, so I’m part of that division in all Daddy’s companies. I’ve already taken off a week. Makes me dizzy thinking how much there is to catch up on.”

“With your dad out of the picture, are you now in charge?”

Her eyes teared. “I take it sensitivity training isn’t a highlight of SEAL business?”

“What? I asked a valid question. Last thing I meant was to hurt you.”

Reclining her seat, she curled onto her side, effectively hiding her face.

“I’m no expert, but isn’t it customary for you to now ask about me?”

Using her jacket as a blanket, she did have one question. “Got anything I might use for a pillow?”

* * *

BEFORE GARRETT PICKED her up that morning, Eve had done an internet search for a church she remembered being near the home for unwed mothers she’d stayed at. Now that Garrett had found it, the task fell on her to find the three-story historic residence.

“I remember it being redbrick.” She’d rolled down the tinted window for a better look. “It sat on two lots and there was a vegetable garden we all took turns tending. And a giant live oak. Unless the tree was harmed in a storm, it has to still be there.”

He slowed for a stop sign. “Nothing on this street fits that description. Mark it off on your map and we’ll go block by block till you see a place that looks familiar.”

Six blocks later, they’d found what they were looking for—only the garden had been replaced by a parking lot and an ornate

sign hung from a wrought-iron gate, announcing that the place was a B and B called The Live Oak Inn.

“Now what?” she asked Garrett. “What are we supposed to do when our first—and only—lead doesn’t pan out?”

He pulled into the federal-style home’s lot and parked. “We’re not giving up that easy. Come on.”

Ten minutes later, they shared a wicker table and iced teas with the home’s owner on the back porch. The day was fine. Balmy with a playful breeze swaying ferns hanging from thin chains. A sweet, white flower Eve didn’t recognize perfumed the air. Had it not been for the jet flying low en route to the airport, they might’ve been in an earlier century.

“When we bought the place five years ago,” said Clara Duncan, middle-aged and sporting a Civil War-era costume complete with prim hair bun, “the house was in foreclosure. Because of that, our dealings were strictly with the bank. Miss Ginnie, our neighbor to the west, mentioned in passing this used to be a home for unwed mothers, but I’m sorry I don’t know much more than that.”

“It’s okay.” Eve traced the condensation on her slender glass. “We knew this was a long shot.”

Garrett asked, “Is Miss Ginnie still around?”

“Of course. Would you like me to call her over?”

“That’d be great.” Fresh hope raced Eve’s pulse.

It didn’t take long for Miss Ginnie to arrive, using a four-pronged cane to help navigate the porch stairs. “As I live and

breathe.” Through blue eyes not dulled by age, the older woman surveyed Eve who’d stood to introduce herself and shake the woman’s hand. “You are about the right age to be one of Rose’s girls.”

Garrett had pulled out a chair for the elderly woman and, after more introductions, helped her sit down. Clara bustled off to get more tea and cookies.

Eve’s mouth was so dry she doubted herself capable of swallowing a crumb.

“Thank you for coming,” Garrett said, sharing the high points of their story. “Since Eve’s father left no information regarding our son’s current whereabouts—or even names of his adoptive parents—we’re having to start with the basics in our search.”

“I understand.” When Clara returned with refreshments, Miss Ginnie helped herself to three sugar cookies. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the reason this house was even sold is because Rose ran out of money. I would assume she kept records, but she had no family that I know of.”

“Where is she now?” Garrett asked.

Miss Ginnie shrugged. “The only kin Rose claimed were her pregnant girls. Best she could, she tried making this home a happy place, but it was hard in the face of such pain. Teens aren’t easy to deal with under normal circumstances. Toss hormones and Savannah heat into the mix and Lord have mercy were there some fireworks over here.”

Eve remembered all too well. She hadn’t been pampered like

she'd been at home. She'd done her share of cooking and cleaning and even though as much as possible she'd kept to herself, some of the other girls had been cruel—taunting her about her lack of communication from her baby's father.

While Miss Ginnie rambled on about how some of the teens had come from less than desirable families, Eve caught herself studying Garrett. The way he seemed to exude tightly coiled physical power. As if at a moment's notice he'd be capable of leaping from his chair to tackle any contingent. The word handsome didn't do his angular face justice. Experience had taught her his gray eyes held the capacity to hurt or heal. There might now be crinkles at the corners from too much time in the sun, but essentially, on the outside, he was the same guy she'd fallen for all those years ago. How had he changed on the inside? How many times had she sat in this very spot, wondering what he was doing? Thinking? Had she been on his mind as often as he'd been on hers?

