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ONCE PREGNANT, TWICE SHY

Red Garnier

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Once Pregnant, Twice Shy

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What's one impulsive night between old friends? Tied together by tragedy, business tycoon Garrett Gage has always vowed to protect Kate Devaney—at all costs. What he doesn't expect is that she'd someday need protection from him. When did Kate blossom from an orphaned little girl into a breathtaking woman? And what possessed him to forsake a deathbed vow and take vulnerable Kate into his arms, into his bed? Now that they'd been intimate, things have changed—more than Garrett could possibly know. Kate is carrying his child. And along with that, a secret that could change everything….

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“Tell me why you’re leaving. Is it because of me?”

He couldn’t seem to help himself, and lifted his finger to trace her lips. Her breath caught, and his face darkened as he watched.

Kiss him, tell him it’s him and that he’s going to be a father!

But while all these impulses rampaged through her, she drew back an inch, considering it a good moment to retreat before she truly lost her senses. She’d lost them once. Now she was pregnant. She didn’t want to castigate him for that night, a night she had been wishing and praying someday happened. But she didn’t want him to pay his whole life.

She simply loved him too much.

Once Pregnant, Twice Shy

Red Garnier

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RED GARNIER is a fan of books, chocolate and happily-ever-afters. What better way to spend the day than combining all three? Traveling frequently between the United States and Mexico, Red likes to call Texas home. She’d love to hear from her readers at redgarnier@gmail.com. For more on upcoming books and current contests, please visit her website, www.redgarnier.com.

As always, with my deepest thanks to everyone at Mills & Boon Desire—who make the best team of editors I’ve ever come across! Thank you for making this book shine.

This book is once again dedicated to my flesh-and-blood hero and our two little ones, who, it turns out, are not so little anymore.

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Prologue

He was the sexiest best man the maid of honor had ever seen, and he wouldn’t stop looking at her.

Stomach clenched tight with longing, she stared into his gorgeous obsidian eyes and wondered how she was going to have the courage to tell him that their one incredible night together, that night that should have never happened but did, had resulted in a little surprise on the way.

That the stork would be paying them a visit in eight months or so.

The thought alone made her legs tremble. Clutching her white orchid bouquet with trembling hands, Kate Devaney forced herself to focus on her sister, Molly, and how stunning she looked up on the altar in her snow-white wedding gown next to the drop-dead-gorgeous groom.

The fresh noon sun lit her lovely pink-cheeked face, its warm rays illuminating the couple as they stood before the priest. They were surrounded by an explosion of white casablancas, orchids, tulips and roses. The train of the bride's wedding gown reached almost to the end of the red velvet carpet, where the guests sat in rapt attention on rows and rows of elegant white benches. Molly's voice trembled with emotion as she spoke her vows to Julian, her best friend for forever, and the man she'd always loved.

"I, Molly, take you, Julian John, to be my husband..."

Kate's heart constricted with emotion for her little sister, but no matter how much she fought the impulse, her eyes kept straying to the right side of the groom...to where the best man stood towering and silent.

Garrett Gage.

Her tummy quivered when their eyes met again. His eyes were hot and tumultuous, his jaw set tight and square as a cutting board.

He'd been looking at her for every second of the ceremony, his palpable gaze boring pinprick holes through the top of her head.

What a pity that his fiancée wasn't at the wedding, so that he could go and stare at that blonde and leave Kate alone, she thought angrily.

But no, he haunted her. This man. Day and night she thought of him, wanted him, ached for him, while every second of the day, she tried futilely to forget him.

For the past month, it had been a struggle to ignore the enticing memories of the things he'd said to her, a struggle not to remember the way he'd held her in his strong, hard arms like she was more precious than platinum.

She'd told herself, every night for the past thirty nights, that they would never work, and when she'd finally heard of his upcoming marriage, she'd had no other choice but to believe herself.

It was fine. Really. She hadn't wanted to marry him. She would never marry unless she could have what Molly and Julian had; if Kate couldn't have a little piece of real love for herself, then she'd rather be alone.

So tomorrow she was leaving. She had a one-way ticket to Florida. Miami, to be precise. Where she could begin a new life and never have to see the man she loved with another woman again. But before she left, she must let him know the truth. A truth she had been carefully keeping to herself for a month, not wanting to detract from the joy of Molly's big day.

Molly was her only sister; Kate had practically raised her since they had both been orphaned as little girls. She wanted Molly's wedding day to be perfect.

Yes, Kate was pregnant, but there was still plenty of time to find the right moment to tell Garrett about it. If only he'd stop looking at her like he wanted her for lunch, making her insides twist and clench with yearning.

"You may now kiss the bride!"

Startled, Kate couldn't believe she'd missed so much of the ceremony, and then she watched as the handsome, blond-haired Julian lifted Molly in his arms as if she weighed no more than a feather and kissed the breath out of her.

Arms twining around him, Molly squeaked in delight as Julian swung her full circle, still kissing her. But he pulled back with a frown and murmured, “Oh, crap!” when he realized Molly’s train had gone round and round both their bodies.

When they looked down to the coil around them, they both burst out laughing, then they started kissing again, Julian’s open hands almost engulfing all of Molly’s petite face as he cradled it.

“I got it,” Kate said, laughing as she easily detached the train from her sister’s dress. With Molly in his arms, Julian hopped out of the tulle and carried her down the aisle to the cheers and claps of their guests and the blaring sound of the “Wedding March.”

They looked so happy, so in love, as they headed for the beautifully decorated gardens where their outdoor wedding celebration was to take place, leaving Kate behind with a pair of stinging eyes, the train and the best man.

As Kate began gathering what felt like a hundred miles of tulle, Garrett came over, bringing her the other end of the train. She couldn’t seem to look up at him. “Thanks,” she said, and felt her cheeks burn. God, why was she even blushing? They’d grown up together. He should be a man she was comfortable with and instead she was a wreck just wondering how she was going to tell him.

Despite how much it hurt her to know he was marrying someone else, she didn’t want to ruin his life, because he’d always protected and cared for her. Always.

And she feared this news was going to be a whopper for him.

Suddenly his tan, long-fingered hands captured and stilled hers, and she held her breath as the warmth of his palms seeped into her skin. She looked up and into those riveting onyx eyes, her lungs straining for air.

“Tell me if I’m mistaken—” his voice was low, his eyes so unbearably intimate she could die “—but did my brother just marry your sister?”

She wouldn’t stare at his beautifully shaped lips as he spoke. She wouldn’t. But, oh, God, he was so handsome she could burst from it. “It only took a full hour, Garrett. You couldn’t have missed it,” she said, trying to keep her voice level.

And yet, maybe she was hallucinating, but...was he staring at her lips? “Apparently I did.”

“You were standing right there. Where were you? Mars?” She straightened and rolled her eyes, ready to leave, but his voice, the intensity in his words, stopped her.

“I was in my bedroom, Kate. With you in my arms.”

She went utterly still, her back to him, while every inch of her body fought to suppress a tremor of heat that fluttered enticingly down her spine. His words seduced her body and soul in ways she couldn’t even believe were possible. Her legs felt watery, and every pore in her body quivered with wanting of him. His words transported her to his bedroom. To his arms. To that night.

