RECLAIMING HIS PREGNANT WIDOW

Tessa Radley

Desire

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“Clea!”

That voice. She jerked around like a puppet on a string, eyes stretched wide, shock punching the air out of her lungs.

Breathless, she whispered, “Brand …?”

It couldn't be. Disbelief made her blink. *Brand was dead.*

The man coming toward her was tall, dark, and very much alive.

The hands that came down on her shoulders were so intimately familiar … yet so painfully strange. *He was dead.* Yet the fingers cupping her shoulders were warm, strong, and very much alive.

This was no ghost.

This was a human. A man she knew too well.

Her husband was back.

Dear Reader,

Every now and then I get an idea that just won't leave me alone. The characters come to life—I can hear them talking. And this was one of those ideas.

In fact, the opening scene of *Reclaimed: His Pregnant Widow* was so vivid in my mind, it took up permanent residence. A hero who comes back from the dead to find the woman he loves has had him declared dead. How would he respond? And what about his woman, who can't bear to think that her trust has been misplaced? I knew from the first moment these characters would be in for a rocky ride.

When I discussed the idea with my first editor Melissa Jeglinski she loved it. But I wasn't ready to write the story … yet … I still had too many unanswered questions. My next editor Krista Stroever also believed in the idea—but both of us still had questions. Finally Charles Griemsman came along and the story came to life.

So I'm truly thrilled you'll at last have a chance to meet Brand and Clea after all the time that they've been living in my head!

Happy reading.

Tessa Radley

About the Author

TESSA RADLEY loves traveling, reading and watching the world around her. As a teen Tessa wanted to be an intrepid foreign correspondent. But after completing a bachelor of arts degree and marrying her sweetheart, she became fascinated by law and ended up studying further and practicing as an attorney in a city firm.

A six-month break spent traveling through Australia with her family reawoke the yen to write. And life as a writer suits her perfectly—traveling and reading count as research, and as for analyzing the world … well, she can think "what if?" all day long. When she's not reading, traveling or thinking about writing, she's spending time with her husband, her two sons or her zany and wonderful friends. You can contact Tessa through her website, www.tessaradley.com.

Reclaiming His
Pregnant Widow
Tessa Radley

www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Charles

All my life November has been special. It's my birthday month. It's Prince Charming month. It's the best month ever!

So I'm dedicating this book to Charles with gratitude and affection—Charles, you will forever make me feel like Cinderella. And meeting you was a hundred birthdays wrapped into one. A magic, never-to-be-forgotten moment.

Thank you for your patience, for your grace and your wonderful work.

One

The photograph sealed it.

The newspaper Brand Noble had bought at JFK International Airport on his return to the United States had carried a story about tonight's black-tie museum exhibition opening. But it was the photo of Clea standing beside a statue of a stone tiger that had caused his heart to stop. It had been four years since he'd seen his wife, and she looked more beautiful than ever. Her raven hair unchanged, her eyes still wide and green.

Brand was not about to allow anything as insignificant as the lack of an embossed invitation to keep him from her. He'd waited long enough.

Now, two hours later, Brand slammed the door of the yellow-and-black cab that had ferried him to Manhattan's Museum Mile. Turning his back on the midweek bustle of commuters hastening home in the fading light, he focused on the Museum of Ancient Antiquities towering ahead.

Clea was in there….

A uniformed guard, almost as wide as he was tall, blocked the entrance, and his scrutiny reminded Brand that in his haste to see Clea he had yet to don the rented tuxedo jacket still slung across his left arm.

Brand's mouth slanted in a wry grimace. What would the man have thought of the battered fatigues he'd worn for the better part

of four years?

Impatience and anticipation ratcheted up another notch, and the ache to see Clea—hold her, kiss her—consumed him.

Breaking into a lope, Brand headed for the glass doors, shrugging on the dinner jacket as he went. He pulled the collar straight and smoothed down the satin lapels with scarred and callused fingertips. As the security guard examined the invitations of the group in front, Brand tagged on behind the tail-enders. To his relief, the guard waved him through with the rest of the party.

He'd negotiated the first barrier.

Now to find Clea …

Brand would've loved the tiger.

As always, the sight of the stone figure transfixed Clea. The chatter and clinking of champagne glasses faded away as she studied the powerful feline. Crafted by a Sumerian stone carver eons ago, the leashed power of the piece was compelling, calling to her on a primal level that she could not explain.

