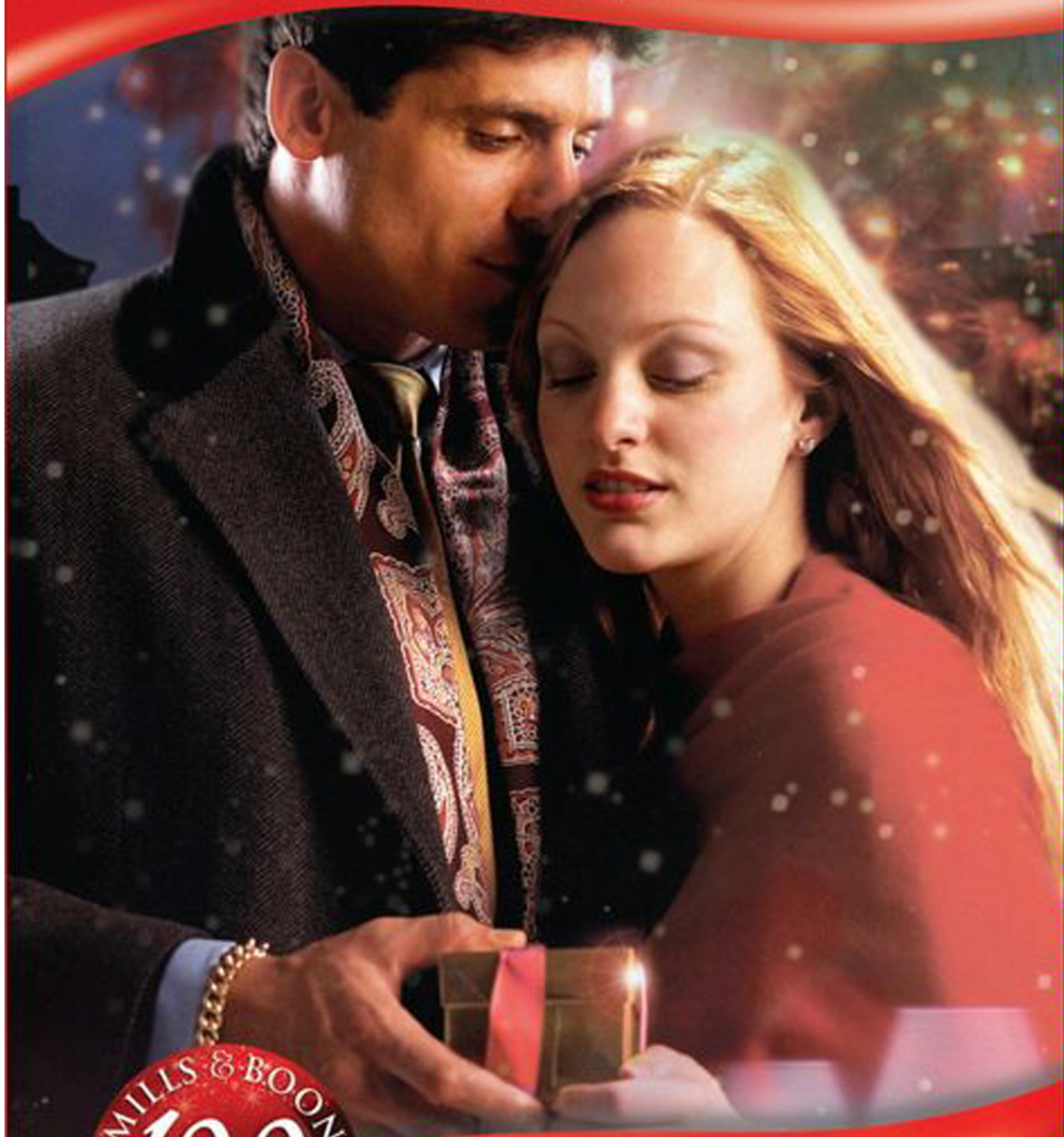


Millionaire's Wedding Revenge

Anna DePalo

Stranded with the Tempting Stranger

Brenda Jackson



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Millionaire's Wedding Revenge**

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Be swept away by passion... with intense drama and compelling plots, these emotionally powerful reads will keep you captivated from beginning to end. Millionaire's Wedding Revenge Anna DePalo Miami millionaire Stephen Garrison was intent on revenge. Megan Simmons had ended their sizzling affair years ago. . . leaving without explanation. Stephen's plan was to seduce his ex-lover but he made an unexpected discovery: she'd had his child. So now he decided marriage would be the ultimate payback! Stranded with the Tempting Stranger Brenda Jackson Cutthroat litigator Brandon Washington wasn't used to being ignored. So when Cassie Garrison refused his attempts at contact, he set out to teach the elusive heiress a lesson. He would use every skill he possessed to uncover all of Cassie's secrets. But would Brandon find his professional mission at war with his very personal interests? THE GARRISONS Unlimited power... unforeseen pleasure

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Millionaire's Wedding Revenge by Anna DePalo



LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON?

Seems the Garrison apple hasn't fallen far from the tree. According to a very reliable source, Stephen Garrison fathered a love child that he is not claiming! Sound familiar? Our source says the mother and child are living in a rundown cottage on the outskirts of Miami Beach, and millionaire businessman Stephen – who was accompanied by an A-list actress on his yacht just last weekend – hasn't attempted to see his progeny.

In other Garrison news, we hear there may be some new additions to the family. Anna Garrison, the newly minted wife of Garrison honcho Parker, was spotted looking at baby clothes on Lincoln Road Mall. A salesperson mentioned one of the Garrison twins had also picked up several items, but she couldn't distinguish Brooke from Brittany, and the transaction was made in cash. Which one of the Garrison ladies is expecting...or could it be all three?

Stranded with the Tempting Stranger by Brenda Jackson



GOLDEN GARRISONS LOSING THEIR TOUCH?

The rumour mill is working overtime this week, folks! Sources inside the Garrison Grand have informed us that Mrs Bonita Garrison will be celebrating her sixtieth birthday at a room in the super-swanky Estate nightclub, owned by her son Adam. No word on whether Mama Garrison will be able to stand upright at her own celebration, as we hear she has no intentions of drying herself out for the upcoming gala.

We've also heard that Jordan Jefferies, rival of family head honcho Parker Garrison, snagged a lucrative real-estate deal from the competition. First, Hotel Victoria – guaranteed to steal the cream-of-the-crop clientele from the Garrison Grand when it opens next season. Then, the alleged acquisition of former fully owned Garrison property Brittany Beach. Now this. Seems like the Garrisons may be losing their touch.

Millionaire's Wedding Revenge

ANNA DEPALO

Stranded with the Tempting Stranger

BRENDA JACKSON



MILLIONAIRE'S WEDDING REVENGE

by

Anna DePalo

For Susan Crosby and Barbara Daly.

Thanks for the mentoring.

ANNA DEPALO

discovered she was a writer at heart when she realised most people don't walk around with a full cast of characters in their heads. She has lived in Italy and England; she learned to speak French, graduated from Harvard, earned graduate degrees in political science and law, forgot how to speak French and married her own dashing hero. A former intellectual property lawyer, Anna lives with her husband and son in New York City. Her books have consistently hit bestseller lists and have won a *Romantic Times BOOKreviews* Reviewers' Choice Award for Best First Series Romance and been published in over a dozen countries. Readers are invited to surf to www.desireauthors.com and can also visit Anna at www.annadepalo.com.

Dear Reader,

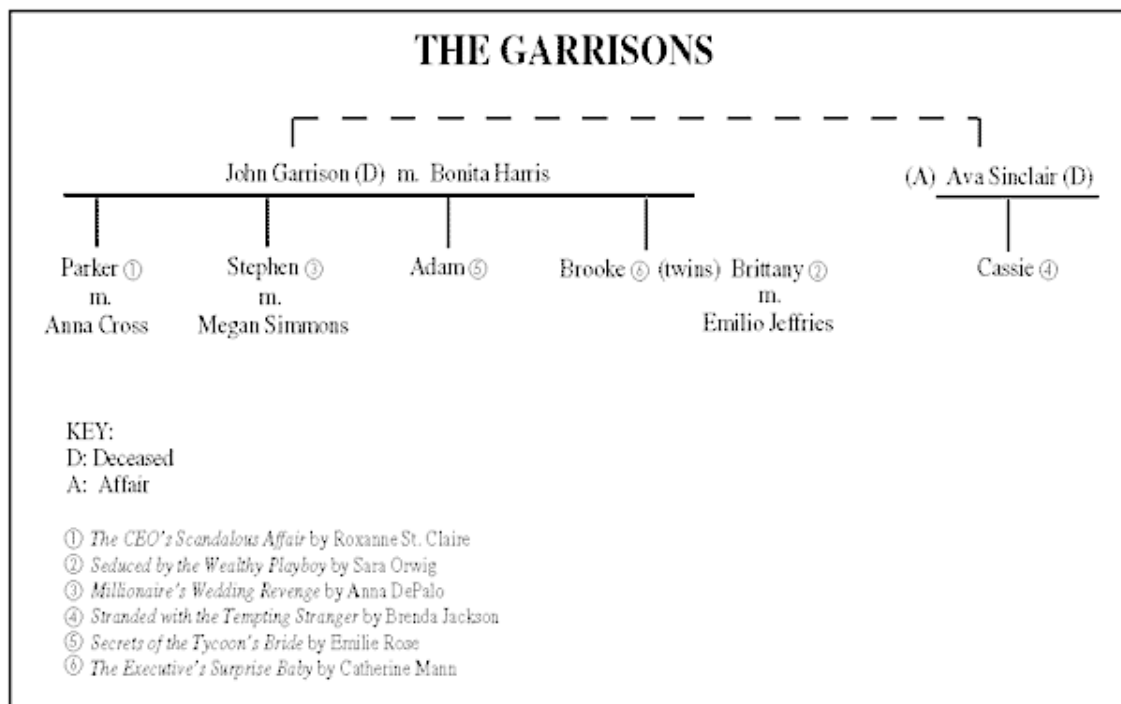
I love writing about intelligent, resourceful, strong women, and Megan Simmons, the heroine of this book, is no exception. Megan's trying to hold her life all together – the child, the job, the family move – until Stephen Garrison walks back into it.

To say these two have been dancing around each other for a long time is the least of it! Stephen owns *the* trendy hotel in South Beach, and now he's out to discover Megan's secrets.

Have you ever had a hotel stay that made you feel as if you're getting away from it all for a while? Now imagine getting involved with a guy who knows how to provide you with that kind of luxurious pampering all the time. I hope you enjoy!

Wishing you the best,

Anna



One

When Megan Simmons left Miami four years ago, she'd struggled every day to regain her equilibrium and put the past behind her. But her equilibrium had eluded her, and the past had dogged her every step.

Now, at the sound of the knock on her open office door, she glanced up from the documents on her desk and into the eyes of the man she'd once thought she'd never see again.

Her breath left her in a whoosh.

She put down the papers she was holding.

"Your new partner is hard at work already, Conrad."

His voice went through her like fine cognac. It *always* had. Particularly in bed.

This time, though, she immediately sensed the danger. Stephen's words held a note of cynical amusement.

Her eyes traveled to the second man at her door. Conrad Elkind's offer of partnership in the interior design firm she used to work for as an employee was the reason she was back in Miami.

"Good news, Megan," Conrad said heartily. "We've got an assignment to redesign part of the Garrison Grand. Stephen here was so impressed by the job you did on the Garrison, Inc. building four years ago that he requested you work on this new project."

Her eyes shot back to Stephen. From the look on his face, she knew this was no mere coincidence.

Stephen's lips twisted. "I asked Conrad not to let the cat out of the bag until we'd sealed the deal."

She felt the blood drain from her face. If she hadn't already been sitting down in a chair, she'd have collapsed into one.

When she'd moved back to Miami, she'd known she might run into Stephen, but she hadn't expected to be working for him within weeks of being back at her old firm.

Someday, in the not too distant future, she hoped to be a *senior* partner. Her firm would be Elkind, Ross, Gardner & Simmons. Now, however, Stephen loomed like an immovable obstacle in that path.