No, no, no, she couldn’t do this here. She just couldn’t.

Shaking her head almost to herself, she started down the beautiful red path that led to the Gage mansion, painfully aware that he followed.

“Kay, I need to talk to you,” he said thickly.

That low, coarse timbre managed to do sexy things to her skin, and her physical response to him irritated her beyond measure.

“If it’s to tell me about your wedding, I already know. Congratulations,” she said in a voice as flat as the bottom of her shoe.

“Then maybe you can tell me the details, since apparently you know more about it than I do? Dammit, I need to talk to you somewhere private.”

He grabbed her elbow to halt her, but she immediately yanked it free. “I need to talk to you, too, but I’m not doing it here. Nor am I doing it today.”

He followed her again with long, easy strides, the determination in his voice nearly undoing her. “Well, I am. So just listen to me.” He stopped her again, forced her to turn and stared heatedly

into her eyes. “I don’t know what happened to me the other day, Katie.... What you told me left me so damn winded, I swear I didn’t know where to begin....”

She covered her ears. “Not here, please, please not here!”

He seized her wrists and forced her hands down. “I know I hurt you, I know you don’t want me to apologize, but I need to say I am sorry. I am sorry for how things have gone down and for hurting you. I’m sorry how it happened, Katie. I wish I’d done it differently. If I could take it back, I would, if only to get you to stop looking at me like you are just now.”

His apology was the last straw. It really was. The last. Straw. “You wish to take the night back, that’s what you wish?” The pitch of her voice was rising, but she couldn’t control the hysteria bubbling up inside her chest, couldn’t stop herself from incredulously thinking, How can I take back the baby you gave me, you ass! “Oh, you’re something special, do you know that? You’re something else. I can’t even believe I let you put your filthy paws on me, you no-good—”

“Goddammit, I really didn’t want to do it this way, Kay. But you’re giving me no choice!” Teeth gritted, he scooped her up into his arms and stalked across the gardens toward the house.

“Wha—” The tulle train fell inch by inch from her grasp and trailed a path behind them as she kicked and squirmed and hit his chest. “Garrett, stop! Put me down! What are you doing?”

He kicked the front doors open and carried her up the stairs, his jaw like steel, his hands blatantly gripping her buttocks. “Something I should’ve done a long, long time ago.”

One

Two months earlier...

This was hell.

The Gage family mansion was lit up with light and music and flowers tonight. All the movers and shakers in San Antonio seemed to be having a good time, a good wine and a good laugh. But Kate had gone well past purgatory an hour ago and was now sure that this night, this endless night, was nothing other than hell.

With a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, she watched the striking couple across the glittering marble floor.

“Garrett,” the slight, sensual blonde gushed to the tall dark man, “you’re just like fine wine, better and better with age.”

Garrett Gage, the sexiest man on the planet, and the devil in Kate’s hell, ducked his head and whispered something into the woman’s ear with a wicked gleam in his dark eyes.

How many nights had she dreamed Garrett would look at her like that? Not like a little girl, but like a woman?

In a black suit and blood-red tie, with his dark hair slicked back to reveal his chiseled features, standing proud and imposing like the media baron he’d become, Garrett Gage could cause lightning to strike. He could make butterflies rise in your stomach. Make the earth stop. Make your heart thump. He could make you do anything just for a chance to be the one woman at his side.

For years, Kate had thought that feeding him, seeing him enjoy and praise her creations, was good enough. The next best thing to having sex with him, she supposed. But now it just pained her to cook and cater for a man who didn’t even notice that she, Kate Devaney, the woman who made the chocolate croissants he so loved, was on the menu, too.

If only one of her waiters hadn’t failed her at the party tonight, Kate might have showcased her new dress with just the right amount of hip sway to finally draw Garrett’s discerning eye. But with a tray fixed permanently to her shoulder, no one spared a glance at the glossy satin dress she wore; she was just passing the food.

“Darling, be a dear and bring over some of those cute little shrimp skewers with the pineapple tips,” a woman said as she swept up a crab-and-spinach roll and guided it to her lips.

“Orange-pineapple shrimp? It’ll be right over,” Kate said.

Grateful for the distraction, she swept back into the kitchen to load up a new tray. Usually the sight of her workers milling about the three-tiered cake and pulling out mouthwatering snacks and hors d'oeuvres from the oven would fill her with satisfaction. But even that didn't lift her spirits tonight. Eight more weeks, Kate. Just two months. And then you never have to see him with another woman again.

As she carried a new tray into the busy living room, it struck her that she was going to leave behind this house with so many good memories, and this family who'd practically raised her as one of their own. She'd been so happy here; she'd honestly never imagined leaving until her feelings for Garrett had become so...painful. Moving to Florida was the best thing to do—the healthiest. For her. To be away from that hardheaded idiot!

"Mother tells me you're leaving." Julian John fell into step beside her as she navigated past a large group. Kate had been so deep in thought that she started at the low, sensual voice.

She glanced up and into the gold-green eyes of the youngest Gage brother, a beautiful man with a heartbreaking smile who was known to be guarded and quiet—except with Molly. He was only two months away from marrying Kate's perky and passionate younger sister and officially becoming her brother-in-law. But if Julian already knew about her departure—who else did? Her stomach cramped in dread.

"I can't believe she's told you. I asked her not to tell."

Julian plucked a shrimp skewer from the tray and popped it into his mouth. Like all Gage men, he had massively broad shoulders, and his symmetrical, masculine face looked as if it had been cast in bronze. "Knowing my mother, she probably thought you meant not to tell the press—and that would exclude its owners."

Kate smiled. At seventy, still stout and active, the Gage matron was a force to be reckoned with. She was the proud mother of three strong, successful media magnates—not that Landon, Garrett and Julian John were powerful enough to keep the sassy woman from having her say.

She glittered tonight in a high-end ruby-colored dress, which was completely undermined by the plain black bed slippers she wore. Comfort, to her, was everything. She didn't care what others thought and had enough money to ensure that everyone would at least pretend they thought the best of her.

She'd been the closest thing to a mother to Kate, who'd grown up without one. At the tender age of seven, she and her bodyguard dad had moved in to this very house where Garrett's birthday celebration was being held. Her father had died shortly after, leaving Kate and Molly orphans, but this house had remained their home.

"Nothing Molly and I can do to change your mind?" Julian asked, gold-green eyes flicking across the room toward Molly.

Kate could melt when she saw the glimmer of pride and satisfaction in his eyes when he looked at her sister.

It only reminded her of what she herself wanted in her future.

A family of her own.

Which was why she had to leave and rebuild her life, find other interests, and find herself an actual love life with a man who wanted her.

"I really have to do this, Jules," she told him as she shook her head and extended the tray to the people standing opposite him. Within seconds, the shrimp skewers started to disappear, one by one.

She had to get away, before she ended up watching the man she loved marry another, form a family. Before she became the dreaded "Aunt Kate" to children she'd always wished would be hers.

"But don't tell Garrett yet, okay? I don't want him on my back already."

"Hell, nobody wants that man on their back. Of course I won't tell him."