Without question Brand would have loved it. That had been her very first thought when she'd spotted the half life-size cat eighteen months earlier—she'd had to have it. Convincing Alan Daley, the museum's head curator, and the acquisition board to acquire it had taken some doing; the financial outlay had been considerable. But the statue had proved to be a crowd pleaser.

And it was inexorably linked in her mind to Brand, serving as a daily memorial to her husband.

Her late husband.

"Clea?"

The voice that broke into her thoughts was softer than Brand's rough velvet tones. Not Brand, but Harry …

Brand was dead. Tossed without honor into some mass grave in the hot, dry desert of Iraq. Years of unending questions, desperate prayers and daily flashes of hope were finally over. Ended, irrevocably, in the most unwelcome manner nine months ago.

But he would never be forgotten. Clea had vowed to make certain of that.

Determinedly shrugging off the shroud of melancholy, she brushed a curl off her face and turned away from the statue to her father's business associate and her oldest friend. "Yes, Harry?"

Harry Hall-Lewis set his hands on her shoulders and gazed down at her. "Yes? Now that's the word I've been waiting a long time to hear you say."

The playful note in his tone caused Clea to roll her eyes. How she wished he'd tire of the game he'd made of the arranged-marriage plan their fathers had hatched for them two decades ago. "Not now, Harry." On cue her phone beeped.

Relieved, she extracted her cell phone from her clutch and glanced at it. "It's Dad." As chairman of the museum's board of trustees, Donald Tomlinson had been giving prospective patrons a private tour of the exhibit.

After listening to her father for a few moments, Clea hung up

and said to Harry, "He's finished the tour, and yes, he has secured more funding. He wants us to come join him."

"You're changing the subject." Harry's hands tightened momentarily on her bare shoulders, making Clea aware of the brevity of the bodice of her floor-length gown. Then the moment of self-consciousness was gone as Harry released her from the friendly hold with a chuckle. "One day I'll convince you to marry me. And that will be the day you realize what you've been missing all these years."

Clea stepped back, unaccountably needing a little distance from him. "Oh, Harry, that joke wore thin a long time ago."

The humor evaporated from his face.

"Is the thought of marrying me so repulsive?"

His hangdog expression added to her guilt. They'd grown up together. Their fathers had been best friends; in all ways that mattered Harry was the brother she'd never had. Why couldn't he understand that she needed him in that role, not as the husband their fathers had cast him as decades ago?

Gently touching the sleeve of his tailored jacket, she said, "Oh, Harry, you're my best friend, I love you dearly—"

"I sense a *but* coming."

The winking glitter from the chandeliers overhead gave his eyes an unnatural sparkle. Despite his carefree persona, Harry had always been perceptive. And he was right, there was a *but.* A great big, tall, dark and heartbreakingly absent *but.*

Brand …

The love of her life … and utterly irreplaceable. Grief had created a black void in her life that drained her of joy. How she missed him!

Clea shut off the line of thought that always led to unstanched pain and wild regret, and focused instead on Harry. “I’m just not ready to think of marriage again.”

She doubted she’d ever be ready.

“Surely you don’t still harbor hope that Brand is alive?”

Harry’s words caused the frenetic buzz that had been driving her for months to subside, forcing her to confront the pain she’d so carefully kept from facing. Weariness—and a lonely longing—overtook her. All at once Clea wished she was home, alone in the bedroom she’d once shared with Brand, cocooned in the comfort of their bed. The familiar ache of loss swamped her.

Dropping her hand from Harry’s sleeve, she wrapped her arms around her tummy and said in a high, thin voice, “This is the wrong time for this discussion.”

Harry caught her arm and said quietly, “Clea, for the past nine months, since you received confirmation that Brand is dead, you *never* want to talk about him.”

Clea flinched at the reminder of that awful day.

“I know you did everything in your power to find him, Clea, that you never gave up hoping that he was alive. But he’s not. He’s dead, and probably has been for over four years—however much you tried to deny it. You have to accept it.”

“I know he’s—” her voice broke “—dead.”

Harry looked as shocked by her disjointed statement as she felt.

Coldness crept through her.

Defeated, Clea's shoulders drooped and the soft satin of the sea-green dress—the color of Brand's eyes—sagged around her body. She shivered, suddenly chilled despite the warm summer evening.

It was the first time she'd admitted Brand's death out loud.

For so long she'd refused to stop hoping. She'd prayed. She'd kept the flame of faith alive deep in her heart, in that sacred place only Brand had ever touched. Clea had even convinced herself that if Brand had been dead a piece of her soul would have withered. So all through the months—the years—of waiting she'd stubbornly refused to extinguish the last flicker of hope. Not even when her father and friends were telling her to face reality: Brand wasn't coming back.