She composed herself and stood, even as her eyes shot daggers at the man who'd haunted her days and not too few of her nights.

"What an *unexpected* compliment," she announced as she came around her desk.

She was dressed in a sand-colored skirt suit paired with an emerald blouse that echoed the color of her eyes. She was glad now for the professional armor, though—in a nod to the hot, sunny weather—her feet were encased in strappy tan sandals.

The end of summer in Miami was still *hot*. The September sun radiated outside Elkind, Ross & Gardner's cool offices, and its rays filtered through the blinds on her office window, hitting her back.

Still, though her sandals lent another two inches to her five-foot-nine frame, the boost wasn't enough to counteract Stephen's intimidating presence. At six foot three, he loomed over her, radiating a charisma and sex appeal that were palpable.

He was the epitome of tall, dark and handsome, with jet-black hair and coffee eyes, and a body that looked as if it would make military basic training seem no more rigorous than a stroll in the park.

She'd seen evidence of his effect on women four years ago. They'd *swooned* over him. *She'd* been stupid enough to swoon over him, too.

Even now, she felt a tingling that went all over.

She wondered whether it was the cleft chin—a Garrison family trait—that did it for some women. But unlike screen idol Cary Grant, Stephen was a living, breathing playboy nonpareil.

A quick glance at his left hand was enough for her to confirm he was still single.

Conrad glanced at his watch. "I've got a phone conference starting in five minutes, so I'm going to leave the two of you to talk and get reacquainted."

Getting reacquainted was the last thing she wanted to do with Stephen Garrison, ever, but she forced herself to nod. “Thanks, Conrad.”

When the older partner had retreated, her gaze came back to Stephen, and of its own volition, her chin rose a fraction.

Then she caught herself. It was ridiculous for her to feel defensive. *She* had nothing to feel defensive about.

“Hello, Stephen. Won’t you have a seat?” She turned to head back to her desk. “I’m sure we can help you with whatever it is you’re looking for.”

“That’s what I’m counting on,” he said silkily.

She heard him close the office door, and she couldn’t help but think of the sound as the opening bell in a boxing match.

She turned to face him. “I suppose it’s too much to hope that your appearance here today is a mere coincidence.”

“You guessed right,” he drawled. “It’s taken a while, but I plan to get the answers I’m looking for.”

“Why do I get the impression we’re not talking about the Garrison Grand?”

“Four years ago, you left Miami without a backward glance.”

“You mean I left *you*.”

A muscle jumped in his jaw.

“No one leaves a Garrison, is that it?” she said, hands braced on hips. Hips that now had experienced childbirth.

Motherhood had instilled in her a newfound courage, changing her from the woman she’d been four years ago. She’d do anything to make sure her daughter had the future she deserved, including struggling with the demands of single parenthood.

Including coming back to Miami.

Last month, she’d uprooted herself and Jade from her hometown of Indianapolis, and returned to Miami, though she knew it was the Garrisons’ town. She’d been lured by the promise of a lucrative junior partnership in her old design firm.

Now, looking more closely at Stephen, she realized the intervening years had wrought a change in him, too. She knew he was thirty-one now, only a year older than she was, but he had a physical maturity he hadn’t possessed the last time she’d seen him.

It wasn’t that he looked different. He was still as good-looking as ever.

It was more that he wore his power more easily. His air of command had lost its harsh shine and achieved a subtle luster.

Subtle, but more dangerous, she reminded herself. With that thought, she blurted, “How did you know I was back in town?”

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his bespoke suit and sauntered closer, completely comfortable in an office that should have been her domain.

She thanked her lucky stars that she hadn’t set out any photos or revealing mementos. She also prayed Conrad hadn’t mentioned anything too revealing about her private life.

“How did I know you were back in Miami?” he repeated, as if taking his time to consider her words. “Now that’s the central question, isn’t it?”

For all his smoothness, she couldn’t miss the quiet danger in his voice.

His eyes held hers, and she felt as if she were drowning in their dark depths. “It seems you never mentioned to your friend Anna that you and I used to be lovers.”

Oh, Anna, Megan wailed silently. Why, oh why, did you have to mention me to Stephen Garrison?

Yet, she could hardly blame her friend. She’d kept Anna in the dark—she’d kept *everyone* in the dark—about the debacle in her life four years ago.

Stephen's lips twisted sardonically. "If you wanted your return to Miami to remain a secret, you should have sewn up that hole with the brand-new Mrs. Parker Garrison."

He was right, of course, but it didn't make the pill any easier to swallow.

"You know, it's funny," Stephen went on, his tone implying it was anything but humorous, "there we were sitting around Sunday dinner at my parents' estate in Bal Harbour a few weeks ago when I happened to mention I was looking for an interior design firm to update the Garrison Grand." He paused. "One guess as to what Anna said."

Megan compressed her lips, but Stephen apparently wasn't looking for a response.

"She mentioned her friend Megan Simmons had just moved back to Miami to be a partner at Elkind, Ross." Stephen rubbed his jaw, then paused as his eyes focused on her again. "I didn't even know you and Anna were friends."

"That's how Anna got her start at Garrison, Inc. four years ago," she said tightly. "I'd gotten to know people in the HR department at Garrison headquarters when I was working on the redesign there, and I recommended her for a job. She was ready to leave Indianapolis."

She braced her fingertips against the top of her desk. Her legs felt rubbery, but since Stephen had yet to mention Jade, she guessed Anna had left out she had a daughter now.

"Right," Stephen said, sauntering even closer. "Four years ago would be right about the time you skipped town."

"I *decided* to leave Miami, yes." She'd *fled*, but these days she'd learned when to run and when to stand her ground.

"Of course," Stephen went on, seeming not to have heard her, "if you hadn't run off like a scared rabbit when I headed your way at Anna and Parker's wedding reception recently, we could have had this conversation elsewhere."

She'd hoped he hadn't spotted her mingling among the guests at Anna and Parker's lavish beach wedding, but clearly it had been a false hope despite her quick departure.

Her fear of coming face-to-face with him had almost kept her from attending, even without Jade, but loyalty to Anna had ultimately won out.

Still, she wasn't about to concede an inch. "I did *not* run away."

He quirked a brow disbelievingly.

"I just refused to sully Anna and Parker's wedding day with an unpleasant conversation."

He laughed humorlessly. "Spare me the drama."

"Is it so hard to believe there are women who don't want to flirt with you?" she retorted, her temper igniting.

"I haven't found any who've turned down an invitation to my bed, sweetheart," he shot back. "Including *you*."

"Yes, but I was the one who ultimately walked away," she countered, then went on the offensive. "Does it bother you, Stephen? Did I ruin your perfect record with women when I dumped you?"

A muscle ticked in his jaw.

She tilted her head. "You know, I promise not to tell..."

His eyes narrowed, his lips becoming a thin line, and for a moment, she worried she'd gone too far.

They'd always been good at pressing each other's buttons. It was what had added an element of exhilarating excitement to their short-lived affair.

She reminded herself, however, that nothing *she* could do now could match *his* betrayal at the end of their affair.

He searched her face. "Did you run because I was getting under your skin?" he mused, his voice lowering. "Were things getting too hot in the bedroom for you? Was your cool facade in danger of melting?"

She sucked in a breath.

"You know it was good," he murmured.

"Don't flatter yourself!"

She hadn't wanted an ugly confrontation four years ago, so she'd walked away without an explanation—without a goodbye. She'd been afraid that if she faced him with her knowledge of his betrayal, he'd convince her to stay.

Because she knew she was weak where he was concerned. Because she was intimately acquainted with just how charmingly persuasive he could be.

He shifted a step back suddenly, laying off some of the pressure. "Why did you leave?" he asked bluntly.

"I told you in the last conversation—"

"A phone message."

"I wanted a clean break," she lied again.

"After dodging my calls for days," he accused.

"You were out of town on business."

"Yeah, and then you were—supposedly."

"I was never good at breaking up," she countered, "and it was clear to me our fling was coming to an end."

As clear as the woman whom she'd seen leaving his yacht, she added silently.

His jaw clenched. Evidently, he didn't like her response, but he also wasn't going to dispute her belief.

She read his silence as confirmation, and her stomach dropped sickeningly. Obviously, if she hadn't called it quits first, Stephen would soon have been giving her his "it was good while it lasted, babe" talk.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?" he taunted finally. "A simple explanation for why you ended the affair. You could have given it to me at Anna's wedding without an ugly scene."

Perversely, she felt her temper rise again. "Are you suggesting that if you'd had a chance to talk to me before now, you wouldn't be here today with a brand-new project for Elkind, Ross?" she demanded. "Because if so, I don't believe it. I know you too well, Stephen."

"You *used to* know me well, sweetheart," he responded silkily. "About as well as any woman who's shared my bed."

She was just one in a crowd, Megan thought bitterly. *As if she could ever forget.*

Yet one more reason Stephen must never, *ever*, know about Jade.

She could bear working for him if she had to. She just couldn't bear having him jeopardize what mattered most.

Stephen stared at the woman who'd walked away from him four years ago without a second glance.

He'd wanted her from the moment he'd seen her, coming out of a conference room at Garrison, Inc., right after her firm had inked a deal with his older brother, Parker, to refurbish the offices at Garrison headquarters.

She'd been laughing at something Parker had said, and the laugh, combined with everything else, had hit him like fine aged whiskey burning a path to an empty stomach.

She'd been intoxicating. A tall redhead with legs that went on forever, and a body that was all curves. A Jessica Rabbit come to life in all her bombshell glory.

He'd pictured her beneath him in bed, those long legs wrapped around him as he lost himself inside her.

And the reality had lived up to the billing—for the first time in his jaded experience with women.

Their five-month affair had been explosive. They'd spent weekends aboard his yacht, just enjoying each other, then had sneaked away in the middle of the workday for lunchtime sex in a hotel room.

Fortunately, he'd owned—and still did—the most luxurious hotel in Miami's trendy South Beach, and he kept a private suite there for his own use.

On days when he was done meeting and greeting the high-rolling hotel guests who'd come to frolic in the sun and party in nearby nightclubs, and he didn't feel like heading back to his four-bedroom villa and estate near South Beach, he could crash at the hotel.

This particular day, however, was supposed to be about putting a coda on unfinished business. Instead, he was irritated to discover, she still had as much an effect on him as ever.

The urge to touch her was irresistible, despite the fact that *she* had chosen to end their affair four years ago with a curt phone message.

He'd tried to contact her, always getting her voice mail, until he'd discovered from the receptionist at her design firm that Megan had given two weeks' notice and skipped town to go back home to Indianapolis.

To hell with it, he'd decided. His male pride had been stung, and he'd already put it on the line enough by breaking his cardinal rule: don't look back.

He'd never been dumped before. He was used to leaving women, not having women leave him. His breakup with Megan had been the first time he'd experienced being cast aside, and he hadn't liked it.

"Why are you here?" Megan demanded now, her green eyes flashing.

To get some answers, and as it happens, I need to hire an interior designer. He'd figured he'd enjoy having Megan on his payroll, playing it until he got some answers, and in the meantime, keeping the pressure on—letting her see just what she'd walked away from.

Now, he shrugged. "Isn't it obvious? I need an interior designer to update the look of the Garrison Grand. Your firm has done work on various Garrison properties in the past, including the Garrison Grand."

"Why ask for me?" She gestured around her. "Any number of people in this office could help you."

Because I'm going to enjoy seducing you back into my bed. "Because you're one of the best interior designers in town, and you're the one who's most familiar with the Garrison account."

He hadn't shown up with the intention of reigniting their affair, but now he'd seen her again, the idea appealed increasingly.

Her response as to why she'd ended their relationship had been only a little more satisfying than the one she'd given him by phone, and he wasn't sure he bought it: their affair had been so hot, he thought his fingers would be singing.

Now that she was back in town—and back in his orbit, by his own doing—he intended to dig a little deeper.

Conrad had told him he and the other partners had lured Meghan back to the firm. They needed new blood, and she was that good.

Megan opened and closed her mouth. "But we—"

"—slept together?" he finished for her.