Smiling at that, she stole a glance in his direction, and yes, he was still there, as gorgeous as he'd been a minute ago, the blonde looking completely absorbed in him.

The woman was some sort of business associate of his who clearly enjoyed raising men's temperatures. Kate didn't know her, but already she abhorred her.

Seeming distracted, Garrett glanced around the room, and his liquid coal eyes stopped on Kate. Her heart stuttered when his gaze seemed to trail down the length of her silky form-fitting dress—the first male eyes to take in her attire tonight—then came back up to meet her startled stare.

Suddenly the look in his eyes was so dark and unfathomable, she almost thought that he—

No.

Whatever emotion lurked in his eyes, it was swiftly concealed. He raised his wineglass in the air in a mock toast, and added a smile that, although brief and friendly, went straight to her toes.

But that smile had nothing on the one he gave his companion when he turned away from Kate. His lips curled wide, with a flash of white teeth, and Kate just knew the poor woman was done for.

So was Kate.

Damn it, why hadn't she gotten one of those wolfish smiles?

Garrett had been there for her for as long as she could remember. A permanent fixture in her life. Steady and strong as a mountain. Her father had died for him. And Garrett had taken the promise he'd made to the dying man to heart.

Now Garrett protected Kate from raindrops and hail, from snow and heat, from kittens with claws and barking dogs. He even protected her from bankruptcy by ensuring the family always had a catering "event" around the corner. But Kate did not want a father.

She'd had one, the best one, and he was gone.

Garrett couldn't replace him; nobody could.

"He's not going to be pleased when he learns, Kate," Julian warned her.

Kate nodded in silence, watching Garrett's mother walk up to him. The elderly woman said something he didn't seem to find particularly pleasant to hear, and a frown settled on his handsome face as he listened.

If only she didn't love that stubborn moron so very, very much...

"Lately he's not pleased about anything," Kate absently said. She remembered the times she'd caught him looking at her with a black scowl during the family events, and just couldn't see why he seemed so bothered with her. "And I don't want him to stop me."

Her father's job had been to protect the Gages. And he had. But somehow, with his death, the family had ended up feeling like they should protect Kate.

They'd made her feel welcome and appreciated for almost two decades. But after receiving so much for so long and giving back so little, Kate felt indebted to the family in a way that made her desperate to prove to them, to all of them, that she was an independent woman now. Especially to Garrett.

"Fair enough. Sunny Florida it is," Julian agreed.

He had always been the easiest to talk to. There was a reason everyone, possibly every female at this party other than Kate, had a little crush on Julian John.

He seized her hand and kissed her knuckles, his eyes sparkling. "I guess this means we'll be buying a beach house next door."

She laughed at that, but then sobered. "Julian. You will take care of Molly for me, won't you?"

His eyes warmed at the mention of his soon-to-be wife. "Ah, Kate, I'd die for my girl. You know that."

Kate gave him a smile that told him silently but plainly how much she adored him for that. Witnessing their love for each other and how it had started out of friendship had been surprising and inspiring, and yet also heartbreaking for Kate. She loved seeing her sister so happy, but couldn't help wish...

Wish Garrett would look at her in the way Julian looked at Molly.

Stupid, blind Garrett.

Blind to the fact that the little girl who'd grown up with him had become a woman.

Blind to the fact that she would gladly be his woman.

And even blinder to the fact that before he could say yay or nay, Kate Devaney was moving to Florida.

* * *

"What do you mean, Katie's moving to Florida?"

Stunned, Garrett stared in disbelief at his mother, his date and business associate completely forgotten at his side.

"Only what I meant. Little Katie's moving to Florida. And no, there's nothing we can do about it. I already tried. And hi there," she said to the blonde pouting at his side. "What did you say your name was?"

"Cassandra Clarks." The woman extended a hand that sparkled with almost as many jewels as his mother's.

But Garrett was too preoccupied to pay attention to their sudden conversation, a conversation that was no doubt about the promising possibility of merging Clarks Communications into the Gage conglomerate. He spotted Kate across the room, and a horrible sensation wrenched through him. She was leaving?

When her gaze collided with his, the grip in his stomach tightened a notch. God, she looked cute as a ladybug tonight, too cute to be waltzing around in that dress without making a man sweat.

Then there were her eyes. Every time she looked up at him with those sky-blue eyes, pain sliced through his chest as though that bullet had actually hit Garrett, instead of her father. He'd never forget that he was living now, breathing now, because Kate's father had stepped into the line of fire to save him.

He'd tried to make it up to her. The entire family had. A good education, a roof over her head, help with securing her own place and encouragement so she'd open her catering business. But lately Kate seemed sad and discontent, and Garrett just didn't know how to resolve that.

He felt sad and discontent, too.

"But...she can't go," he said.

Eleanor Gage halted her conversation with Cassandra and turned her unapologetic expression up to his. "She says she can."

"To do what? Her whole life is here."

His mother raised a perfectly plucked brow that dared him to wonder why, exactly, she would want to leave, and a sudden thought occurred to him. He frowned as he considered it. Kate's distance would be good for him. He might even finally be able to get some sleep. But no. Hell, no.

He'd made a promise to her father, years ago, the tragic night of his death. Kate and her little sister, Molly, had become orphans because of Garrett. They would always belong here, with the Gages. This was their home, and Garrett had done everything in his power so that they would feel comfortable, protected and cared for.

Molly was marrying his younger brother now. But Kate?

Garrett had always had a weakness for her. He respected her. Protected her. Even from things he himself sometimes felt.

His whole life he'd ignored the way Kate's hair fell over her eyes. The way she said Garrett an octave lower than any other word she spoke. He'd ignored the way his chest cramped when she spoke of having a date, and he'd even done his best to try not to count all the freckles on the bridge of her pretty nose.

It wasn't easy to force himself to be so damned ignorant. Of that. But he'd done it by force and that was exactly how it would remain.

Kate was like his sister and best friend. Except she was truly neither....

No matter.

He would still do all kinds of things to protect her—and this included making her see that moving to Florida was not a good option. Not an option, period.

Scowling, he snagged his mother by the elbow and pulled her closer, so that Cassandra didn't overhear. But the woman took the cue and easily began to mingle—leaving him to talk to his mother in peace. "When did she say she was leaving?"

"The day after the wedding."

"Eight weeks?" His brain almost ached as he tried to think of ways to keep her here. "Long enough to change her mind then."

"My darling, if you manage to—" his mother gently patted him on the chest "—you'll make me a very happy woman. I don't want Katie anywhere in the world but here."

Garrett bleakly agreed and snatched a wine goblet from a passing server. He almost downed the liquid in one gulp, wondering how in the hell one could change the mind of a stubborn little handful like Kate. She could teach old, grumpy men a thing or two about sticking to their guns, and Garrett wasn't looking forward to being on the opposite end of the field from her. Or then again, maybe he was.

It was always fun to pick a fight with Kate.

It seemed the only way he could vent his frustrations sometimes.

Frustrations that seemed to grow by the minute as he stalked over to Cassandra, who was engaged in a conversation with two other women Garrett knew but couldn't remember the names of.

He was interested in securing her family's company to consolidate the Gages' grip on Texas media, but he couldn't even think about that now.