As if feeling her stare, he glanced her way. While Miss Ginnie rambled on, their eyes locked. Eve wanted to look down, but held her ground. Now wasn't the time to let on how scared she truly was—not just about the odds of them ever finding their son, but taking on her father's responsibilities and finding a way to cope with her growing fear that Hal hadn't been the person she'd thought he was. As for how she felt about her unexpected reunion with Garrett? She might never completely understand.

“Miss Ginnie, Clara—” Garrett rose. “While we can't thank

you enough for talking with us, we don't have long to be in town and we still need to get to the Vital Records Office. Maybe someone there can help find Rose."

They said their goodbyes and then followed Clara's directions to reach the next stop on their journey, where they encountered a line leading out the door.

Already on edge, wrung out from the memories of her father essentially abandoning her with Miss Rose, Eve said, "This is probably a sign. We should just go."

"No way. We've come this far and need to see it through."

Exhaustion clung to her, making her limbs feel heavy and drugged.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head, intending to keep her private issues inside, but then she found compassion in his eyes and he ever-so-lightly cupped his hands to her shoulders. The realization she was standing in an endless line in what might turn out to be an endless, fruitless search for their son... It was all too much—especially when what the two of them once shared was a dream. Like some far-off, hazy image of what she'd always dreamed her life could be. "I—I have to go."

"Where?" Still holding her, his gaze searched hers. "You're exactly where you need to be."

Was she? Before her father's cancer, she'd been a strong, self-supporting woman. She'd not only recognized she was miserable in a marriage that'd been lackluster from the start, but she'd

taken on the business world and won. Landing contracts for the manufacturing of top New York fashion designers' shoes had been not only fiscally rewarding, but personally fulfilling. She'd finally felt as if she were coming into her own. As if she'd lived the past decade underwater and had only just been allowed air. Then Hal's cancer had struck hard and fast, and now she was constantly falling apart. She didn't recognize the woman fainting at funerals and skipping out on family obligations. For the sake of not only her sanity, but all of the people depending on her to run her father's companies, she had to pull herself together. Fast.

"Tell you what." Garrett fished in his jeans pocket, handing her his keys. "Go back to the car and nap or rock out to the radio or whatever you need to do. I'll handle this."

Lips pressed tight and fighting tears, she nodded, taking Garrett up on his offer.

* * *

IT TOOK AN HOUR FOR GARRETT to learn exactly nothing. Not only was there no birth certificate, but no record whatsoever of their baby even having been born—or having died.

More than anything, Garrett wanted to give in to the slow burning rage building inside. He'd honestly been dumb enough, naive enough, to believe even the all-powerful Hal Barnesworth wouldn't have been capable of pulling a stunt such as hiding his own grandson, but he'd been wrong.

In the crowded parking lot, Garrett found Eve asleep with the car's windows down. She looked at peace and he didn't want to

ruin that.

He tried opening the driver's-side door quietly, but she bolted awake.

Some of her hair had spilled from her tight French twist, making her appear more like she had back in school. His fingers itched to reach out, sample the soft strands as he once had been free to do, but he instead kept his hands to himself and climbed behind the wheel.

What they'd once shared was as lost as their son.

"Well?" she asked, tidying her hair. "What'd you find out?"

Right hand fisted, he punched the steering wheel. "Not a damned thing."

Chapter Four

"Eve Barnesworth, you can just march those sweet buns of yours right back home."

"Thanks for the compliment, but you know what they say about there being no rest for the weary." Eve kept right on walking toward the elevator. Her assistant Darcie was not only a good friend, but held her MBA from the University of Florida, and in a pinch, could run Barnesworth Industries. There wasn't a day that passed when Eve wasn't appreciative to Human Resources for finding her. Following Eve into the car, Darcie pressed the button for the third floor.

"I thought the saying was 'no rest for the wicked'?"

Eve managed a smile. "That probably describes us, as well."