At her indrawn breath, he arched a brow. "You have a problem working for former lovers?"

"This is the first time I've had to face the situation!"

"What? Worried about maintaining your professionalism?"

"It's not *my* professionalism I'm worried about," she retorted.

He swept her a look, letting his gaze linger on her chest before coming back to meet her mutinous gaze.

He smiled slowly. "Then you have nothing to worry about."

She raised her chin. "I'll ask that someone else be assigned to work on the Garrison Grand."

"Careful, sweetheart. The Garrison property is one of the most lucrative accounts your firm has going. You wouldn't want to be the one who caused your firm to lose it."

Her eyes widened, and color seeped into her face, masking the dusting of freckles there—freckles that he'd spent one memorable night kissing, one by one.

"You wouldn't dare," she gritted.

He shrugged. "Since you're just back in the office, I'm assuming you've got the most time to devote to a new account. You're going to find it hard to explain to your partners why you can't."

Her shoulders heaved, and her lips compressed.

"Fine," she said finally.

He looked back at her blandly.

"But our relationship this time is strictly business."

He inclined his head. "Whatever you say...Meggikins."

He was going to enjoy coaxing Megan Simmons back into his bed. And this time, she'd leave only when he asked her to.

Two

Megan stepped past the liveried doorman and into the cool lobby of the Garrison Grand.

The change was a welcome respite from the heat outside. She'd dressed for the hot weather in a lime-green sheath dress with a short matching jacket, her feet encased in strappy sandals.

A couple of men sent appreciative looks her way.

She knew that as a tall redhead in heels, she was hard to overlook—even if she wore her hair tied back and constrained, as it was today.

What she *wasn't* used to, she thought, as she looked around at the hotel guests in the lobby, was the cool sophistication of Stephen's world.

She'd almost forgotten what this world was like, having spent the past few years variously wiping baby food off her shirt, reading nursery rhymes and teaching Jade how to use the potty.

Now though, as she surveyed the women with lithe tanned bodies dressed in halter tops or less, and the men projecting a chic style in khakis and designer shirts, she knew she had to gird herself for today's meeting.

Glancing to her left, she noticed Stephen walking toward her from across the lobby.

She watched as he was waylaid by an employee, then as his progress was halted again by someone who appeared to be a familiar hotel guest.

When he finally approached, she said, "I thought I was meeting one of your executives."

"Change of plans," he said, cupping her elbow and gently steering her with a subtle pressure.

He slanted her a look. "That is, unless you *mind* it's me."

"No," she responded automatically. Since she had been the one to call their relationship strictly professional, she had no choice but to stick to the script. "Of course I don't care."

Of course I care. Just being in the same room with him was enough to make her tense and jittery.

As it was, little shock waves coursed through her from the casual contact of his hand at her elbow.

They walked across the majestic soaring lobby toward the elevators. One end of the lobby led to the street, and the other end, with columns alternating with billowing white curtains, opened onto the Garrison Grand's private beach. The smell of surf and sand wafted in.

She hadn't been able to stop herself over the years from reading the occasional news article about Stephen and the Garrison Grand. The hotel had kept a fantastic reputation while she and Stephen had been dating, but *it* had surpassed itself since then, becoming the it place for the rich and famous who flocked to South Beach.

Walking through the lobby now, she could understand why. Stephen seemed to keep everything new and cutting edge.

"I'm looking to redesign some of the meeting rooms on the second floor," Stephen said. "Then we can talk about other changes—what else needs to be revamped and updated."

His deep voice buffeted her like the warm jets of a hot tub.

This is not going to work, she thought. How could she stand to work with him when she couldn't even think straight?

Yet, she had no choice. After Stephen had left her office yesterday, she'd gone to see Conrad. The meeting had confirmed everything Stephen had said: everyone else in the office was too busy with other projects to be the lead person on the Garrison Grand, and they were looking to her to be a team player.

Now, as Stephen called the elevator and they rode up together, she felt the air between them fairly crackle with tension.

When they stepped out on the second floor, they walked down a hallway with recessed lighting along either side of its carpeted floor.

He gave her a quick tour of the business center and various conference rooms. They ended up at the end of the hall, where Stephen opened a set of double doors and ushered her inside the last empty conference room.

As she walked past him, she was careful not to brush against him. She didn't think she could stand it.

This conference room contained a long, rectangular, glass-topped table that looked as if it could seat twenty. Like the others, the decor was modern, with high-backed office chairs and all the proper business amenities: phones, a flat-screen television with a DVD player, and a projection screen that appeared as if it was normally hidden behind a wooden wall panel.

"I find it hard to believe," she observed after looking around and turning back to Stephen, "that anyone can work in paradise's playground."

It was a thought that had increasingly hit her during their brief tour.

A smile slashed across Stephen's face. "*I* do," he said, then added drily, "That's why you can't see the beach from this room or the others."

She walked farther into the room, trailing her fingertips along the top of the table before setting her purse down, putting together the thoughts and ideas that had been formulating since the beginning of their tour.

He watched her.

"Very modern," she mused.

"Very," he agreed, "but I'm not looking for merely modern. I want different—unique—and that means changing to stay ahead of our competitors."

She turned to face him. "Are you thinking of the Hotel Victoria?"

"Just back in town, and you've heard of it already," he quipped.

She lifted her shoulders. "I'm an interior designer. Of course I'm interested in news of a hotel opening."

"Well, don't be too impressed," he advised. "Jordan Jefferies is an imitator, not an innovator, and I'm more than ready for a fight."

Stephen's comments reminded her of everything she knew about him from four years ago. He was still strong-willed, powerful and competitive.

Seeking to change the direction of the conversation, she said, "The conference rooms are different from the rest of the hotel. They don't have the same white theme—"

His lips quirked. "We were looking for something a little more professional for the business rooms. White is the ultimate indulgence."

"Decadent luxury," she agreed.

It was what his celebrity guests came for. She could only imagine what his cleaning bill amounted to for the hotel. She knew most of the guest rooms were decorated in white, with splashes of color lent mostly by fresh flowers and marble accents.

But then again, given the room rate at the Garrison Grand, she could well imagine Stephen seeing healthy profits.

She thought about the suite at the hotel that Stephen kept for his personal use. It had also been done in white, she recollected. But unlike the other suites in the hotel, the room rate there had been a night of passion in Stephen's bed.

She felt herself heat at the thought.

"What are you thinking?" he said, and she jumped.

"I was just mulling the possibilities," she said quickly, trying to cover her lapse. "It occurred to me to do a takeoff on the decor in the rest of the hotel. White and dark blue. White leather, midnight-blue velvet. Different textures, different fabrics."

She spoke rapidly, sketching her idea for him, the thoughts spilling from her. "White to echo the calming relaxation of the rest of the hotel, midnight-blue for business. Navy is a business color, but we'll subtly undermine it by casting it in sinful velvet and giving it a unique hue."

His long-ago familiar lopsided smile appeared. "Tell me more."

It was easy to think *sinful* in his presence, she wanted to tell him.

Her heart beat rapidly.

There was a time, four years ago, when they'd been so hot for each other, they'd have abandoned their business meeting to sneak away upstairs and have frantic sex in his hotel suite, kissing and holding hands in the elevator as soon as the doors closed.

Or he'd have locked the door, and taken her right here.

Not anymore.

And she shouldn't be having such lascivious thoughts about a client, she reminded herself. Particularly him. She was mommy material now.

She glanced around. "We'll replace the wood paneling with sound-soak material to help with the acoustics and lighting. It comes in an off-white color, but with a suede finish, so it'll blend with the decor."

He smiled. "Sounds good."

"It'll sound even better when I've had time to draw up plans," she responded as she walked back toward him. "We'll need to move the business center, too. It should be convenient but less obtrusive. Right now, from what I saw, it has too much glass, in my opinion."

"I'm liking it even more," he replied.

"Aren't you lucky, then, that you got me before Jordan Jefferies did?" she joked, then could have bitten off her tongue as Stephen's eyes darkened.

She watched as his gaze traveled over her. "Yeah, I *got* you," he drawled before he met her gaze. "The question is, when will I have you again?"

Her stomach flipped. "*Never.*"

"Never is a long time, sweetheart."

"I thought we agreed to keep this relationship strictly professional."

"We did?" he murmured.

"That would put sexual innuendo on the wrong side of the line," she informed him.

"How about dinner?" he asked, his voice flippant even as his look heated her all over. "Would having dinner together be on the wrong side of the line?"

"Mo—" She stopped to clear the catch in her throat. "Most definitely."

"Too bad," he murmured.

Yes, too bad. Then she caught herself.

No, not too bad. He was lying, cheating vermin, and she'd be three kinds of fool to fall under the spell of his seductive charm—again. What was wrong with her?

He looked at her hair. "Why is your hair up?"

"It's hot."

Outside. It's hot outside. But she felt as if she was burning up right in here.

Before she could stop him, he reached up, and with an efficient move, released the barrette holding her hair in place.

A cascade of dark red hair followed.

"Much better," he remarked. "I always liked it better down."

"Stop it." She didn't know whom she was angrier with, him for putting the moves on her, or herself for her breathless reaction.

"It was good four years ago," he stated.

"Yes, and it's over now."

"Easily rectified. Have dinner with me."

Stephen being Stephen, it was more a command than a request.

"I can't. I need to go—"

She clamped her mouth shut. He'd gotten her so discombobulated, she'd almost said she had to go relieve the babysitter. It was an excuse that came effortlessly to her lips. She'd grown accustomed to using it over the past three years.

"You have to go, what?" he asked.

"Nothing," she responded. "When I have something down on paper for this project, I'll call you."

Then she grabbed her purse and brushed past him in her haste to get out of the room.

Stephen stood looking out his office window, his suit jacket hanging open and bunched above the hands shoved in his pockets. He had a rare moment for calm introspection.

He'd come on strong with Megan earlier. Maybe too strong, he admitted to himself now.

She'd reacted like a deer caught in headlights. It was far different from the way she'd reacted to his pursuit four years ago. Then she'd flatly refused to go out with him, but the unaccustomed taste of rejection had simply spiked his interest.

He'd made up reasons to show up at Garrison, Inc. headquarters, even recruiting Parker so he would know when Megan was due to show up there.

He'd engaged her in casual conversation, and eventually discovered they'd both been captains of their high school swim teams and they were both football fans, though she followed her hometown Indianapolis Colts while he was a Miami Dolphins fan.

More importantly, he'd liked the fact she was ambitious without taking herself too seriously. It was something he could relate to.

He'd discovered she'd left her home in Indiana and come down to Florida because of the career opportunities in the interior design field. She dealt with the aesthetics of workplace and hospitality environments, while his aim was to make his hotel the premier accommodation in Miami by focusing on cutting-edge design.

To his chagrin, he'd also discovered his reputation as a player had preceded him and Megan was understandably wary.

"Why won't you go out with me?" he'd asked her one day, bestowing one of his trademark killer smiles. He'd found from experience that the direct approach often worked best. "It's been rumored I'm actually a reasonable dinner partner, decent arm candy and even a fairly good kisser."

Her lips had twitched. "Yes, and that's not *all* apparently. I know about your reputation."

"Rumors of my prowess have been exaggerated," he parried, not averse to shamelessly self-serving comments.

She laughed. "Can I quote you? It's rare to hear a guy like you argue for once that his image has outstripped the reality. Still, I noticed you didn't say *greatly* exaggerated."

"A guy like me?" he repeated, pretending to look wounded.

"Mmm-hmm. Exactly like you," she said archly, turning back to her work.

Still, he'd eventually caught her at a weak moment one day and coaxed her into having an overdue lunch with him at a corner bistro. She'd relented, and their affair had taken off from there.

Yet, back then she'd never had that apprehensive quality around him that she'd exhibited earlier today.

People changed, of course, but he wondered what could have triggered it in this case.

Still, he didn't intend to let the pressure off Megan.

He wanted her—sooner rather than later.

Three

When Stephen showed up at her office two days later, Megan was prepared to act as if their encounter in the Garrison Grand's conference room had never happened.

She gritted her teeth now as she led the way down the hall to Elkind, Ross's storage rooms, where they kept fabrics, carpets and wall coverings.