Kate was packing her bags and flying out of his life in eight weeks, and he was so determined to stop that from happening that, if he had to, he would run to Florida after her on his own two feet, and come back carrying her like a sack of potatoes on his back.

Which might even be more fun than fighting with her now.

"Something's come up," he apologized as he brought the blonde around to look at him. "I'm afraid I'll need a rain check on our talk."

He smiled down at her to ease the blow, marveling that he could, and he was glad to find there was no hostility in her eyes. She didn't tell him to go take his apology and shove it where it hurt, but instead she said, sounding alarmed, "When can I see you again?"

"Soon," he said with a nod, his mind already on Kate.

Two

He spotted her out on the terrace, and his insides twisted painfully tight. Tall and slender, Kate leaned against the balcony railing outside of the French doors, peacefully gazing out at the gardens. Her dress dipped seductively in the back, exposing inches and inches of flawless bare flesh and the small, delicate little rises of her spine. Something feral and dangerous pummeled through him. She's leaving me....

She'd been avoiding him tonight. And now he knew why.

He clenched his hands, hauled in a breath, then yanked the doors open and stepped outside.

A warm breeze flitted by as he approached her. A slice of moon hung in the sky above her, bathing her with its silvery light. It was the kind of night lovers waited for. A night for whispers, for promising forever...

"Why?"

She spun around in a whirl of silk and red hair, her lips slightly parted, her eyes wide and bright. "Don't tell me," she said with a disappointed shake of her head. "Your mother told you."

"Why, Kate? Why am I always the last to know?"

For a moment, she didn't seem to have an answer. She's leaving you. She's leaving you and won't tell you. Won't look at you.

Restlessly, she pulled at her small earring as she gazed out at the majestically lit lawns. “I...uh, planned to tell you.”

“From where? Florida?” he scoffed, unsure whether he was wounded, angry, amused or just plain damn confused.

“Okay, maybe yes, from Florida,” she admitted. “But you’ve been grumpy lately, Garrett. I can’t handle you right now. I’m too busy.”

His lips twisted into a cynical smile as he leaned on the balustrade next to her. He eyed the length of her glossy hair, wondering what it would smell like up close. Raspberries in the summer...? Peaches and cream? And why in the hell did he need to know? And what did she mean, he was grumpy? “I don’t need to be handled.”

With a pointed stare that told him that he really did, Kate studied him with mischievous blue eyes. “You haven’t exactly been easy to be around lately.”

“Come on, I can’t be that bad!”

She shot him a wry smile, and Garrett found himself responding to that captivating grin. He nudged her elbow up on the railing. “Kate. What did you think I’d do? Tie you to your kitchen to keep you here? Steal your damn plane ticket?”

“The fact that you’ve already thought of that makes me wonder about your sanity.”

“The fact that you’re leaving makes me want to check your head, too. You belong here.”

He sensed—rather than saw—the smile on her lips, but when she refused to look at him, Garrett wondered why Kate seemed so absorbed by the dark gardens it was as if she’d never seen them before—as if she’d never played outside in that yard when she was growing up. His heart jerked as an awful suspicion struck him.

“This is because of a man, isn’t it?”

“Excuse me?”

“You don’t just dump a life like yours and go away for nothing. So why are you running? Is it a man?”

“Does it matter?” she asked, thrusting her chin up a notch. “I’m leaving, Garrett, and I’m certain.”

The rebellious note that crept into her voice only confirmed to him that it was a man.

A toad Garrett wanted to kill with his own two hands.

Pushing away from the railing with sudden force, he plunged his hands into his pants pockets and paced in a circle on the terrace, lowering his voice when he stopped at her side again. “Who’s going to protect you?”

She scrunched her pretty nose with a little scoff. “I don’t need protecting anymore. I’m grown up, in case you missed it.”

He was struck by a memory of holding his jacket over Kate’s head while they rushed into the house, soaked and laughing. They’d both been just teens. His chest turned to lead as he wondered if he’d never do that again. Laugh with her again. Laugh, period.

“Adult or baby, you still need to know that someone’s got your back,” he grumbled.

She glanced down at the limestone terrace floor, and for a nanosecond, he detected a flash of pain in her expression. “I know you’ve got my back,” she said softly.

She sounded as sad as he felt, and suddenly he wanted to punch his fist into something.

Because nothing in his life felt right anymore.

Everything he did felt pointless. He felt restless. Angry. So angry at himself.

He imagined her all alone in a new place, with no one to help her with anything. Not if she got lost. Not if she was lonely. Not to unload her stuff. Not if there was thunder outside—she hated thunder. He clamped his jaw, loath to think of how many Florida men would be out there just ready to use and discard her, and then continued his attempt at persuasion. “What about Molly? You two are close.”

"And we still will be. But Molly has Julian now. Plus she's promised to visit, and so will I."

"Then what about your catering business?"

"What about it?"

"It's taken off during the past couple of years. You worked your butt off to make it happen, Kate."

She lifted her shoulders in a casual shrug, as if leaving her entire life behind were just an everyday occurrence to her, as if she couldn't wait to leave the shadow of the Gages behind. "Beth's my associate now. Trust me, if Landon married her, it means she's very capable of handling things by herself. We'll hire a couple more helpers, and I can start a new branch in Miami."

Frustrated at her responses, he ground his molars as he thought of a thousand arguments, but he predicted she'd have a retort for each one. How in the hell was he going to change her mind?

Her smile lacked its usual playfulness as her pretty blue eyes held his. "So that's it? Those are your arguments for me staying?"

Her lips...they looked redder tonight, plumper. He wanted to touch them with his thumb and take off her lipstick. See her all fresh and pure like he was used to seeing her. Not all made up. Just pink, fresh-skinned, with those seven freckles on her nose, and that soft coral mouth that he—

Damn.

He stiffened against the heat building in his loins.

But Kate... She made him feel so damned protective it wasn't even funny. Her smiles, her personality, her alertness... There was no part of Kate he would ever change. No part of her he wouldn't miss when she left for Florida.

Luckily, she wouldn't be going anywhere.

"What am I going to do to change your mind?" he asked, more to himself than to her.

"Nothing. Honestly. My mind's completely made up."

He noticed the tray of wineglasses she'd set down nearby. She was taking a short break from making the rounds, he supposed. So he seized one and offered her another.

"Here's to me changing your mind," he said with an arrogant smile. He would find out what she was running away from, and he would eliminate it from the face of the planet.

She laughed, and the sound did magical things to him even as she declined the wine he offered her. "Oh, no, I don't drink when I'm working."

He snorted. "I should've stopped seven glasses ago, and yet here I am. Still going strong. Drink with me, Freckles."

"Well it is your birthday. You might as well enjoy."

"Come on. Join me on this toast. I relieve you of your duties." He pressed the glass against the back of her fingers, glad when she finally took it. He felt cocky and arrogant as he lifted his glass. "Here's to me changing your mind," he repeated.

Kate's eyes gained a new sparkle as she did the same. "And to me, and my new life in Florida."

They knocked glasses in toast, and it was on.

It was on.