Harry spoke, breaking into her thoughts. "Well, accepting he's dead is a major step forward."

"Harry—"

"Look, I know it's been a tough time for you. Those first days of silence." Harry shook his head. "And then discovering he'd gone to Baghdad with another woman—"

"I might've been wrong about Brand still being alive," Clea interrupted heatedly, "but Brand was *not* having an affair with Anita Freeman—I don't care what the investigators say." Clea wouldn't tolerate having her memory of Brand defiled. "It's not

true. Their minds belong in some Baghdad sewer."

"But your father—"

"I don't care what Dad thinks, I absolutely refuse to believe it. Besides we both know Dad never cared much for Brand. Let it rest." She hesitated. "Brand and Anita were colleagues."

"Colleagues?" Harry's voice was loaded with innuendo.

"Okay, they dated a few times. But it was over before Brand met me." How Clea hated this. The way the gossip tarnished the love she and Brand had shared.

"That might have been what Brand wanted you to believe. But the investigators found proof that they'd lived together for over a year in London before he met you—hell, that's longer than he was married to you, Clea. Why did he never mention that? Your husband died in a car crash with the woman in the Iraq desert. Stop deceiving yourself!"

A quick scan around revealed no one close enough to overhear their conversation. Thank God. Clea stepped closer and spoke in a low tone: "They did not live together—Brand would've told me that. The relationship was brief. They only kept contact because of work. Brand was an antiquities expert, Anita was an archaeologist. Of course they ran across each other."

"But you'll never know for sure. Because Brand never even told you he was going to Iraq."

Unable to argue with Harry's logic, Clea straightened and said, "I have no intention of conducting a postmortem on this."

Her husband was dead. It was tragic enough that her bone-

deep conviction that he'd been out there somewhere—hurting … maybe suffering memory loss … waiting to be found—had been misguided.

But then, everyone had always thought she was mad to hope he might still be alive in the face of the mounting evidence that he must be dead. The burned-out wreck of Brand's rented vehicle had been found in the desert, and nearby villagers had confirmed burying the charred remains of a man and a woman in a local mass grave.

Despite the investigators' certainty that Brand had perished in the desert, Clea had wanted proof. That it had indeed been Brand who had died, not someone else. Not even the fact that no one had seen or heard from Brand since his disappearance or the fact that his bank accounts had remained untouched could quell her hopes.

But nine months ago, after years of lingering hope, Clea had received the proof she'd dreaded.

Brand's wedding ring. Stolen off one of the corpses by a member of the burial team and later turning up in a pawnbroker's stall at the local village market.

Brand would never have taken his ring off. *Never.* Finally, no choice remained but to face the truth: Brand had died in that wreck in the desert. He was not coming back.

Her beloved husband was dead.

There'd been nothing left for her to do but complete the formalities.

The court accepted what her father, the investigating team and the lawyers dispassionately called "the facts" and made an order confirming that Brand was dead, authorizing a death certificate to be issued.

The day she'd received the death certificate, the final document charting Brand's life, Clea's heart had shattered into glass-sharp fragments. She'd believed she would never come to terms with the harsh finality of it.

Harry's familiar features became a blur as her vision teared up. Yet amid the ashes of despair she'd found a way to combat her loneliness …

"Now I've upset you." Harry looked more wretched than ever. "I never meant to do that."

"It's not you."

Clea blinked furiously. How could she explain that everything made her feel tearful? The doctor said that was normal—it would pass.

"It's me. I'm just all over the place right now."

That caused Harry to take a hurried step back.

Patting the front of his dinner jacket, Clea gave a wan smile. "It's okay, I promise I won't bawl my eyes out."

Harry gave a hasty glance around, then said gamely, "You can cry on my shoulder anytime you want."

Her throat ached. "I'm done crying. I know—and accept—that Brand is dead. I know that I have to move on. Everything is going to be all right." If she told herself that often enough she

might one day start believing it. For good measure she added, "And I've got something to live for."

"Clea, if you need me—I'll be there for you. You know that."

Yet despite his brave words Harry looked so alarmed by the prospect of her falling apart here, in front of New York's high society, that Clea couldn't help smiling. "Harry, thank you. You're the best."

Relief lit Harry's expression. "Isn't that what friends are for?"

In the foyer of the Museum of Ancient Antiquities, Brand paused midstep and looked around. It was different from the last time he'd been here … yet still very familiar.