She was determined to keep this an all-business relationship even if it killed her.

She could feel his presence behind her—authoritative, confident, all male—and wished now she'd worn something more severe than a wrap dress and heels to work today.

They stepped into the secluded and very empty storage room, and Megan couldn't help thinking that there were some requirements of her job that she could easily do without right now.

Stephen looked around at the shelves surrounding them. They were all piled high with materials.

"So this is what things really look like around here," he said, his voice tinged with amusement. "I was beginning to think, judging from your austere office, that this was a place where even a paper clip wouldn't dare to be out of place."

"I haven't had a chance to settle in yet," she responded.

Let him think what he liked, she thought. She didn't want him getting any hints of her life as it was now.

She walked toward the back of the room to search for the samples she was looking for, and he followed, then stopped beside her. In his dark pinstripe suit, he pulled off the look of restrained power effortlessly.

Retrieving a small chip from a cardboard box, she said, "This is a sample of the type of wall covering I'd like to use in the conference rooms."

As he took the chip from her, their hands brushed, sending awareness shooting through her.

"As you can see," she went on, determined to ignore the sensation, "it's not quite white, but close enough, I think."

"Right," he muttered, but his eyes were focused on her, not the sample in his hand.

She scooted over to another shelf. "And these are examples of the fabrics I'd like to use. This is the white leather—" she tapped a bolt of fabric "—and this is the midnight velvet."

She watched him feel the leather, his tanned hands dark against the lightness of the fabric, and an erotic charge went through her.

Cursing her wayward mind, and seeking to distract both him and herself, she yanked the bolt of velvet fabric forward with more force than necessary.

"As you can see, the color has a depth and a richness to it that make it more than merely navy-blue. It's plush, and at the same time, fairly easy to clean thanks to the wonders of new industrial processes."

He reached out and touched the fabric, his hand slowly stroking over it.

She nearly gulped. It was impossible, she belatedly realized, to have this conversation *without* a sexual subtext.

"You're right," he said, gazing directly at her. "It's...sinful."

She could see amusement lurking in his eyes. Damn him. He knew exactly the effect this conversation was having on her.

The sudden ring of a phone made her jump and broke the spell.

Stephen arched a brow.

"We keep a phone in the supply room," she explained, hurrying over to a nearby cabinet, "in case anyone needs to be reached while they're working."

While they're being seduced by the look in a client's eyes.

Picking up the phone, she said, "Hello?"

"Megan, it's Tiffany."

What a time for her babysitter to call! Maybe it hadn't been such a great idea to tell her secretary to forward any important calls. She cast an involuntary look at Stephen from the corner of her eyes.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked.

"Just checking in."

She groaned inwardly. "Thanks. That's thoughtful."

"Jade wants to go to the park," Tiffany continued, "so we might not be here when you arrive home. I didn't want you to worry, so I thought I'd call now. If we don't beat you back, we'll be on the way."

"That's fine."

"We might stop for some ice cream."

"Just remember what she's allergic to," she responded in a lowered voice.

"Will do."

When she hung up, Stephen asked, "Is everything okay? I heard you mention the word *allergic*."

She thought frantically, even as she struggled to appear composed.

"Ah, it's a client I'm taking to lunch," she fibbed. "I was just reminding my secretary to bear in mind what the client is allergic to when making reservations." She waved her hand around. "You know, ah, ethnic cuisine and all."

"Right."

She cleared her throat. Time to get out of the pressure cooker that the storage room had turned into. "If you follow me back to my office, we can consider the layout of the Garrison Grand redesign in greater detail."

What was Megan hiding? She'd appeared furtive when speaking on the phone in the storage room earlier in the day.

Stephen stared out the window of his office, his fingers steepled, his feet crossed on his desk.

He knew she wasn't married. She didn't wear a ring, and he figured Megan would be one to change her surname when she got married.

Maybe there was a boyfriend in the picture.

His lips thinned at the thought of Megan with another man. Still, her reaction to his asking for a date *hadn't* been to say she was seeing someone. She'd been about to say something, but he was fairly sure it wasn't that. She would have finished her thought otherwise, because a steady boyfriend would have afforded her an easy excuse to turn him down.

Still, he wondered how many lovers she'd had since their breakup. He'd hardly been celibate himself. They're were plenty of beautiful women in South Beach who were only too happy to hook up with the wealthy and good-looking owner of one of the trendiest places in town.

But none of those relationships had gone as deep as the one with Megan. When his mind had slipped its leash and he'd compared those women to her, they'd come up short.

He thought back to Megan's accusation. *No one leaves a Garrison.*

Yeah, it had irked him to be dumped. Particularly since, as far as he was concerned, their relationship had been just fine. The sex had been great, and she'd challenged and fascinated him out of bed, too.

She was the one woman he'd actually given thought to settling down with.

"You look severe."

He looked at his open office door and noticed his new sister-in-law, Anna, holding on to the doorjamb.

He pushed away from his desk and lowered his feet.

Anna walked into the room. "What were you thinking? I could practically see the storm clouds."

"Nothing," he said, standing. "What brings you to the Garrison Grand?"

He kept his personal life private, including the particulars of his short-lived affair with Megan.

Still, now he knew Anna and Megan were friends, he figured his new sister-in-law could be useful to him. He wasn't averse to doing some subtle digging.

"Parker and I are having dinner at the Opalesce Room," Anna responded.

He flashed a smile that more than one woman had characterized as devilish. "Come to invite me along?"

Anna laughed. "Hardly. Parker and I are still honeymooners."

"Yeah, how can any of us forget?"

The change in his brother had been extraordinary. The guy actually seemed to be in love, which—given the train wreck their own parents' marriage had been until their father had died—was some feat. It also spoke volumes about the woman before him.

His parents' marriage had been marred by Bonita Garrison's drinking. Still, after John Garrison's sudden death from a heart attack, everyone had been shocked to learn he'd fathered a love child.

"Actually," Anna went on, "since your brother is going to be late, I thought I'd stop by on the off chance that Megan might be around. I know she's working on the business center renovation."

"She came by yesterday." He didn't add she'd hightailed it out of there after his thwarted pass.

Anna looked momentarily disappointed, then shrugged. "Oh, well. I suppose I'll catch up with her soon." After a moment, she added impetuously, "I'm glad you hired her."

"Yeah," he said, coming around his desk, "I didn't know until you mentioned it that you were close friends with one of Miami's best up-and-coming designers."

"In fact," Anna admitted, "I have Megan to thank for my start at Garrison, Inc. four years ago. She'd gotten to know people in the HR department while she worked on renovations at Garrison headquarters."

"So she said. What are friends for?" he remarked flippantly as he made his way to a side cabinet that held a small refrigerator and beverages.

Recently he'd suspected Anna of corporate espionage, but he'd been proved wrong. Someone, though, was leaking secrets to the damn Jefferies brothers. Last month, editorial coverage and a photo spread in *Luxury Traveler* that he'd been working hard to negotiate for the Garrison Grand had somehow fallen through, and the magazine had instead—by strange coincidence—decided to profile Jordan Jefferies's soon-to-be-opened Hotel Victoria.

Fortunately, Parker had asked the family's private investigator, Ace Martin, to ferret out the traitor. It didn't help matters, though, that one of his younger twin sisters had just decided to get herself engaged to Emilio Jefferies.

"Drink?" he offered.

"No, thanks. Parker should be here any minute."

Stephen poured himself some bottled water. After watching his mother drink herself silly, he was careful with the heavy stuff.

"Anyway, I'm glad you hired Megan after I mentioned her for the project here at the hotel," Anna continued. "I'm glad I was able to return the favor she did for me."

"I'm sure she can't thank you enough," he responded tongue-in-cheek, thinking of Megan's reaction when he'd shown up in her office.

"I also convinced her to take over the cute little house I was leasing in Coral Gables."

He turned back toward Anna, and took a sip of his drink. "You don't say?"

Parker appeared in the doorway behind his wife, and Anna turned.

"Great, you're not as late as I thought you'd be," Anna said.

Parker gave his wife a quick kiss.

"Leave it for dessert," Stephen said to no one in particular.

Parker flashed him a grin, and Anna looked embarrassed.

Stephen raised his glass in salute. "Enjoy your meal."

Thanks to Anna, he had more important matters to attend to, starting with calling over to HR at Garrison headquarters and finding out his sister-in-law's old address.

Four

He scanned the house numbers, and when he found the modest little home in Coral Gables, he pulled up at the curb and parked his Aston Martin convertible.

As Stephen strode up the well-kept front lawn, he scanned the home's facade. It was hard to tell if anyone was home.

The house was painted white, with light blue shutters and trim providing vivid contrast. Flower boxes spilled over from the front windows, and some small bushes dotted the lawn before them.

He pocketed his sunglasses before finding and ringing the doorbell.

It was a late Saturday afternoon, and the temperature hovered modestly in the mideighties. Megan could be anywhere, he thought. She could be out running errands or seeing friends. If she wasn't home, his plan was to try another time.

He rang the doorbell again.

He knew just calling Megan up and asking for a date wouldn't work. She'd already turned down his invitation to dinner.

So, he'd decided to show up on her doorstep unannounced. He figured he could offer his help for what remained to be done moving in, and in the process, he might even persuade her about dinner.

She was bound to be more relaxed outside of work.

On top of it all, he was more than a little curious about what Megan was hiding. At the Garrison Grand the other day, when she'd abruptly cut herself off, the alarmed look that had crossed her face had been telling.

Showing up at her house would give him a good opportunity to discover any secrets.

With that thought, he rang a third time.

After waiting for a few moments, and again receiving no response, he resigned himself to trying again another time.

He turned to leave when a distant laugh suddenly stopped him.

The laugh came again, and this time he thought it was coming from the rear of the house.

Changing direction, he cut across the lawn, then turned the corner and walked along the concrete path that ran along the side of the house.

As he neared the backyard, he could tell from the sound of movement that there were definitely people outside.

"Mommy, the green."

"Okay, Jade. Just a minute, honey."

He recognized the second voice as Megan's.

Even as his mind roared to life trying to make sense of the conversation—*Megan, a mother*—he turned the corner into the backyard.

His eyes rapidly took in Megan, her back to him, sitting at a plastic picnic table opposite a little girl. They were finger-painting and wearing matching smocks.

The little girl looked up suddenly and stared at him.

He stared back—and felt the breath leave him.

The girl had dark brown hair, pulled back in a ponytail, and her large brown eyes stared at him innocently.

But the characteristic he zeroed in on was her cleft chin.

He was all too familiar with the trait. He viewed it every morning when he shaved, and he saw it in the faces of his siblings.

All the Garrisons had cleft chins.

The girl looked to be around three, which would make her the right age....

His mind froze.

The little girl smiled and pointed. "Mommy, there's a man here."

He watched as Megan looked over her shoulder.

When she saw him, her eyes widened and her lips parted. Color drained from her face.

She owed him some answers big time, Stephen thought grimly.

He could read the truth in Megan's reaction, could see it in his daughter's face. *His daughter.*

"Hello, Megan." Given his fury, he was surprised by how even his voice was.

Not in front of Jade, her eyes seemed to beg him as he stepped forward.

"And who is this pretty girl?" he asked, looking over at Jade.

The little girl giggled. "I'm Jade."

A door opened and slammed. "Sorry, I'm late—"

Stephen turned to see a woman—a cute blonde who looked to be in her early twenties—stopped in front of Megan's back door.

Megan rose. "That's okay, Tiffany. I was just entertaining Jade with some finger-painting."

Stephen noticed Tiffany gazing at him as if she recognized him.

More likely than not, she did. If she and her friends partied at the Garrison Grand or one of the other hot spots among the Garrison properties, chances were good she would have seen him. Or maybe she recognized him from the newspapers.

"My name is Jade, and I like green!"

Despite the charged atmosphere, Stephen couldn't help smiling at the little girl's outburst. The tyke had personality.

Megan looked down at her daughter. "Time to clean up, sweetie."

"But, Mommy, we're not done!"

"Why don't I finish painting with Jade?" Tiffany offered, stepping forward, though her eyes remained on him.