Like when they were kids playing Battleship...hell, yeah. Garrett was going to sink Kate's Florida ship to the bottom of the ocean.

As though mentally plotting, too, Kate quietly sipped, watching him over the rim with a little glimmer in her eyes. A glimmer that told him she was definitely onto his plan.

Think what you want, Freckles. But you won't be going anywhere.

"I'm not backing out until I get my way, Kate. You know this, correct?" Garrett warned with a smile

Kate shook her head, but was smiling, too. "See? And you asked me why I didn't tell you? There's your answer. I can't deal with you right now, Garrett. I need to pack and make plans, help Molly with preparations so I can leave after the wedding."

"You don't need to deal with me. I will be the one dealing with you," he countered as he finished his glass. He snatched another and then gazed out at the gardens, the alcohol already slowing his usually sharp brain. Oh, yes, he was determined.

He just couldn't imagine his life without Kate in it.

Every family celebration—hell, every family dinner, gathering or festivity—she would be there. Every morning in his office, her delectable croissants would be there. In his mind, his very dark soul, every second of the day, she was there....

"Will you be spending the night here?"

The lights in her eyes vanished at his question, and she nodded sadly. "Your mother said I could use my old room. She doesn't want me driving alone so late. You know what happened..."

To our fathers, he thought. They'd taken Garrett to watch a rock concert.

Neither had returned.

The reminder made his stomach twist and turn until he thought he'd puke.

He wanted to discuss Florida, take back control, make her promise she would stay and settle this here and now. But he didn't feel like he was in control of all five senses anymore; he'd drained the second glass already, which brought tonight's drink count to almost a dozen, so perhaps he could save this for another day.

Setting down the empty glass on the tray, he said, "All right, Kate. Sleep tight. I'll see you in the morning."

"Garrett." Her voice stopped him, and he turned from the terrace door. There was regret in her eyes, and he worried she'd see the truth of his torment in his. Then she sadly shook her head. "Happy birthday."

"You know what I want from you for my birthday, don't you?" he asked, his voice so low she'd probably barely heard it.

For a long, charged moment, their gazes held. The wind rustled the bottom of her dress and pulled tendrils of hair out of her bun. Watching the way the breeze caressed her, he felt unraveled on the inside with crazy thoughts about tucking that hair behind her ear, feeling the material of her silky dress under his fingers.

"What?" she asked, sounding breathless. "What is it that you want for your birthday?"

Her eyes had glazed over. Now her chest heaved as though his answer made her nervous and, at the same time, excited, and for a moment, Garrett felt equally nervous, and equally excited. For that fraction of a second, he just wanted to say one word, just one word, that would change their lives unequivocally in some way. But he forced himself to say the rest.

"You," he whispered, barely able to continue when he noticed the way her cheeks flushed, the way she licked her lips. "Here. I want you here on my next birthday. I want you here every day of the year. That's all I want, Kate."

* * *

You...

Kate felt strangely melancholy, lying in her old bed, in her old room, with its decorations still left over from her childhood. She didn't want to think that this was the last time she'd be sleeping here, a door away from Garrett. She didn't want to think it'd be the last birthday she spent with him and that some other guy she'd meet in Florida, a cabana boy or whatever, would be the one she'd settle down with.

She'd been barely seven when she buried her dad, and in that strange reflective moment when a grieving child gains the maturity of an old person, Kate had realized that her chance to be loved, to belong to something and someone, was now buried six feet under, in a smooth wood coffin.

She'd never blamed Garrett for anything, at least not at first.

She hadn't been told what had happened in the beginning. She'd only learned that two men had been murdered and the killers had been caught and would spend their lives behind bars. Which

had seemed like such an easy punishment, compared to how her father and Garrett's had lost their lives. Garrett and his brothers had grieved their father, and Kate and Molly had quietly grieved their own. But then she had overheard a conversation Garrett's mother had had with the police, and Kate had found out what really happened. She had felt betrayed, kept from the truth by their whispers. Garrett's betrayal had hurt most of all.

She'd always had a soft spot for that dark-haired boy, and she'd felt like he hadn't even cared enough for her to tell her the truth. That her father had not died to save his dad. He had died to save Garrett. She'd rushed up to him one day and told him he should be ashamed of himself. She'd asked him how he could stand there with that poker face, and laugh, and try to pretend nothing had happened, when it had been his fault! Her father had died protecting Garrett from the gunshots. All because Garrett hadn't run for cover when he should have. She'd been angry because they'd all lied to her, to her and poor innocent Molly, who was merely three and lonely. But she had been especially angry at Garrett.

She'd regretted the words instantly, though, when she'd seen the way his neck had gone red, and his fisted hands had trembled at his sides, and his eyes had gone dead like she'd just delivered the last blow that he'd needed to join the two men down under.

The death wish the boy had developed afterward had alarmed the family to such an extent that the Gage matron had asked Kate to please talk to him. Horribly remorseful, Kate had approached him one day and apologized. She'd realized that her father would have done that for anyone, which was true. No matter how painful it had been to speak, she'd said that it had been his job, and he had done it well. He was a hero. Her hero, and now he was gone.

Garrett had listened gravely, said nothing for long moments, and Kate had felt a new, piercing sense of loss when she realized in fear that she and Garrett would never be friends again. They would never be able to cope with this huge loss and guilt again.

"I wish it had been me."

"No! No!" She'd suddenly hated herself for having planted this in his head, for not coping well with this strange anger and neediness inside her. Maybe she'd been so angry because all she'd wanted was for someone to put his arms around her and Molly and say it would be okay, even if it was a lie and it would never be okay.

But Garrett had tossed a small twig aside, and gazed down at her hand like he'd wanted to take it. She hadn't known if she wanted him to hold it or not, but when he had, a current had rushed up her arm as if the tips of her fingers where he touched her had been struck by lightning.

"I'm gonna be your hero now," he'd said.

And he was.

He'd protected her his entire life, from anything and everything. He'd become not only her hero...but the only man she'd ever wanted.

* * *

He could feel Kate in the house somehow.

Of course his mother wouldn't let her drive so late back to her apartment alone. Garrett also had an apartment of his own in a newer neighborhood, but tonight he'd also planned to stay in his old room so he could get blissfully inebriated without having to drive. And yet even after all the wine he'd drunk, he didn't feel so high.

The news of Kate's plans to move had sobered him.

Now he lay in bed with just a little buzz to scramble his brain, not enough to numb his thoughts. He couldn't stop thinking about her.

He might as well have been eighteen again, staring at the ceiling, sleepless with the knowledge that Kate slept nearby. Except now, Molly no longer slept in Kate's same room, and Kate wasn't a teenager anymore. Neither was Garrett.

With the vivid imagination of a man, he imagined her red hair fanning out against the white pillow, and the mere thought of her in bed caused his muscles to tighten.

His chest became heavy as he grappled with the same feelings of guilt and solitude that he always did when he thought of her.

Garrett had also denied little Molly of a father. But Molly had never looked at him with resentment. She had never really looked at him like she wanted something from him, like Kate did.