Dated black-and-white tiles had given way to glossy white marble. And the flooring wasn't the only change. An imposing, curved marble staircase with an ornate bronze balustrade wound upward in the space once occupied by creaky wooden stairs covered in threadbare, mustard-colored carpeting from the 1950s. To the right of the stairs, a magnificent bronze immortalized a pre-Christian goddess. The wreath of corn she wore allowed Brand to identify her as Inanna, the ancient Mesopotamian goddess of love, fertility and war.

The dark, old-fashioned entrance hall had been transformed into a sophisticated, inviting space just as Clea had sketched one snowy winter's evening while they'd reclined beside the glowing fire at home. Brand had listened as she'd shared a vision of how the museum could become New York's most exciting collection of ancient treasures.

Brand moved forward slowly.

A rush of pride filled him. His wife had clearly accomplished what she'd once only dreamed of. The museum was no longer a somewhat dowdy haunt of scholars and art aficionados. It was thriving … alive … exactly as she'd envisaged.

At the foot of the stairs a flock of women in high heels and designer frocks were being served oversize cosmopolitans by a white-jacketed waiter.

There was a buzz of excitement in the air.

Brand's gaze searched the group.

No Clea. Beyond the fashionistas lurked more clusters of people. His gaze sharpened. Men. All of them. Formally clad in black-and-white and scattered beneath the bronze of Inanna.

Where was his wife?

His heart hammering, Brand advanced, passing under a gilded chandelier, its iridescent crystals dispersing flecks of light across the domed arch of the ceiling far above. He made for the spectacular staircase he knew must lead to the second floor and the upper galleries. He couldn't wait to watch Clea's incredible green eyes light up with unrestrained joy when she saw him, couldn't wait to touch her, feel her soft warmth, her femininity within his arms. How he'd dreamed of that.

His wife. His lover. His lodestar. Every minute away from her had almost killed him.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Brand paused. The long gallery was crowded. The sparkle of jewels and riot of color was

blinding. He fought an unexpected wave of claustrophobia as the crowd enveloped him.

Perhaps he should've called ahead, let her know he was coming home….

But with the worst of the long and dangerous trek through the mountains bordering northern Iraq behind him, he'd wanted to get the less risky journey back to the United States done. Sure, there'd still been the chance that he could be arrested for carrying a fake passport. And, beneath reason, there'd lurked the blind terror that calling Clea might jinx everything.

Too late for second thoughts now.

Brand scanned the throng crammed between glass display cases holding priceless ancient treasures and tables loaded with canapés. Still no sight of the woman he sought. He edged past a trio of gossiping older women, their hungry eyes incessantly sweeping the packed room for fresh fodder before they turned to each other and cackled. His lips started to curl … then relaxed into a rusty smile. In the past he would've dismissed them as social hyenas; but now, after his months of deprivation, any laughter was a welcome sound.

He met the heavily mascaraed eyes of one of the group. Saw the disbelief as recognition dawned. Marcia Mercer. Brand remembered that she used to pen an influential society column. Perhaps she still did.

"Brand … Brand Noble?"

He gave her a nod in brief acknowledgment before advancing

with ruthless determination, ignoring the turning heads, the growing babble that followed in his wake.

And then he saw her.

Brand's mouth went dry. The cacophony of rising voices faded. There was only Clea …

She was smiling.

Her mouth curved up, and her eyes sparkled. A shimmering ball gown clung to her curves, her arms bare except for a gold cuff that glowed in the light from the opulent chandeliers … and on her left hand the wedding band he'd chosen for her glinted.

Brand sucked in his breath.

For an instant he thought she'd cut off the riot of curls he loved. But as she turned her head he caught a glimpse of curls escaping down behind her back from where the dark tresses had been pulled away from her face. He let out the breath he hadn't been aware of holding in a jagged groan. She looked so vital, so alive and so stunningly beautiful.

Longing surged through him and his chest expanded into an ache too complex to identify.

Clea's hand reached out and touched a jacketed arm. Brand's gaze followed. The sight of the bronze-haired man she was touching caused Brand's eyes to narrow dangerously. So Harry Hall-Lewis was still around. When she tipped her face up and directed the full blast of her smile at the man, Brand wanted to yank Clea away. To pull her to him, hold her, never let her go.

Mine.

The response roared through him. Basic, primal … and very, very male.

"Champagne, sir?"

The waiter's interruption broke his concentration on Clea. Brand helped himself to a glass from the tray with hands that shook, and he gulped the golden liquid down to moisten his tight, parched throat.