Doubtlessly, Stephen thought, she was wondering what he was doing standing in Megan's yard.

"Yes, Megan," he drawled, "why don't you let Tiffany take over, since you and I *need to talk*."

His tone said she wasn't getting rid of him. He wanted answers *now*.

Their eyes met and clashed until Megan broke contact.

"All right," she said finally, then raised her arms to untie the smock from behind her neck.

Because Tiffany continued to look at him curiously, he said smoothly, "Aren't you going to introduce us, Megan?" Then without waiting for a response, he held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Stephen Garrison."

Jade's father. Megan's former lover. The guy who just found out he has a child.

"I thought I recognized you!" Tiffany exclaimed. "You're the owner of the Garrison Grand, aren't you?"

"Yes," he acknowledged, then shook Tiffany's hand.

He was used to women stating the obvious when meeting him for the first time.

He knew his effect on the opposite sex. He was tall, well-built and rich. Three qualities women loved. When they weren't slipping him their phone numbers or hotel keys, they were finagling an introduction from friends.

His image blended with that of the Garrison Grand: life in the fast lane.

“Get around, don’t you?” Megan remarked drily.

He arched a brow as he stepped toward where she stood, waiting for him. “I’m locally known, if that’s what you mean.”

He could tell Tiffany was following their exchange avidly, which made it all the more imperative that he and Megan find a place where they could speak privately.

“Listen to what Tiffany says, sweetheart,” Megan said to her daughter before turning to walk toward the back door.

He followed, watching Megan’s hips swing in tailored shorts and a light blue T-shirt, her feet in flip-flops.

She could have been any suburban mother trying to entertain her kid on a hot weekend afternoon.

Except now he knew she was the mother of *his* kid.

He trailed her through the house to a cozy living room furnished with tropical-print furniture and strewn with toys.

She stopped and turned to face him.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me I had a daughter?” he began without preamble. “And don’t bother denying it. She’s got the Garrison features, right down to the cleft chin!”

She folded her arms in front of her, almost hugging herself. “I thought it was best.”

“You...thought...it...was...best?” Fury made him enunciate every word. “Best for whom? *You*? Because I can already tell you, honey, it sure as hell wasn’t best for me.” He stabbed his finger in the direction of the yard. “And it’s questionable whether it was best for that little girl out there to be raised by you alone and denied all the advantages I could have provided for her.”

He’d just given voice to her own niggling doubts over the years, Megan thought.

There were times when she’d thought about contacting Stephen. Times when she’d wondered whether she was doing the right thing by not telling him of Jade’s existence.

And then she’d thought about his betrayal and his playboy lifestyle, and realized all over again he wasn’t father material. There was no way he’d be happy to learn he’d accidentally fathered a child.

Now, though, he’d found out about Jade in the worst possible way.

Still, she rebelled at his judgment of her.

“*Why?*” he asked.

“It was clear to me our affair was coming to an end.”

“Try again,” he snapped. “You’ve used that line before. It may have sufficed as a reason for breaking up, but it doesn’t explain why you kept my daughter from me.”

“What would you have done if I’d told you?” she flung back at him. “Would you have accused me of deliberately getting pregnant? Of trying to trap you?”

He stared at her hard. “My reaction is beside the point. I had a right to know.”

“You gave up that right when you proved yourself untrustworthy.”

“Untrustworthy? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you were seeing other women. *Having sex with other women.*”

He didn’t move a muscle.

Just let him deny it, she thought angrily.

“You’re crazy,” he said finally.

“I saw *her*,” she responded, dropping her arms. “I saw her leaving your yacht the night I was coming—”

She cut herself off.

“The night you were coming to tell me you were pregnant?” he finished for her, guessing.

“She said you were the best she’d ever had.”

“A nice compliment if it had been *true*,” he retorted, “but I wasn’t sleeping with anyone else.”

She threw up her hands. "What was I supposed to think? She was straightening her dress while she spoke to me! She was leaving your yacht, it was late, and you had a reputation as a player."

A reputation that she'd been well aware of. She'd only gone out with him after he'd pursued her persistently while she'd worked on the renovation of Garrison headquarters. Even then, it had been against her better judgment. Of course, once she'd found out about his cheating, she'd castigated herself for her naiveté.

"I can hardly remember who you're talking about! Women have thrown themselves at me—"

"And that's the problem," she retorted. Definitely not Daddy material. Not then, and not now. "You're the Garrison Grand's owner. You operate in a sophisticated world."

A heartless world.

A muscle worked in his jaw. "Even if I'd slept with someone else, it doesn't justify your hiding Jade."

"Oh, yes, it does," she responded. "It meant as far as you were concerned, we weren't serious. It confirmed you were still a player. I knew you wouldn't be thrilled to discover I was pregnant."

If she couldn't trust him with her heart, how could she trust him with her baby?

At least, that's what she'd told herself whenever she'd had doubts about keeping Jade's existence a secret.

"How can you be so damn sure of my reaction when I'm not even sure what the hell my reaction would have been?" he tossed back, then raked his hand through his hair. "How could you have gotten pregnant? We used protection."

She'd wondered the same thing for a time. Now, she shrugged her shoulders. "I took some antibiotics for a sinus infection. They must have interfered with the pill."

He just continued to look at her fixedly.

She steadied herself. "The question is, where do we go from here?"

She dreaded raising the issue, but it was a question that had to be asked.

"I'll tell you where we're *not* going, and that's back to you excluding me from Jade's life."

His words chilled her. The thought of Jade somehow, someday, being taken away from her was her biggest fear.

"What do you mean?" she breathed.

"I mean," he said, his expression flinty, "you're going to marry me and publicly acknowledge I'm Jade's father."

"*What?* You can't be serious!" Even as her heart thudded, she tried to wrap her mind around the idea and couldn't.

"But I am, *sweetheart*," he responded implacably.

"And if I say no?"

His face closed, hardening, and she got a glimpse of Stephen, the ruthless businessman. "Then I'll take you to court to establish my parental rights. I'll use every means at my disposal to give you the legal battle of your life and to get access to my daughter."

She knew those means were formidable. Stephen had wealth, power and political influence, not to mention the Garrison empire to back him up.

Still, she managed to find her voice, and say evenly, "I'd probably win a custody battle. The law is on my side as Jade's mother and the one who's raised her."

"You couldn't afford a fight, and even if you could, would you want to risk it?" he shot back.

No, she acknowledged, if only to herself. She knew Stephen had the money to hire the best lawyers in town, which would make for a protracted and messy battle. He could very well win generous visitation rights, at the least.

"Think about it," he said, seeming to read her mind. "One way or another, I'm in your life."

"I *could* fight you." She wasn't without some means herself. But she knew she was out of her league with Stephen.

And that was the heart of the matter. He'd always been out of her league, in every way.

"Yeah," he acknowledged too quietly, "but think about your career. You just got a new start in Miami. You don't have the time for a legal battle, and your professional reputation will take a hit."

She hated that he was right. Her professional reputation *would* suffer. Interior design was such a fickle business. Who would want to hire a woman whose personal life was a disaster? Who might be trailed by reporters to their doorstep?

Stephen had influence in this town. He was a trendsetter and more. She knew there would be people who'd want to keep on his good side—and that would include not doing business with the former lover with whom Stephen was involved in a messy child-custody fight.

"Why are you doing this me?" she whispered, distraught.

"Isn't that my line?" he countered. "Why did you do this to me?"

She opened and closed her mouth.

"No matter what," he said flatly, "we're joined at the hip."

"Oops, sorry to intrude!"

Megan turned and saw Tiffany standing in the doorway from the hallway to the living room. She had no idea how long the sitter had been there.

"I didn't realize you were still here, Megan," Tiffany said, "but I thought I'd check because you usually tell me when you're leaving." Then glancing from Stephen back to her, she added, "Didn't you say your dinner was at seven?"

Megan closed her eyes. She'd almost forgotten about her business dinner!

Opening her eyes again, she looked at her watch. It was nearing six. She'd have to hurry.

Tiffany looked from her to Stephen, and evidently judging that she'd walked in on a heated conversation, she took a step back. "I left Jade in the kitchen. Call me if you need anything."

When the sitter had retreated, Megan looked back at Stephen. "I have a business dinner in a little over an hour to court a potential new client. That's why Tiffany came over."

She'd made an exception to her rule not to let business intrude on her weekends with Jade because Conrad had asked her for a favor. She was supposed to meet Conrad and the potential client at a downtown Miami restaurant—and she wasn't even dressed yet.

Stephen looked at her coldly. "I'm giving you until Monday to make up your mind. And I'm only giving you that amount of time because I know you're scheduled to come by the Garrison Grand and we can talk then without having Jade around." He paused. "You already got *four years*."

Megan watched then as Stephen strode to the front door and slammed out of her house.

But *not* out of her life, she thought with a pang.

Five

The Mediterranean-style Garrison estate in Bal Harbour should have felt like home, but it didn't.

Still, Stephen reflected, even now with John Garrison gone, and his extramarital affair and its illegitimate child exposed, not to mention Bonita's heavy drinking, they all still felt obliged to maintain the illusion of a happy family gathering over Sunday dinner.

Yet, it was rare for all the Garrison siblings to be present, and tonight was no exception.

Stephen looked around the room. Bonita sat at the head of the dining room table, and his younger brother, Adam, and younger sister, Brooke, sat across from him.

Missing were Parker and Anna, and Brooke's twin, Brittany. Stephen figured the newlyweds had better things to do, lucky dogs. And since Brittany had recently decided she was in love with Emilio Jefferies, she preferred avoiding tense family dinners.

Now, as they chewed dinner mostly in silence, Stephen reflected on how an outsider might perceive tonight's gathering.

Valuable artwork hung on one wall, and in front of the opposite wall sat a china closet displaying various crystal pieces. Potted ferns sat in two corners of the room, and Greek columns flanked an arched entry. Overhead, a magnificent chandelier hung from a painted domed ceiling.

The room, like the rest of the estate, was majestic—and cold as ice.

His gaze came back to his family. Better to bite the bullet, he thought grimly.

“I just found out I have an illegitimate child,” he announced into the silence.

Brooke gasped, and Adam froze.

Bonita stopped in midmotion, her wineglass halfway to her lips.

Given the shock waves that the discovery of John Garrison’s illegitimate child had recently sent through the family, he had no illusions about how his news would be received.

Suddenly Bonita gave a raucous laugh. “Just like your father, except you don’t have a wife to trick.”

He ignored the outburst, though it was uncharacteristic. He was the only one of the Garrison off-spring that his mother didn’t criticize, but he knew his news was a bombshell. “There’s a three-year-old little girl named Jade.”

“How?” Adam asked, raising the question he knew must be in everyone’s mind.

He held his brother’s gaze. “I had a relationship with her mother, Megan Simmons, when she did some interior design work at Garrison headquarters.”

Bonita shook her head. “Just like your damned father!”

He heard the note of betrayal in his mother’s tone, and felt his face tighten. “I’m planning on publicly acknowledging Jade as my daughter as soon as possible.”

And marrying Megan, he added silently, if he got his way. He planned to do everything in his power to get his way.

Bonita’s hand came down, her glass hitting the table with a thud and sending red wine across the white tablecloth. “You will do no such thing, do you hear me? I will not have the child of another tramp in this family! I will not tolerate another slut getting her hands on the Garrison fortune!”

He faced his mother. “You have no say in the matter,” he ground out.

“I’m disappointed in you, Stephen,” Bonita said, her voice frigid despite her inebriated state. “First your father betrays this family, then you do. Don’t we have enough turmoil to deal with?”

In fact, he’d been thinking the same thing, but he rebelled at putting Megan in the same category as his father’s faithlessness.

His fling with Megan may have been careless, but it sure as hell hadn’t amounted to marital infidelity.

And it wasn’t the fact that he had fathered a child out of wedlock that bothered him. It was having a child and not acknowledging her for years that, for him, created uncomfortable parallels with his father.

The longtime housekeeper, Lisette, appeared in the archway, no doubt having heard raised voices.