Sometimes, when he got drunk and reflective, he wondered if that night had never happened, would things have been different for him? He might have been happier, like his younger brother. He could have also waited until Kate was the right age, and then, if there had been any hint of her having any special feelings for him, he might have let himself feel them back for her. But it was pointless to imagine it. Pointless torture and torment. Because that night had happened, and Garrett could still feel the dank air, hear the gunshots and remember it as if it had happened less than twenty-four hours ago.

Yeah, he remembered exactly how those gunshots had exploded so close to him, how they'd burst between the buildings of downtown San Antonio like an echo. He remembered his father's grip —which had been firm on Garrett as he guided him into the concert entrance—and how suddenly he'd jerked at his side and his fingers had let go. His father had crashed like a deadweight to the asphalt.

"Dad?" Garrett had said, paralyzed in confusion for a second, only to be instantly shoved aside by Dave Devaney, whose expression clearly told Garrett he'd already figured out what was going on.

"Get down—run!" the man had shouted, reaching for the weapon Garrett knew he carried inside his jacket. But Garrett could hear his father sputtering, struggling to breathe, and he had been paralyzed for a stunned moment. The world could have been crashing over him. As far as he'd known, it had been. But all he had been conscious of was his father. In the middle of the street, clutching his chest, where blood spurted through his open fingers like a fountain.

Instead of running away, Garrett had run back to him. He hadn't known what he planned to do. He'd only known his father was covered in blood, choking on his own breath, and that his eyes—dark as coal like Garrett's—looked wild and frightened. As wild and frightened as Garrett felt.

He'd dived back for the figure on the ground and gripped him by one arm, trying to drag him aside, when he'd heard Devaney's "No, boy! Dammit, no!" A half dozen more gunshots had exploded, and in that instant, the weight of a man had crushed him to the ground.

Garrett had cursed in front of his father for the first time in his life and squirmed between both men. Something hot and sticky had oozed across both his chest and back as he'd tried to push free, which had proved immensely difficult being he was only ten, and Dave Devaney had been a big man. His father had sputtered one last time beneath him, and when Garrett swung his head around, Jonathan Gage's eyes had been lifeless.

Garrett had gone cold, listening to sirens in the distance, footsteps, chaos around them.

Suddenly he'd heard Dave's voice, saying, "Garrett," as he rolled to the side to spare Garrett his weight. He'd blinked up at the man, shocked, mute when he realized the man had stepped into the line of fire to save him. Him. Who hadn't run when he'd been told to.

The man had reached out to pat his jaw, and Garrett had grabbed the man's hand and attempted a reassuring squeeze. He'd shaken uncontrollably, felt sticky and startlingly cold. "My daughters... They have no one but me. No one but me. Do you understand me, boy?"

He'd nodded wildly.

The man had seemed to struggle to swallow. To speak and breathe. But his eyes had had that wild desperation Garrett's father had worn, except his gaze had also been pleading. Pleading with Garrett. "Help me.... Be there...for them..."

He'd nodded wildly again.

"So that they are not alone...taken care of...safe. Tell 'em...I l-love..."

Garrett had nodded, his face wet and his eyes scalding hot as he tried to reassure the dying man. His chest had hurt so much he'd thought he'd been shot, as well. "Yes, sir," he'd said low, with the conviction of a ten-year-old who'd suddenly aged to eighty. "I'll take care of them both."

But how could he take care of Kate now, if they would be miles and states apart?

* * *

Kate was jolted from her thoughts when the door of her bedroom crashed open. She sat upright on the bed, her heart hammering in her chest. A huge shadow loomed at the threshold.

Garrett.

"I don't want you to leave," he said gruffly.

Shock widened her eyes. His voice was slurred, and she wondered how many more drinks he'd had after they'd last seen each other.

From the light of the hall, she could see he was still partly dressed in his black slacks and button-up shirt. His tie was loose around his collar. His hair rumpled. His sleeves rolled up. Oh, God, he looked adorable.

"I've made up my mind," she told him.

"Then unmake it."

He shut the door behind him and strode into the darkness, and her heart beat faster in response.

"I can't unmake it," she said, her voice raspy. Her throat was aching and she thought that the night of no sleep yesterday and the marathon to get everything set up today had just set her up to fall ill. "Look, I made up my mind. I can't stay here."

"Why?"

"Because I'm unhappy, Garrett. I've got everything I ever wanted, and yet don't. I make money for myself, I've got great friends, and Molly, and I've got you and your family...and I'm so unhappy."

The mattress squeaked as he sat down, and suddenly she felt his hand patting the bed as though to find her. "Why are you unhappy?" he asked. He found her thigh over the covers, and when he squeezed, her stomach tightened, too.

She couldn't remember ever being in a dark room with him, or maybe she could, decades ago, when he had been sick and she would help Eleanor nurse him and feed him soup. But now she was no longer a girl. Her body was a woman's, and her responses to this man were purely feminine and decidedly discomforting. Her blood raced hot through her veins as her body turned the same consistency of her pillow behind her. Soft. Feathery. Weightless.

"Why are you unhappy?" he murmured. She felt the mattress squeak again when he edged closer. He seemed to be palpating the air until he felt her shoulder; then he slid his hand up her face. The touch of his fingers melted her, and she closed her eyes as he cupped her jaw and bent to her ear. "Tell me what makes you unhappy and I'll fix it for you."

He smelled of alcohol. And his unique scent.

She shook her head at his impossible proposition, almost amused, but not quite. More like unsettled. By his nearness, his touch.

She had promised herself, when she'd decided she had to move away, that she would forget this man. And now all she could think of was reaching up to touch his hair and draw his lips to hers. She couldn't see him in the darkness, but she knew his face by memory. The sleek line of his dark eyebrows. The beautiful tips of his sooty eyelashes. The strikingly beautiful espresso shade of his eyes, dark brown from up close and coal-black from afar.

She knew his strong face, with that strong, proud forehead, as strong as his cheekbones and jaw, and she knew the perfect shape of his mouth. She might not have touched his face with her fingers in her life, but her eyes had run over those features more than they had touched any other thing on this earth.

"You can't fix it. You're not God," she sadly whispered. Her throat now ached with emotion, too.

"You're right. I'm a devil." He cupped her face in both hands and stroked his thumb across the flesh of her lips, triggering a strange reaction in her body. "Why did you wear lipstick tonight? You look prettier bare."

Her breath caught as she realized he was stroking her lips with his thumb like he wanted to kiss her. He'd called her pretty. When had he ever called her pretty? Decades ago, maybe by accident, he'd blurted it out. But it had been years since he'd ever complimented her. Or touched her.

He'd just done both.

And suddenly the only thing moving in the room was her heaving chest, and his thumb as it moved side to side, caressing her lips, filling her body with an ocean of longing. She swallowed back a moan.

"You're right to want to leave here, Kate." His voice thickened as he bent his head, and he smelled so good and exuded such body warmth and strength, she went light-headed. "You should run from here."

It took every ounce of willpower for her to push at his hard shoulders. "You're drunk, Garrett. Go away and get out of my bed."

His hands tightened on her face as he nuzzled her nose with his, the timbre of his voice rough with torment. "Kate, there's not a day I don't remember what I took from you—"

"Garrett, we can talk about all this tomorrow."