Then he set the empty glass down and drew a steadying breath.

He had his life back … and he had no intention of spending another moment away from the woman who had lured him back from beyond the darkness with the memory of her smile.

There was no time to waste.

Yet, when he looked across the room again, Clea and her companion had vanished.

After a terse exchange with her father near the Egyptian room, Clea then sneaked behind a tall pillar while Harry ventured into the crowd to fetch her a drink. Leaning against the cool column, she shut her eyes. If her father saw her he'd lecture her about duty, about the importance of networking and getting out in front of all the television cameras in attendance. Clea pursed her mouth in a moue of resignation. Of course he was right. But she needed a little time alone. She wasn't in the mood for small talk, and the growing whispers were causing the latent tension within her to spiral out of control.

"Clea."

That voice. She jerked around like a puppet on a string, eyes

stretched wide, shock punching the air out of her lungs.

Breathless, she whispered, “Brand …?”

It couldn’t be. Disbelief made her blink. *Brand was dead.*

The man coming toward her was tall, dark and very much alive.

A ghost from the past.

Heat seared her, instantly followed by an icy chill. He was a dead ringer for her very dead husband—the man she’d officially had declared dead eight months ago, a month after being given his ring back.

This was cruel. Brand was gone. Forever. Hadn’t she spent the past nine months trying to come to terms with the final proof of his death after nearly four years of terrible, traumatic uncertainty?

Blood rushed to her head. The sudden airlessness of the room pressed in on her.

Clea couldn’t breathe, and she felt horribly ill. Her father would never forgive her if she was sick all over the marble floor … with press cameras everywhere to immortalize the moment.

“Clea!”

The hands that came down on her shoulders were so intimately familiar … yet so painfully strange. She shook her head, resisting the cold mist closing in on her. *He was dead.* Yet the fingers cupping her shoulders were warm, strong and very much alive.

This was no ghost.

This was a human being. A man she knew too well.

“Don’t faint on me,” he warned in that deep, slightly hoarse voice.

“I won’t.” She’d never fainted in her life. Yet she had to admit that she felt weak, dizzy … dazed. “You’re supposed to be dead!” She sucked in a ragged breath, and then added inanely, “But you’re back.”

Clea!

A raw, burning hunger he hadn’t experienced for more than a thousand nights overpowered Brand. He pulled the woman he’d dreamed of every day—every night—toward him, drinking in the scent of her, a heady mix of honey and jasmine. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. Her warmth and fragrance flooded him.

Beneath the exploring pads of his fingers her shoulders were more slender than he remembered, the bones fragile, but her skin was as soft as ever. “You’ve lost weight.”

She stiffened under his touch. “Maybe.”

Brand buried his face in the side of her neck, iron bands of emotion constricting his chest.

“I’ve missed you,” he breathed, “so much.” Without her, a void had replaced the man he’d been. His arms tightened around her slender frame, words pouring from him, rough guttural sounds against her smooth skin.

“Brand, I can’t hear you.” Clea drew away a little. “It’s too loud in here—let’s find somewhere quieter.”

She slipped out of his hold and a sense of loss swamped Brand.

Clea held out a hand. “Come.”

He took the fingers she offered, the delicate link frighteningly fragile.

She pulled him along with her, threading between the press of staring people until they broke clear, escaping through open double doors into a carpeted corridor beyond. Clea halted outside a set of glass doors in the clear floor-to-ceiling glass wall. Letting go of his hand, she fished in her evening purse looped over her shoulder by a delicate chain and extracted a keycard, which she swiped in the security slot. The doors sprang open and Brand followed her into a reception area and the corridor beyond. "My office is through here."

Brand paused. "You used to be down in the basement."

Her chin tilted up in a gesture that was pure Clea, and his heart clenched.

"I've moved up in the world," she told him, her eyes hungrily searching his face. "I'm more important now."

Clea pressed a wall switch and light flooded the room, catching forgotten glints of precious copper in her long, dark curls, hinting at the fire that lay beneath.

Lust caught him by the throat.

He'd missed her so damn much. Missed talking to her. Missed touching her.

Most of all he'd missed loving her.

Clea.

In a flash, Brand closed the space between them and took her in his arms again. He couldn't get enough of touching her,

reassuring himself that she was here, in his hold. Not a wraith that would vanish with his dreams as dawn cracked over the endless, empty horizon. Bending his head, he slanted his lips across hers. She gave a surprised gasp, and a beat later melted into his embrace.