Bonita knocked a wine bottle to the floor, sending more wine, as well as glass this time, everywhere. Then she rose unsteadily to her feet.

Stephen stood, and Adam did the same.

Immediately, Lisette moved to Bonita’s side. “Let me help you, Mrs. Garrison.”

Stephen watched, along with Adam and Brooke, as Lisette helped Bonita from the room.

His hands bunched at his sides. He figured Lisette, as well as the missing Garrison family members, would find out soon enough what caused tonight’s ruckus.

“Well, another rockin’ Garrison family dinner!” Adam said, then picked up his glass and raised it in a mock salute before taking a swallow.

“Why don’t we continue this conversation outside on the patio where the wet bar is?” he said to Adam and Brooke. Outside, they would be away from any prying eyes and open ears among the household staff. “We can let the staff clean up in here.”

They’d almost finished with dinner, anyway. He looked down at the spilled wine and broken glass in distaste.

“Sorry,” Brooke demurred. “I think I’ll pass.”

Stephen noticed his sister continued to look pale.

“Is something wrong?” he asked. “Did my news shock you that much?”

“N-no,” she stammered.

He searched her face. “You look upset.”

“I’m concerned about Mother’s drinking.” She lowered her voice. “Did you notice she drank almost a full bottle of wine at dinner—before she spilled the rest?”

Yeah, he had, and he hated to think how much his mother had imbibed *before* dinner.

Still, he had to admit that sometimes *he’d* felt the need for a fortifying drink before a Garrison family dinner.

They’d all moved to one end of the dining room, and he gently chucked Brooke under the chin. “Don’t worry, kid. Let our mother deal with her own problems. But if it makes you feel better, I’m planning on having a talk with her.”

Fat lot of good it would do, but he’d try. For some reason, today’s dinner aside, Bonita usually held her tongue with him, and he figured that gave him some leverage. He’d also have to make clear that he wouldn’t tolerate his mother taking any more cheap shots at Megan.

After he and Adam had said goodbye to Brooke and had retreated outdoors to the patio, he went to the marble-topped wet bar to pour himself a Scotch on the rocks.

The patio was dominated by an Olympic-size pool and lined with queen palms that swayed in the cool breeze. There was an unobstructed view of the ocean.

Their surroundings were serene, which made the recent tumult inside the mansion seem all the more out of place.

“Drink?” he asked Adam, who’d taken a seat on one of the bar stools.

“Booker’s Bourbon, thanks.”

From there, the conversation quickly moved to local business and politics. By an unspoken agreement, he and Adam put the ugly scene inside behind them as quickly as possible.

“The president of the Miami Business Council is retiring next year,” Stephen found himself observing after several minutes.

“Yeah, I know,” Adam said. “I’ve been thinking of running to be his replacement.”

Stephen shook his head. “The Business Council wants to uphold a certain image. Only married men have ever won election.” He raised his glass and took a sip of his drink. “And you and I, little brother, are far from the image they want.”

He and his brothers had well-earned reputations as players. Except now, Parker was married, and he’d probably be heading the same way soon, too, though he didn’t feel the need to share that news with Adam just yet.

“So, what are you going to do about Jade? I’d like to meet her.” Adam paused. “I’m an uncle, and I didn’t even know it!”

“Try finding out that three years ago you became a father,” Stephen replied ruefully. “And don’t worry, you’ll get to meet her.”

All the Garrisons would, even if he had to move heaven and earth to make it happen.

His brows snapped together as he recalled Megan’s accusation that he’d cheated. He could barely remember the night she’d referred to, or the woman who may or may not have tried to come on to him. But he knew he’d never two-timed anyone.

Still, he’d have to jog his memory somehow about the night she was talking about. It infuriated him even now that she had continued to be skeptical even in the face of his denial.

“How *did* you feel when you found out you had a child?” Adam asked, curiosity lacing his words.

Stephen considered his brother’s question. As he looked out at the water, Megan’s words came back to him. *You wouldn’t be thrilled to discover I was pregnant.*

Four years ago, he'd been happy to live in the moment. Yes, he'd given a passing thought to the fact that Megan was the one woman he could settle down with, but he hadn't taken any concrete steps in that direction. The truth was he'd have been blown away to discover he was a father.

Now, though, he thought about the little girl he'd seen yesterday. She looked like him, and he'd felt an instant connection.

He knew he wanted to be a father to Jade.

"It was unbelievable," he said, his gaze moving from the ocean to his brother. "She looks just like a Garrison, and the protectiveness automatically kicked in."

In fact, he was mad as hell at being shortchanged on the past three years.

"I've heard having a daughter changes everything for guys," Adam commented. "Suddenly you can't look at women the same way."

Tell me about it, Stephen thought, his mind traveling over all the women who'd blended into his past. Adam was right. He wouldn't want Jade to grow up and fall for the kind of smooth operator he'd been for most of his adult life.

"So, you're going to publicly acknowledge her?" Adam shook his head doubtfully. "I hope you know what you're getting into. As much as I hate echoing our mother, what do you know about Megan Simmons?"

"Enough," he said shortly.

"I remember meeting her when you dated four years ago," Adam went on. "Think she's one of those women who believes getting knocked up by a rich guy is like hitting the jackpot?"

"Shut up, Adam."

"No, really," his brother pressed.

"You don't know anything about it. She was hiding the kid's existence from me. I found out *accidentally* when I showed up at her house unannounced."

Adam whistled. "Well, that puts a different spin on things. I won't bother asking why you showed up at her house without an invitation." His brother gave him a sly look. "Still carrying a torch?"

"Shut up," he said, and downed some more of his drink.

It was late Sunday afternoon, and she and Anna Cross—no, Anna Garrison now, Megan corrected herself—sat at her dinette table enjoying some coffee and sinfully good Tres Leches cake.

Jade was playing in the living room, where they could hear and sometimes see her.

The house was big enough for Jade to play in, but small enough for just two people. Megan was glad now she'd taken up Anna's lease when she'd moved back to Miami. At the time, Anna had no longer needed the house in Coral Gables because she was marrying Parker Garrison.

Jade's uncle.

Of course, that meant Anna was Jade's aunt.

She really needed to 'fess up, Megan thought, looking at her friend.

She steeled herself and took a deep breath. "I have something to tell you."

"Mmm?" Anna responded, cutting off another piece of cake with her fork. "I shouldn't, but this is so—so yummy—"

"Jade is a Garrison."

Anna stilled for a moment, then her fork clattered against her plate. "*What?*"

Anna stared at her in disbelief, a dozen questions flitting across her face.

Megan rubbed clammy hands against her shorts. "Before you came to Miami four years ago, I dated Stephen Garrison."

"Stephen—?"

Megan nodded.

"I didn't even know the two of you had been involved!"

"It wasn't a long relationship." Though it had left its permanent mark. "It ended badly, and once it did, I was reluctant for a long time to share the details with anyone."

Now, though, she decided to fill in Anna on her past relationship and recent conversations with Stephen. Once she was done, she said, “He’s threatened to go public. And he demanded I marry him.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell him about Jade,” Anna said. “Not that I’m passing judgment. It’s just that I think I’d have found it hard to keep it secret.”

And that was why, Megan thought, she hadn’t confided in her closest friend about the details of Jade’s paternity. She knew Anna would be working at Garrison, Inc. headquarters, and she didn’t want to burden her friend with an explosive secret about the boss’s brother.

Of course, she’d been tripped up by *not* having confided in Anna.

Anna looked thoughtful now that she seemed to have recovered from the initial shock. “I *knew* there was something between you and Stephen. I got some hints from Stephen’s reaction when I mentioned you at dinner once. You also seemed to have a funny reaction at my wedding when he was heading our way.”

“Actually, Stephen discovered I was back in Miami when you mentioned it to him,” Megan said.

Anna’s brow furrowed. “Oh, Megan, I’m so sorry! I didn’t know how it would cause problems! All I wanted to do was send some business your way.”

“Thanks.” She reached out and patted Anna’s hand soothingly. “I know you had the best intentions.”

“And you know,” Anna went on, “you *can* help Stephen. The Jefferieses are pressing *hard*, helped along by what Parker thinks is a corporate spy within the Garrison organization.” Her lips twisted. “For a while, Parker—and, I guess, Stephen, as well—thought *I* was the spy.”

“Yes, you explained it to me.” She withdrew her hand and waved it around vaguely. “But now look at you. You’re the glowing newlywed.”

Anna laughed self-consciously, then murmured, “Parker...”

“*Believe me*, I’m very familiar with the charms of the Garrison men.” Megan nodded her head toward the front room. “I have a daughter to prove it.”

“But you don’t regret Jade, do you?”

“No, of course not. She’s wonderful. But now I have Stephen to deal with.”

“All the Garrison men are alike,” Anna observed obliquely. “What are you going to do?”

Megan sighed. “I’m not sure. Any suggestions?”

“Why don’t you agree to marry him?”

“Are you serious? I can’t!”

Obviously, Anna’s eyes were clouded by love, Megan thought.

“Why not?”

Two simple words, and yet they dredged up a wealth of emotion, Megan thought. She was dangerously weak where Stephen was concerned, despite *everything*.

She’d seen that herself since he’d walked into her life again. It had been the same old feeling of excitement and overwhelming awareness—as if she couldn’t stop arguing with him, and the only way to deal with it was to give in to the itch to jump his bones.

“He’s a cheat,” she contented herself with saying.

“Are you sure?” Anna pressed.

“You mean, am I sure I saw a woman with disheveled clothing emerging from Stephen’s yacht, claiming to have seen more of him than his famous cleft chin?” Megan asked sarcastically. “Then, yes, I’m sure.”

Anna cocked her head. “Well, even if he did cheat, that was four years ago. Now you have a child together. Think about Jade.”

In fact, she had been thinking about Jade. Until now, Jade hadn’t had a father in her life—though her own parents and family had been around in Indianapolis to shower her with love.

"You know," Anna went on, "being married to Stephen might not be so bad. It would take away some worries. Jade would grow up with everything money has to offer. You wouldn't have to worry about arriving at some complicated arrangement with Stephen for him to see her."

Yes, she thought, but she didn't know if *she* could take living under the same roof with Stephen. Sharing his bed...

Just being in the same room with him made her tense, jittery, and acutely aware of herself as a woman.

And she definitely couldn't risk her heart again. She'd cried for days, heartsick, when she'd discovered his betrayal four years ago.

At the time, she hadn't told him she was pregnant because she was sure a marriage between them would have been a disaster: he'd have cheated—he'd already proven himself capable of it—and she'd have wound up divorcing him to save herself.

There was *no way* she could marry him.

No way...no way...no way...

Unless...unless, of course, she could marry him without risking her heart again.

She paused.

Now, *there* might be a way out of her dilemma....

Six

Stephen stepped out of the elevators at Garrison, Inc., and the receptionist gave him a wide smile.

"Hi, Sheila."

"Hello, sugar." Sheila batted her eyelashes at him, and purred, "Come to make my day?"

He laughed. "I wish I could, honey, but duty calls."

Sheila pretended to pout.

The blue-eyed, blond, ex-Playboy bunny was his type, but this time, he knew his heart wasn't in their customary banter.

Damn Megan.

"Parker in his office?" he asked.

Sheila nodded.

"Thanks," he said, then walked down the hall.

He greeted Mario, who was pushing a mail cart and had been with the company since John Garrison's day, then a human resources person named Roberta, who was a recent hire.

All the while, he keenly observed every employee he passed. Someone in the firmament at Garrison, Inc. was passing along information to the Jefferies brothers, and until they discovered who it was, he and Parker and every other executive had to be careful about what they said and did within range of others.

Just last month, someone had accessed Parker's office computer and forwarded an e-mail they'd planted to Jordan Jefferies.

At his brother's partially closed office door, he rapped with his knuckles.

When he strode in, Parker said, "I hear congratulations are in order."

Closing the door, Stephen made for one of the leather chairs positioned before his brother's desk. "Thanks, but save it for after the wedding."

He was here because he and Parker had a Monday-morning appointment scheduled with Brandon Washington, the Garrison family lawyer. Brandon was always punctual, so Stephen knew he'd be here soon.