"There's nothing to discuss. You're staying here. Here, Kate. Where I can take care of you and I know you're safe. All right, Freckles?"

"Even if I'm miserable?"

He dropped his hands to her shoulders and squeezed. "Tell me what makes you miserable, Kate. I'll take care of it. I'll make it better for you."

Kate wanted to push him away, needed to push him away. He was drunk and she didn't have the energy to deal with him tonight, not like this. But the instant she flattened her palms on his shirt, they stayed there. On his chest. Feeling his hard muscles through the fabric, his heart beating under her hands. Between her legs, she grew moist and hot.

When she was little, she'd wanted him because he was strong and protective, and her favorite boy of all the boys she'd ever met. But now she was older and a new kind of wanting tangled up inside her. Her breasts went heavy from the mere act of touching his chest through his shirt, and her nipples puckered against her nightshirt.

"Do me a favor, Kate?"

His voice slurring even more, Garrett sounded drunker by the second as he stroked her face with unsteady fingertips. Every pore in her body became aware of that whispery touch, causing shivers down her nerve endings.

"Stay with us. My mother loves you. Beth loves you, and so does her son." He seemed to wrack his brain for more to say. "And Molly. Molly loves you, Kate. She needs you. Julian, Landon, hell, everyone."

But not him?

She didn't know if she wanted to laugh or cry or hit him for excluding himself, but she already knew that she was a weight on him, a responsibility to him. That's what she'd always been. Forcing her arms to return to her sides, she sighed. "Garrett..."

"What will that obsessed client of yours, Missy Something, do without your currant muffins? What will I do? Hmm, Kate? It's a tragedy to think about it."

"I don't want to argue about this now, Garrett." She rubbed her temple.

"All right, Katie."

She blinked.

"All right?" she repeated.

Confused by his easy concession, which was not like Garrett at all, she suddenly heard him shift on the bed and spread his big body down the length beside her.

Eyes widening in horror, she heard him plump one of the two pillows.

“All right, Katie. We’ll talk about it in the morning,” he said in that deep, slurred voice.

She heard him shift once more, as if to get more comfortable. Sitting on the bed, frozen in disbelief, she managed to sputter, “You’re not planning to stay here the night, are you?”

He made a move with his head that she couldn’t see but rustled the pillow.

“Garrett, you moron, go to your room,” she said, shoving at his arm a little.

He caught her hand and squeezed it. “Relax, you little witch. I’ll go back to my room when I stop spinning. Come here and brace me down.” He draped his arm around her shoulders and drew her to his side, and Kate was too stunned to do anything but play rag doll.

Minutes passed as she remained utterly still, every part of her body excruciatingly aware of his powerful arm. Garrett was not the touchy-feely brother; that was Julian. In fact, Garrett seemed to do his best not to touch her. But his guard was down and he seemed not to want to let go this time.

She frowned when he tightened his hold and slid his fingers up beneath the fall of her hair. Cupping her scalp, he pressed her face down to his chest.

“Garrett,” Kate said, poking on his abs. They were hard as rocks under his shirt.

He breathed heavily. Oh, no. Seriously. Was he asleep?

“Garrett?”

She groaned when there was no response and wondered if she should move into Garrett’s room and leave him to sleep here, because she was certainly not dragging him to his own room. He must weigh double what she did, even if he was all muscle, judging from the hardness of the arm around her and the abs she’d just poked.

Instead, she grumbled and complained under her breath, and ended up using her pillow as a barrier between them. She eased his arm from around her, setting it on the pillow. His hand was enormous between her fingers, and for a moment, she seemed to be unable to let go, kept her hand over his just to feel that he was not a figment of her imagination. Then she realized what she was doing and that it was stupid and foolish, and she yanked her hand away.

Damn him.

He was going to do everything possible to keep her in Texas, she knew.

But he wasn’t going to take Florida away from her.

Oh, no, her life had stopped revolving around Garrett Gage ever since she’d decided she didn’t want him anymore, and now she’d be damned before she let him screw up her perfect plans, too.

Three

Monday morning, business at the San Antonio Daily was more intense than normal.

Usually Landon, the eldest Gage brother, would bark about the grammar mistakes in that day’s print edition. Julian John, the youngest, was no longer working at headquarters since he’d started his own PR firm, but he still occasionally dropped in and offered his services in weekly status meetings. Lately, Garrett had been focused on maneuvering their assets to make one of their greatest takeovers, one that would absorb Clarks Communications into the Daily and the rest of their holdings.

Which was why Cassandra Clarks was visiting today. She sat in Garrett’s office, quietly eating the remaining muffin from the batch Kate had sent to the office this morning.

It made Garrett grumpy to see that muffin go.

But he feigned indifference as he flipped to the next page of the current stock statistics for Clarks Communications. Still, he wasn’t really paying attention to their impressive growth numbers. Instead, he kept going back to Saturday night and Sunday morning.

He’d woken up alone, dressed in the most uncomfortable way possible, with a stiff back and the scent of Kate in bed, which had made him hard as marble.

Then he'd realized he was lying on Kate's old, frilly pink bed. Which he'd apparently decided to take over during the night while on a semidrunken spree.

Damn.

He'd immediately texted her Sunday morning, and even now, he kept glancing at his phone, replaying their conversation.

Sorry for crashing in last night.

You mean that was you? That's all right, at least u didn't break anything.

But my pride. And my back.

Ouch. Ok, but it's nothing my muffins won't cure.

Holy hell. Was she flirting with him?

I'm going to savor every bite.

He wasn't sure if he'd been flirting, too. Savor every bite. The alcohol had still been running through his system, clearly messing up his head. Thank God Kate hadn't replied after that last one. But she'd sent a dozen muffins this morning and he had gobbled three up with barely a drink of coffee. His experience with Kate's food was almost sexual.

He couldn't help it; it had always been like this since the beginning.

The first time she'd made chocolate-chip cookies on her own, Garrett had been fresh out of bed on a Sunday in his randy teen years. He'd been scouring the kitchen for breakfast and had shoved a warm cookie into his mouth, nodding when she'd asked if it was good. Then Kate had laughingly stepped up and brushed a crumb from the side of his mouth, and he'd almost swallowed the cookie whole.

Sometimes he waited until he was alone to eat her stuff. And he imagined he was licking her fingers when he wrapped his tongue around her sugary frostings. And when they had little sprinkles, he pictured her freckles.

He really should look into therapy.

Suddenly he heard Landon sigh and slap his copy of the report shut, and he was jerked back to the present.

"So if your brother is still not aware of our plans," he asked Cassandra, "why are you chickening out on selling?" The chair creaked as he leaned back, folding his arms over his chest.

Cassandra Clarks may have had the appearance of a blonde bombshell, but behind that "bimbo" facade, Garrett had learned, there was actually a brain. The woman was not only smart, but about as flexible on her terms as a damned wall.

Today she exuded casual confidence, slowly shaking her head as Landon explained his position.

"We're supposed to keep buying the stock until we get over twenty percent," Landon told her. "In a week, two at most, your brother's company will be ours before he even realizes we're in bed with him. No pun intended."

"None taken," Cassandra said, eyeing Landon judiciously as she finally stopped shaking her head and allowed him to continue.