"True." Darcie may have only stood five feet tall, but she was

a dynamo. Another reason Eve admired her was because she was a single mom. Back when she'd still believed her son had died at birth, Eve liked to think had he lived, she'd have been much like Darcie—scrapping her way to the top, no matter the odds stacked against her. Between her quick wit, adorable dimples and killer work ethic, it was all too tempting to hand Darcie the company reins while she in turn ran off to Fiji. “Sorry I missed Hal’s funeral. Leo had a 103 fever and I couldn’t leave him.” Leo was Darcy’s four-year-old son. Cute didn’t begin describing his freckles, red curls and rotating assortment of missing teeth.

After Eve’s last miscarriage, she’d secretly dreaded whenever Darcie brought her son to the office. The pain of losing yet another child had been too much to bear. Lately, Eve had been able to enjoy Leo, but now that she’d learned she may have her own son out there, she’d grown curious about what he might be like.

Eve gave her friend a squeeze. “I wouldn’t have wanted you to leave the little guy—although I’m assuming you’ve heard Daddy’s send-off wasn’t exactly the dignified affair I’m sure he wanted?”
“Unfortunately, yes.”

The cranky elevator finally dinged and Eve gestured for Darcie to lead the way onto their floor. Barnesworth Industries’ official headquarters was located in the century-old former Buxton County hospital. What the place lacked in amenities, it made up for in charm. Cypress floors glowed and the pink, mission-style exterior had become a recognizable landmark

to everyone within a hundred miles. Much of the building was rented out to other longtime partners, legal firms and coincidentally enough in light of the building's past, a few doctors. The Spanish-tiled lobby's vaulted ceiling and grand double staircase rivaled those of any historic hotel.

Well-wishes and hugs from most every employee she passed meant it took Eve another fifteen minutes to reach the corner office that had once been a patient dayroom. Tall windows welcomed in healing sun and Eve was determined to not let even the stack of ten newspapers that'd featured her father's funeral and the scandal bring her down.

"Sorry." Darcie dashed ahead to take away the pile of bad news. "Guess I should've asked Gladys to get those out of here, but I don't think she's coming in today. Zack was the one insisting, you know." Gladys was Hal's bosomy secretary. The woman was big as a house and bore the motto that if you got in her way, she'd mow you down like a wrecking ball. She'd been with Eve's dad from the start and had the loyalty and facial structure of a bulldog. What she lacked in physical beauty was more than made up for by the kind of inner beauty that seemed to get harder and harder to find. Zack, on the other hand, had been her father's right-hand man. A Harvard Law graduate, his fair hair and green gaze might've been easy on the eyes, but he was also beyond intimidating.

"It's all right." Eve winced. "I was kinda there when the story first broke." Finally seated in her comfy desk chair, she exhaled.

She'd been working from home alongside her father for so long that a guilty part of her felt good to be back among the living. "Is Gladys all right?"

"She's had a tough time with Hal's death—we all have. Even though we knew it was coming, you know..."

"Sure." Eve ran her fingers over the desk's cool, wood surface, reminding herself this was what mattered. Her dad might be gone, but the business was still here, along with all the people whose livelihoods depended on her to keep the company running strong. Responsibility bore down on her shoulders, bringing on an instant headache and literal pain in her neck. "I'll call her in a little bit. Tell her to take as much paid leave as she needs."

Eve's father had easily been one of the most recognizable figures in the state. Larger than life with a loud laugh and even louder temper. In his prime, the army veteran had been over six feet of muscle. In his older years, too much steak and heavy cream sauces had loaded on the pounds. He'd been generous with compliments and holiday bonuses, but those who crossed him learned to deeply regret it. Along with seemingly everyone else, Eve had once worshipped Hal. Now she wasn't sure what she felt for her father.

Darcie asked, "Want me to call her for you?"

"No." Eve powered up her computer. "She's practically family. I owe her a personal visit."

"That may well be." Darcie tugged at the curtains to keep sun from shining in Eve's eyes. "But you only lost your dad a few days

ago. With all due respect, maybe you also need more time off?"

"Probably." Eve shook her head. "No, definitely, but part of the reason I came in today was to get my mind off of his dying. Right before he went, in true Hal Barnesworth style, he dropped a bombshell on me that still has my ears ringing."

"Oh?" Darcie dropped onto one of a pair of ivory leather guest chairs.

"Prepare to have your mind blown." By the time Eve relayed to her friend the events of the past couple days, Darcie's mouth hung open.

"I fail to see how even Hal could've pulled all of that off—especially without Zack knowing."

"That's just it. Daddy pulled this stunt long before Zack came on board. I'm sure not even Gladys knew."