He caught his brother's raised eyebrows as he settled into his chair. "Somehow I knew the news would reach you one way or another."

Parker leaned back in his mesh swivel chair and tapped his fingertips together. "Maybe not the way you expected. Anna."

That caught his attention. “Anna?”

“I guess it’s all right to disclose this now, since I also discovered you’ve been letting the news be known yourself.” His brother paused. “Anna was over at Megan’s place yesterday afternoon, and they had a little powwow.”

Stephen felt his nostrils flare. “Tell me the wife encouraged Megan to do the sane thing.”

Parker chuckled. “Define *sane*.”

“Stuff it, Parker.”

“Whoa, whoa, go easy here. I just discovered I’m an uncle.”

Stephen let go with an expletive.

Parker eyed him. “You know, I should have known the minute I hired Megan four years ago that you’d find her irresistible. Of course, a redhead with flashing green eyes would send you down for the count.”

“Yeah, well, I’m up again, and I intend to win this match. Why the hell didn’t you tell me Anna and Megan were friends?”

His brother shrugged. “I had no idea myself until recently. It never came up. In fact, the first time I saw Megan again was at the wedding.”

“You haven’t reacted to my news with the same suspicion it’s been greeted with in other quarters,” Stephen observed.

“Well, I *did* hire Megan, and I *am* married to Anna.”

Just then a knock sounded, and both brothers turned to look at the door.

“Come in,” Parker called.

Brandon walked in. “Good morning.” He shut the door behind him. “I’m glad to see you’re both here.”

Stephen and Parker stood, and the men all shook hands.

Brandon took the other chair facing Parker.

“So what do we have, Brandon?” Stephen asked, as he and Parker sat back down.

“Cassie Garrison is still refusing to deal,” Brandon stated matter-of-factly.

Stephen suppressed a snort of disgust.

At the reading of his father’s will two months ago, he, along with the rest of the family, had discovered John Garrison had fathered a daughter during an extramarital affair with Ava Sinclair, a local he’d met in the Bahamas.

On top of it all, it turned out that the daughter was Cassie Sinclair, the manager of the Garrison Grand-Bahamas hotel, and that she, along with the five legitimate Garrison siblings, had inherited shares in the family business.

Stephen’s lips twisted. Cassie Sinclair now chose to go by the name Cassie Sinclair Garrison.

Something had to be done.

So far, Cassie had resisted Parker’s overtures and refused to turn over her shares in the Garrison empire.

“She apparently just wants to be left alone to run the Garrison Grand-Bahamas,” Brandon said.

“No dice,” Parker responded.

Brandon sighed. “I’m not getting anywhere by phone. Frankly, our best option is if I go down there and try to negotiate in person for a deal to buy her out.”

Parker laced his fingers together. “I have no problem with that plan.” Parker glanced over at Stephen for his assent before looking back at Brandon. “We’re willing to pay—within reason.”

Brandon named what he’d offered as a reasonable price for Cassie’s shares, and Stephen’s hand flexed on his armrest.

“You lowballed her first?” Stephen heard himself ask.

“Of course,” Brandon said.

Stephen trusted Brandon like a brother. The Washingtons—Brandon and his father before him—had been the family legal advisors for years. Still, it was vitally important they get this problem with Cassie wrapped up soon and to their satisfaction. They couldn't let the future of the Garrison empire rest with an unknown quantity—a potential loose cannon.

"And if she still refuses to sell after I approach her in person?" Brandon asked, voicing the question on all their minds.

"Everyone has their price," Parker said grimly. "We'll have to think about how much more we're willing to offer."

Stephen arched a brow. "Or we can borrow a page from the world of celebrity." He looked over at Brandon. "When you get down there, why don't you first see if you can dig up some dirt on Cassie's past? It'll give us some leverage to force her hand."

Parker nodded thoughtfully. "With stakes like this, I'll take any ammunition I can get."

When Megan walked into Stephen's office at Garrison, Inc., she had some design plans in hand. But more importantly, she had a decision.

Stephen stepped around his desk and strode toward her.

"I've drawn up some preliminary plans," she said. "You can take a look at them at your leisure, and then we can discuss them. Anything can be changed, of course."

He took the plans from her and dropped them on a nearby table. Then he shut his office door and braced his arm there. "Well?"

They both knew the real topic of this meeting.

She told herself she wasn't afraid of him. She wasn't afraid of the vast Garrison family wealth and influence. But she had to face reality.

She chewed her lip. "I've thought about your proposal."

His *proposal* had been a far cry from her girlhood dreams, but those she'd buried along with their relationship four years ago.

"Good. I expected you to."

She walked farther into the room, and he followed.

Stephen's immense office had a view of the beach and endless blue water. His desk stood in front of floor-to-ceiling windows, and off to one side were a sofa and chairs arranged around a low table.

Like the rest of the hotel, the office was light and airy. The only thing she'd change was the abstract artwork. Though she was sure it was all very valuable, she'd prefer to see something less geometrical and more soft, maybe impressionist.

But more importantly, the view from Stephen's windows said everything, and *that* she couldn't change. She watched as a toned blonde walked past to head into the hotel.

She turned toward Stephen.

His too-handsome face gave nothing away.

Nervous energy thrummed through her. She rubbed a palm against her taupe linen skirt. "I've decided to accept your proposal."

His eyes shot dark fire, and she could read the triumph in them. "We'll have the wedding next weekend."

Her stomach flipped over. "*Next weekend?* That's not enough time!"

She'd thought she'd have more time to adjust to the idea of being Mrs. Stephen Garrison.

"You've already had four years," he said in a clipped voice, as if he'd read her mind.

"A week is not enough time to plan a wedding—"

A grim smile slashed his face. "It is if we have it here at the Garrison Grand, where *conveniently* I'm the boss. In fact, I just put together Parker and Anna's wedding in a short time."

"I have a job I just started," she began.

"You won't need to do anything but show up."

She stared at him doubtfully.

"Let's seal the deal." He looked at her innocently. "I hope that's okay?"

Then before she could react, he pulled her into his arms, and his lips came down on hers.

First there was the warm pressure of his mouth, then he slipped inside, his tongue touching and coaxing hers.

Hot, sweet sensation flooded her, and a rainbow of colors danced behind her eyelids.

When he eventually pulled back, he gave her a heavy-lidded look. "Just like I remembered," he murmured.

She touched her fingertips to her lips, feeling him there still.

Ordinarily, the stolen kiss might have sparked her ire, but under the circumstances, it reminded her of what she had to do.

She dropped her hand. "I forgot to mention something," she said hoarsely.

"What's that?"

She took a breath. "I have a couple of conditions of my own."

His look turned guarded. "Shoot."

"I want to wait until after the wedding to explain to Jade that you're her biological father."

He looked ready to argue, so she rushed on. "I want to give her time to adjust. It's enough for the moment that I'm springing this wedding on her."

"Aren't you just drawing this out when it would be better to explain the whole thing at once?"

She shook her head. "I want her to get used to you...get to know and—and like you, first, without putting any sense of obligation on her three-year-old shoulders."

"Fine," he said, though she knew he still wasn't thrilled with her idea.

And now for the hard part, she thought.

"I'm agreeing to this marriage for Jade's sake," she said. "I know there'll be lots of advantages to growing up a Garrison and with you there to help raise her."

He nodded, as if he was glad she saw reason.

"That's why," she went on, her chin coming up, "this will be a marriage in name only. I'm doing this for Jade. I won't sleep with you, Stephen."

Something in his eyes flared, and his lips curled. "Strong words from a woman who just melted into my kiss."

"Those are my conditions," she repeated.

Their eyes held for one drawn-out moment.

"You'll get your own bedroom," he said finally.

She relaxed. She was thankful for the walls of a bedroom. Now she just had to work on shoring up the ones around her heart.

When she pushed back the tissue paper, Megan felt the breath leave her.

A short while ago, a messenger had delivered several boxes. She'd taken the delivery, puzzled but knowing from the sender's information that it came from Stephen. She'd wondered why he hadn't bothered to bring the boxes himself, since he was due to arrive in a short time.

Now, Megan let her fingers stroke over the smooth white satin revealed when she'd opened the first box.

A multitude of conflicting emotions stormed her.

She understood now why Stephen may have chosen to send the boxes by messenger before he arrived. Once she'd seen what he'd bought for her, he'd known she'd find it hard to resist.

Carefully, she lifted the gown from the box and examined it.

It was a backless sheath dress with a small swallowtail train made of satin overlaid with lace. The bodice, which had a sweetheart neckline, was held up by two spaghetti straps.

Simple but sexy, it would be spectacular with her flaming red hair, as well as show off her generous chest to advantage.

Stephen knew her so well. And *that*, she realized, was part of the problem.

She'd told Stephen she'd be wearing something practical—something she already owned—for the wedding. Instead, he'd overridden her.

He'd sent her this dress, and its message was clear: she was being served up as a delicious dessert he intended to savor.

Still, the dress was so beautiful, it brought tears to her eyes.

She'd once wished for happily-ever-after. Instead, she was getting an illusion.

A sham wedding leading to a fake marriage.

Tamping down a sudden well of emotion, she forced herself to open the rest of the boxes.

One box contained a pair of stylish stiletto sandals. Another held an adorable sleeveless flower girl's dress with a high ribbon waist and matching white sandals.

Her heart squeezed as she thought of Jade and how delighted she'd be.

When she opened the last box, however, her reaction changed, and she felt heat course through her.

The box contained a white bustier, matching lacy underwear and thigh-high hosiery.

Unbidden, images of modeling the sexy concoction for Stephen went through her mind.

Then, annoyed with herself, she let her hand drop away from the box.

Of course, Stephen had no trouble picking out her size. He was a connoisseur of the female form, she reminded herself. A playboy extraordinaire.

She was torn from her thoughts by the sound of the doorbell.

Moments later, she heard the sound of running feet.

"Mommy, there's someone at the door!" Jade called out.

"I'll be right there."

She and Stephen had agreed he'd come over on Wednesday night in order to ease the transition for Jade to the upcoming marriage.

She'd already explained to Jade as well as she could that she'd be getting married to Stephen and they'd be known as Megan and Jade Garrison.

Now, she prayed Stephen's get-to-know-you session with his daughter went well.

When she opened the door, with Jade peering around her, she was presented with an incongruous sight. Stephen held a bouquet of flowers in one hand, and a large brown-haired, brown-eyed baby doll in the other.

As annoyed as she'd just been with him, she couldn't help reacting with a laughing gasp.

His eyes met hers, and she saw laughter lurking within them. "She rode in the front passenger seat."

Wide-eyed, Jade stared at Stephen.

Megan covered her mouth.

Not a word, Stephen's eyes mockingly warned her. Then he stepped forward. "Hello, honey."

Megan stared at him—dressed as the consummate corporate executive in a charcoal business suit—before he bent forward and kissed her on the lips.

"We need to make this good for Jade," he murmured as he straightened.

She gave him a startled look, then closed the door behind him. What was he up to?

But Stephen was already looking down at his daughter. He smiled. "Hello, Jade."

Jade edged closer to her, and Megan put a comforting arm behind her.

"Hi," Jade said hesitantly.

Megan realized with a start that Jade was uncharacteristically shy. Apparently, it was one thing to enthusiastically point out a stranger—as Jade had done when Stephen had appeared in their backyard on Saturday—and another to welcome someone more permanent.

Megan prayed again for all their sakes that tonight went well.

Stephen held out the baby doll, which was dressed in pink and purple and wore a headband. “I have a present for you. This is Abby, and she’s looking for a home.”

Jade eyed the doll, then looked back at Stephen.

Megan saw a flicker of uncertainty in Stephen’s eyes, and her heart went out to him. He was clearly lost.

“Stephen bought a gift for you, isn’t that nice?” she said to Jade.

They’d agreed Jade would call him Stephen until she got used to him in her life.

Jade stepped forward, then took the doll and hugged it to her. “Thank you.”

Megan watched as Stephen’s eyes went to her again. “And these are for you.”

The bouquet that he held out to her contained lilies mixed with lavender. Her favorite. He’d sent the flowers to her when they’d dated, and he’d remembered still.