"Once we secure your remaining thirty-two percent, it puts us in control, and it leaves you a very wealthy woman, Cassie."

"That's the problem. My brother will know I sold to you. He will destroy me and anything else I have," she said, her entire countenance clouded with worry. "What I wanted to propose to Garrett

on Saturday before he cut me short was a marriage of convenience. My brother has control of my stake in the company now, but if I marry, he won't have control over financial decisions regarding my stake anymore. My husband can take over the shares and compensate me discreetly. It would be an easy arrangement, and over in six months, where we'll both happily walk away with what we want. Me with my money, you with the stock."

Garrett remained silent as he absorbed the proposal.

He met Cassandra's gaze unflinchingly, the ambitious businessman in him wanting to say yes. But in his mind, he went back to waking up to Kate's scent on the pillow, to the memory of somehow holding her in his arms.

He tugged at the collar of his shirt several times, aware that his frown was pinching into his face. "I'm afraid that's not an option, Cassandra," he said, signaling for his assistant to refill all their coffees.

Hell, he might even start drinking whiskey at this hour. Because marriage?

"Like Landon said, we're willing to buy those shares up front. No need to get dramatic about it."

"I'm afraid selling out front is not an option. My brother is... You don't know him. Marriage is the only way I can free myself of his control. You take the shares, transfer the money to me, and then we walk six months later with irreconcilable differences. It's a marriage in name only and we have nothing to lose. That's the only way it's happening: you marry me and by right take my thirty-two percent."

Landon's and Garrett's eyes met across the conference table. Landon's gray gaze almost looked silver in his concern.

"Look, Cassandra," he started. "We're almost at twenty percent already. We'll buy your position outright at way above market price. At fifty-two percent, we'll be in control and can get your brother out of there. He won't have a say in the matter anymore."

She shook her head, her eyes tearing up. "You don't know him. He has a say in a lot of things in my life. I don't get real financial independence until I marry—can't you understand?"

She reached across the table and squeezed Garrett's hand as if she were falling from a precipice and he'd been appointed the task of hauling her up.

"It'll be a marriage in name only, but I can make it sweet for you. I can. I know I'm pretty. I think you're an incredibly sexy man."

His stomach turned, and he was amazed at how calmly he looked back at her. Several years ago, he'd probably have done it without thinking. He was a businessman, after all. She was an attractive woman offering something and he had nothing to lose. People got married and divorced for other reasons; why not for business?

He just didn't have the energy for it right now. What he'd told Kate at his party had been the truth. All he wanted was for Kate to be home. He would dedicate every waking moment to making that happen. Life without Kate to him was...unimaginable.

He was selfish when it came to her.

He was stupid, unreasonable and stubborn when it came to her.

But Cassandra Clarks didn't know this. She didn't know that as he sat in this chair, and let her squeeze his hand, every cell in his body was burning with yearning for another woman. He'd burned for so many years, it was a miracle he hadn't turned to ashes by now.

"We'll talk about this during the week, see what we can come up with," Landon finally said. In silence, the Gage brothers both stood up to dismiss her.

Cassandra went over to shake Landon's hand, and then returned to Garrett, giving him a hug that crushed all of her assets against his chest. He could see she was trying very hard to look seductive, but he saw fear and frustration glowing in the depths of her eyes as she eased back.

Cassandra was blonde and beautiful, and she also appeared desperate. If Garrett had an ounce of mercy in him at all, he'd find a way to help her. "You'll let me know?" she asked hopefully.

He nodded. "You'll hear from us in a week or two."

"Marriage," Garrett grumbled as the door closed behind her. He fell back on his chair and rubbed his temples as he tried to think of a way they could free Cassandra from her brother's grip and get their hands on Clarks Communications.

"In name only," Landon said, gazing out the window with a thoughtful frown.

"I'm not interested in a fake marriage, Lan."

Landon sighed and spun around, coming back to the table. "Do you have any other ideas?"

Garrett lifted his shoulders. "We find another fish in the pond, let go of Clarks," he said bitterly, glaring down at his coffee.

The silence that followed made it clear that neither Landon nor he was ecstatic at the possibility. Clarks was the biggest fish in their pond, and if they were smart—which the Gage brothers were—they would secure it at all costs.

When evaluating the big picture, six months wasn't a lot of time, if it meant getting Clarks into their pocket. And Garrett had everything riding on this project. Currently, Clarks posed a threat. But once they'd acquired the company, it would be a huge asset for the Gage conglomerate.

But at the cost of a fake wedding?

Hell, it's not like you plan to ever marry. Why not at least do some business?

The two large doors of the conference room knocked open, and in strode Julian John, casual as could be, blond and Hollywoodesque, an hour after the scheduled meeting time. Behind him, one of the secretaries rushed to close the doors.

Jules never said good-morning, but then they were brothers. They didn't have to.

He regarded the pair of somber men seated at the conference table and remained standing. "I had something to do, so drop the long faces, both of you."

Landon arched a challenging brow and leaned back in his chair. "I hope it was business and not you playing around while we try to take over Clarks Communications."

"Do you even remember I no longer work here? I'm here to offer my assistance, that's all. Molls needed me this morning."

"Tell Molly to leave the baby-making for the evening," said Landon with a devilish smile.

Heading to his chair, Julian rolled his eyes at his brother. "I picked up some medicine for Kate, idiot, after Molly took her to the doctor. And if I want to make babies in the morning with my Molls, I sure as hell will make them without your permi—"

"What the hell is wrong with Kate? Is she sick?"

Julian's attention swung back to Garrett, and his blond eyebrows flew upward. "Why? Are you a doctor?"

"Is Kate," Garrett slowly enunciated, "sick? Ill? Feeling badly?"

Julian's eyes twinkled like they did when he was up to no good. "Don't you think it's about time you did something about how you feel for her, Dr. Garrett?"

"I feel responsible for her, that's how I feel," he gritted out. "And right now I'm going to punch your face if you don't tell me what's wrong with her."

Plopping into his chair, Julian grabbed his folder and started scanning the contents. "She's running a fever. A high fever. Molly took her home to stay with her, and I was the guy who picked up the prescription and dropped it off."

Garrett's overwhelming protectiveness surged with a vengeance. Kate was never sick. Ever. He didn't like knowing she was sick at all, and now, he felt sick inside. "I could've picked it up for her."

"And tear you away from Cassandra Clarks and our plans for world domination?" Julian said. "No, bro. If that girl is selling anything, she'll sell it to you. I saw her with you at your party. I think she digs you even if you don't dig her."

"She digs him enough to marry him." Landon filled his brother in, then broached the topic currently setting Garrett's brain on overdrive. "Is Kate still planning to move to Miami?"

"As far as I know, nothing has changed her mind. But Molly's privately freaking out about it," Julian said, his expression going somber. Garrett knew his younger brother was intensely territorial and protective of Molly, and even if he was usually cool as a cucumber, it must irk him not to be able to do anything to spare her any pain.

"So is Beth," Landon murmured sadly.

Garrett looked down at the conference table and scowled. Nobody in this goddamned world could be as freaked out about it as he was.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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