Leaning forward, Darcie rested her elbows on Eve's desk. "While I'm still processing the fact that you have a mystery child, tell me more about Garrett. Is he handsome? You two have sparks? Was he excited by the prospect of you two sharing a son? Is he as larger-than-life as navy SEALs are made out to be, or is it all a bunch of hype?"

"If you ever pause for breath—" Eve cast a faint smile "—I'll fill you in. Plus, he's meeting me here in an hour, so if you're not stuck in a meeting, you can judge him for yourself."

* * *

GARRETT HAD DRIVEN BY what Coral Ridge residents dubbed the Pink Palace no doubt hundreds of times, yet he'd

never stepped foot inside. Since he'd always considered Hal Barnesworth to be a bloated, power hungry, egotistical brute of a man, Garrett halfway expected Barnesworth corporate headquarters to feature a flame and pitchfork-themed decor, but upon stepping off the third-floor elevator, Garrett was welcomed into a serene office space buzzing with productivity and rich furnishings. Far from the theme featuring black-and-orange flames, monochromatic sand-colored everything save for the occasional potted palm and pricey-looking painting made him feel even further from his comfort zone than Barnesworth Mansion.

While waiting for Eve, a receptionist requested he park on a leather couch the color of his mother's Sunday pearls.

The formality only reinforced how different he and Eve truly were. They might share a son, but that was where all other comparisons ended. This kind of life wasn't for him. Like his father, Garrett needed plenty of fresh air and excitement.

That point noted, when Eve rounded a corner wearing creamy-colored slacks that made her legs go on for miles and an ultrafeminine, breast-hugging blouse with fabric looking too soft to be real, Garrett struggled for his next breath. Making matters worse, Eve sported a flawless side ponytail that all at once made her elegant, yet fun. Had her smile reached her eyes, he doubted he'd be capable of speech. Still no sleep? Even all her styling perfection couldn't hide her red, puffy gaze.

"Garrett." Rather than giving him the hug he stupidly craved,

she extended her right hand. “Thanks for meeting me here. I needed to handle a few things.”

“Sure.” What did it mean that even after their simple handshake, he still felt her touch? “Need me to come back later?”

“No, not at all.” She led him down a wide hall. “Since my mind is already occupied by our son, I’m happy for a break.”

“Know the feeling.” It came as a relief—knowing she was also consumed with finding their child.

Her private office was even more intimidating than the rest of the place. Walls lined with silver-framed photos of Eve smiling alongside faces he recognized from magazines and TV had him feeling all the more out of his league. When she sat at her desk, offering for him to take a guest chair, he had the oddest sensation of being in some swanky principal’s office with her about to give him detention.

He took in the twelve-foot ceiling. “Quite a place you’ve got here...”

“It’s okay. Daddy’s decorator had more to do with it than me. She wanted magazine coverage. All I wanted were plenty of windows and a comfy chair.” She handed him a yellow legal pad on which she’d made notes. “I think our best course of action is trekking back to Savannah. Maybe through real-estate records, we can find a forwarding address for Rose.”

“Worth a shot.” He returned her paper. “But are you sure you’re up for that? It’s one thing discussing the woman who no doubt took our baby through a third party. Meeting her face-to-

face may not be so easy.”

“Let’s face it, we could’ve just as easily run into her on our last trip. I had no idea the unwed mothers’ home was closed.” Her eyes welled, but she held her composure. “Rest assured, no matter the personal cost, I’ll do whatever it takes to find our son.”

* * *

GARRETT HAD LONG HEARD from his friends with small children how they were fast to fall asleep in the car. Eve apparently was no different. Thirty minutes into their return trip to Savannah, she lightly snored—a fact which, were she to discover, Garrett guessed she wouldn’t like. Back in school, where her grades were concerned, she never settled for anything less than perfection. She’d made him feel like king of the world when she’d told him that’s what the two of them together were—perfect.

How easy it would be—falling for her all over again. She might be a highly accomplished businesswoman, but she also carried an air of fragility that made him want to fight all her battles. His job was protecting those who couldn’t protect themselves. Only what he felt for Eve was far from professional.

Ten minutes from their destination, he gave her a gentle nudge. “Wake up, sleepyhead.”

“We’re here already?” She lowered the visor to fuss with her hair. “I’m so sorry. I never meant to crash like that.”

“It’s okay. You’re cute when you snore.”

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