“Thank you.”

Their hands brushed over the flowers, and a sizzle went through her. And though her mind flashed danger, her heart beat rapidly.

She steadied herself. “Why don’t we go into the living room? Dinner is almost ready. Would you like anything to drink, Stephen?”

“A beer would be great.”

Jade was already playing with her doll, and Stephen planted himself halfway between the kitchen and where the little girl sat.

Megan felt a small smile rise to her lips. Big, bad Stephen Garrison was in unfamiliar territory, rendered helpless by a three-year-old.

She could see the headline: *Playboy Beaten by Child’s Play.*

When she came out with Stephen’s beer, she noticed Jade looking at him from the corner of her eyes.

The little girl stood, then blurted, “Would you like to see my toys?”

She watched the play of emotions on Stephen’s face, before he responded casually, “Sure. Let’s see what you got, kid.”

Her heart constricted as she watched Stephen follow Jade, and a variety of emotions swept over her.

Finally, she headed back to the kitchen. She had chicken Kiev in the oven and potatoes and broccoli on the stove.

Dinner would be a far cry from what Stephen was used to at Miami’s top-tier restaurants, including the ones within the Garrison Grand itself. She had to give a nod to kid fare, but she reminded herself that Stephen was better off finding out sooner rather than later what parenthood was about. He was determined to come into her life and Jade’s, and she wasn’t going to sugarcoat it for him.

When she’d gotten everything on the table, she went to find them—the most important person in her life, and the one around whom her world had revolved four years ago.

She located them in Jade’s room.

“...and this is Holly, and that’s Caroline,” her daughter said.

Megan watched as Stephen nodded. “Quite a crowd.”

Jade had all her dolls and stuffed animals lined up, and apparently had been introducing them all to Stephen.

“Dinner’s ready,” Megan heard herself say.

Stephen and Jade both turned to her.

“But, Mommy, I still need to introduce my dolls!”

“Later, sweetie.”

Stephen winked. “I promise I’ll come back after dinner, pumpkin.”

Jade pulled a face but trudged in the direction of the kitchen.

Pumpkin?

It was a big turnaround from where Stephen and Jade had been a mere thirty minutes ago, and Megan was reminded again of the fact that a three-year-old's worldview could do a one-eighty in a minute.

She watched Jade leave, then looked back at Stephen. "Quick work there."

He gave her a lazy smile. "Charm upsets you?"

She forced herself to shrug indifferently. "Your *legendary* charm. Why should I be surprised?"

"Afraid you'll fall under it again?" he challenged.

"I've been inoculated for life."

He chuckled as he sauntered toward her. "Don't worry. I leave my best for someone...special."

She sucked in a breath, but he didn't try to steal a kiss or make a pass.

Instead, he walked out of the room and followed Jade's lead.

She expelled the breath she was holding, then followed him out.

In the house's little dining area, she saw Stephen eyeing the floral display in the center of the table.

She'd set his bouquet there in a clear glass vase.

"Very nice," he commented, "if I do say so myself."

"I put them there so we wouldn't have to stare at each other across the table through dinner," she muttered in a low voice as she went past.

He had the audacity to laugh, which just sent a shiver through her because she remembered how much she'd always liked his laugh.

She felt his arm snake around her, and he gave her a quick kiss on the neck. "Glad you like them so much."

"You know flowers that stand for *devotion* are my favorite," she retorted.

At dinner, Jade kept up a steady stream of conversation with Stephen. She seemed openly curious about him now.

He handled her questions well, simplifying but never talking down to her, and it was clear that though he was still feeling his way, he was gaining confidence with every passing second.

Megan watched the interaction and thought they could all be any family having dinner together. Except this was a pretend family with an upcoming sham marriage.

Seven

So far, Stephen thought, things were working out as he'd planned.

Jade was warming to him, and while he had further to go with Megan, he knew at least that she was far from being immune to him.

"Want to see the rest of my dolls?" Jade piped up as soon as dinner was over.

"Sure."

Jade's face lit up. She ran around the table to grab his hand and tug him forward as he stood.

"Jade, we don't drag guests around like toys," Megan warned. "Stephen isn't Barney."

"Yes, Mommy," Jade responded without looking at her mother.

Stephen felt a smile pull at his lips.

She reminded him of himself when he was a little kid—full of boundless energy and enthusiasm. He wondered which parts of herself Megan saw in Jade.

It was still hitting him that this little girl was *his*. He wouldn't—couldn't—let her down.

Twenty minutes later, Jade was instructing him on tea party etiquette using her table-and-chair set and toy kitchen when Megan appeared in the doorway.

His eyes ate her up. He'd discarded his jacket and tie before dinner, but she was dressed even more casually in a flower-print short-sleeved blouse, tailored beige cropped pants and espadrille sandals.

Memories tugged and he remembered the way they used to dance together at some of Miami's hottest nightspots.

Their bodies had brushed, swayed and come together again. They'd tantalized each other before heading home to make passionate love on silk sheets.

Realizing he'd been staring at Megan and she'd begun looking back at him questioningly, he suddenly felt ridiculous.

It was absurd to be having sexy thoughts about Megan while he was sitting in a girly pink bedroom, waiting to drink pretend tea from a toy cup.

Covering his lapse, he said, "Have you shown Jade her flower girl dress?"

Megan hesitated, but Jade perked up, "Dress? What color?"

"Pink, of course," he informed her.

Jade squealed and clapped her hands. "Can I see? Can I see?"

Megan sighed. "It's on my bed, Jade."

Stephen noted Megan didn't seem too happy with his gift. He was doubly glad now he'd let the cat out of the bag and gotten the jump on her.

They followed Jade to Megan's bedroom, which was decorated in tropical colors of lime-green, peach and pink. White wicker furniture blended with a couple of antique pieces.

His eyes fell to the bed, where some of his purchases from yesterday lay in and out of their boxes. The lingerie he'd sent was nowhere to be seen but a tulle-and-satin flower girl dress with a wide sash and little rosebud embroidery along the neckline lay spread out across the bed.

Jade oohed and aahed over the dress before announcing, "I love it!"

"I wasn't sure of the size, so I had to guess."

"It's her size," Megan said gloomily from next to him.

He tossed her an amused look, and she raised an eyebrow at him. Clearly there'd be a battle later, but he was more than up for it.

After Megan gave in to Jade's pleas to try on the dress, and the little girl had twirled around for them, Megan announced it was time for dessert.

They all went back to the dining room to have what Stephen discovered was Jade's favorite: mint chocolate chip ice cream with chocolate syrup.

Afterward, the three of them cleared the table and Megan said it was Jade's bedtime.

Jade put up some resistance, but gave up the fight when Stephen agreed to read a bedtime story.

Only after he'd read three of Jade's favorite stories were he and Megan able to head back to the living room.

Once there, Megan folded her arms. "I can't accept the gifts you sent."

"Then I suppose you're really not going to like this." He reached into his pocket, then picked up her hand and slid a ring onto her finger.

He heard her breath catch, hitch.

Yesterday, he'd gone to one of Miami's most exclusive jewelers and bought an engagement ring with a large Canadian diamond in the center flanked by two emeralds.

"The stones signify our yesterday, today and tomorrow," he told her. "I chose emeralds for your eyes."

"We're not having much of an engagement," she said, staring at the ring.

"We're just condensing the steps."

She looked up at him, then started to pull the ring off, but he stopped her.

Her chin came up. "Do you want a symbolic reminder of our yesterdays, Stephen?"

His mouth tightened. "Do you regret having Jade?"

"You know that's not what I meant!"

"Then what did you mean?" he challenged her. "Do I want to remember nights of mind-blowing sex? Do I want to remember the way we were so hot for each other, we couldn't be in the same room without getting turned on?"

Their eyes locked.

He'd opened the door, and their past came flooding back. One touch, one kiss, right now, and Stephen knew they'd both be swept away.

"I was waiting to discuss the packages with you, but now that you made her aware of the dress, Jade is all excited."

"Yeah, well, consider yourself outmaneuvered."

The air between them shimmered with sexual energy.

"And what about that kiss when you first walked in?"

He gave her a rakish smile. "What about it?"

"What did you mean by 'we need to make this good for Jade'?"

He sobered. "I mean, if this marriage is about doing what's best for Jade, then we need to make her believe we're happily married."

She stalked away, then whirled back. "You're just using Jade as an excuse."

Busted. "For what?" he asked innocently.

"You know what. To put the moves on me, hoping to get me back in bed."

"When we wind up back in bed, it'll be because you'll want it as badly as I do."

"You're not even going to try to deny it, are you?"

"In fact—" he glanced back toward Jade's room "—since Jade's asleep now, I'm going to suggest we practice." He took a step toward her.

Her eyes widened. "Definitely not necessary," she said sharply.

"But oh so enjoyable. Did you like the lingerie I sent?"

She flushed. "Strumpet & Pink. You do know your lingerie, and why am I not surprised?"

He was close enough now to see the pulse jump at the side of her throat.

He smoothed a lock of her hair with the back of his hand, and her eyes sparked before his gaze dropped to her mouth.

He'd always liked her fire. As much as he liked her mouth, in fact. It was full and made for kissing. He remembered all she'd done with that mouth, and nearly groaned aloud.

"You had an amazing collection," he muttered against her lips, "and a fabulous body to go with it."

Then he kissed her, sinking into her with a hunger that surprised even him. There was a moment when she didn't react, but then her mouth opened to him.

He deepened the kiss and brought his hand up to cup her breast, feeling the nipple harden through the thin fabric of her bra and top.

Lust slammed into him, and just like that he was aroused.

She'd always been able to turn him on faster than any woman ever had, and apparently nothing much had changed.

He had to have her. In bed and out. He *would* have her.

It gave him some satisfaction to be in control—to be calling the shots. It was what he was used to.

But if he didn't stop this make-out session soon, he was in danger of losing it. Tonight wasn't the night for seduction—just for giving her a taste.

Jade was sleeping nearby, and he didn't want to scare Megan off a wedding when he almost had her where he wanted her.

He eased back from their kiss. When he raised his head, he met her lambent gaze.

"Was that kiss supposed to prove something to me?" she asked.

"Yeah. We won't have any problems convincing Jade." Hell, his body still raged for her, and it was only with effort he got it under control.

Her brows drew together. "Of course not. You're a playboy of mythical proportions."

He refrained from gibing about what proportions she was talking about. Instead, he said, "I won't cheat because my father was a cheater."

That got her attention.

“What?” She stopped, and her brow puckered again. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, my father had an extramarital affair, and we only found out about his twenty-seven-year-old love child at the reading of his will recently. Suffice it to say, the news wreaked havoc on the family, particularly my mother.”

He filled her in on his family’s discovery of the existence of Cassie Sinclair Garrison and her claim on the Garrison fortune.

“You do have problems, don’t you?” she said. “The Jefferieses on one hand, and now your father’s illegitimate child.”

“Don’t forget *my* illegitimate child, but I’m about to fix that situation.”

Megan folded her arms. “So I’m supposed to conclude from the Cassie story that you’ve reformed?”

Her coolness and continued skepticism ate at him. He picked up his jacket from where he’d thrown it on the back of a chair at the beginning of the evening. “You’re supposed to conclude we’ll have a *real* marriage.”

He gave her a lingering look—sparks shooting back and forth between them—before he let himself out of the house.

The wedding ceremony was held on a private slice of beach behind the Garrison Grand, where Parker and Anna’s wedding had taken place the month before.

A floor had been laid over the sand, and folding chairs had been set up on either side of a makeshift aisle. Off to the side, adjacent to the hotel, was a canopied area that would serve as the location for an indoor-outdoor reception.

Because of the short notice, and the small number of guests, the local media had not caught wind of the pending nuptials.

Now, as Megan stood behind Jade and next to her father in the shade of the hotel’s lobby, waiting for the string quartet to strike up Pachelbel’s *Canon*, she was profoundly grateful for the relative privacy.

She was nervous enough as it was.

This week, she’d had to break the news to both her family and her employer that she was about to have a hasty wedding to Stephen Garrison.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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