She tasted so sweet, and his hunger soared.

Tracing the indent of her spine with shaking fingers, Brand's hands moved up … up … until his fingers speared into the soft, glossy mass of constrained curls. Her head fell back and he deepened the kiss.

Her breasts pressed against his chest, and despite her weight loss they seemed fuller than he remembered. Clea had always bemoaned her lack of curves, but now she was positively lush.

Another change.

But this one he would savor …

He brought his hands forward to shape her ripe flesh and his fingers skimmed her belly. Fuller there, too. A curious anomaly given the slenderness of her shoulders, the sharp definition of her high cheekbones. His hands rested on the rise, his fingers exploring … and he felt her still.

Blood roared in Brand's ears. He couldn't absorb what his fingertips were telling him.

No!

His first reaction was denial. But his hands had developed a life—a reasoning power—all their own, even as his mind sputtered then stalled. His palms stroked over Clea's curves,

sending bursts of unwelcome information back to his struggling brain until he could no longer deny the truth of what lay beneath his hands.

Raising his head, he glared accusingly down into her startled green eyes. “You’re pregnant!”

Two

Clea knew at once how it must appear.

"It's not what you think," she said quickly, reaching up to cradle Brand's beloved face between her cupped hands. "Remember how we—"

"It certainly didn't take you long to find someone else."

The blaze of accusation rocked her. Brand had gone all tense, his jaw clenching and unclenching against her hollowed palms as he glowered at her from between slitted lids.

In the stillness of her office, Clea stared up at him in absolute shock, the awfulness of what he was saying—what he believed—finally sinking in.

There was no one else.

"I didn't—"

"Shut up," he snarled.

"Wait a minute …"

Clea's voiced trailed away as his hands manacled her wrists. He forced her fingers away from his skin and dropped them with palpable distaste, and all the while the beautiful ocean-hued eyes bored unblinkingly into hers. "It didn't take you long to accept that I was dead—or was it a case of out of sight, out of mind?"

The injustice of that caused her to reel away, almost tripping over the visitor's chair in front of her desk. Clea sank onto the padded black leather, her legs weak.

How *could* Brand believe that?

Especially when she'd never stopped believing in him!

Five days after her last telephone conversation with Brand, unable to contact him, Clea had sounded the alarm. It had taken another thirteen days—the longest stretch of Clea's life—for the official channels to relay back to her that Brand was no longer in Greece. He'd entered Iraq over two weeks earlier through the Kuwait border and had checked into a battle-scarred hotel once favored by foreign businessmen in Baghdad. No one knew where he'd gone after checking out a few days later.

There had been nothing left to do but wait. She'd made every excuse in the book for him. But time passed and still he hadn't gotten in touch.

To the men in black suits who materialized like spooks at her workplace Clea had insisted there had been nothing suspicious about her husband's visit to Iraq; after all, Brand made his living from dealing in antiquities, a love he'd developed while stationed with the Australian Special Air Services elite forces in Iraq. But it had been galling to admit that he hadn't told her about his intention to enter Iraq, and she decided not to tell her visitors about the argument she'd had with Brand the second to last time she'd spoken to him.

Once the shadowy men in black suits departed, on her father's advice and using his extensive contacts, Clea had hired a firm of investigators to locate her missing husband.

It had *never* been a case of out of sight, out of mind.

She hadn't stopped thinking about him, not for one minute. Even the two identical clocks on her office wall bore testimony to that—one set to Eastern Time, the other to Baghdad time. She'd never stopped thinking what he might be doing at any moment of her day. She'd wanted her husband back. She'd wanted answers about his disappearance. Real answers. Not speculation that he'd deserted her for another woman, which had been the first theory the investigators had come up with. The news of the grisly discovery of the burned-out SUV in the desert had terrified her. But she'd stubbornly clung to her belief that she would've known in her heart if Brand was dead. She'd demanded incontrovertible proof.

When they'd brought her his wedding ring nine months ago, Clea had been shattered, her dreams pulverized to dust, her hopes charred to ashes.

The idea of a baby had become a lifeline to sanity.

Getting pregnant had given her back her life. Not the life she'd hoped to share with Brand, but something better than the hopelessness that had overtaken her.

Yet now Brand stood over her accusing *her* of forgetting *him.* Instead of taking her in his arms, he was behaving like the world's biggest bastard. And he showed no signs of listening anytime soon. Clea shook her head to clear it and pressed her hands protectively over her stomach.

Brand laughed—a harsh, grating sound she'd never heard before. "Nothing further to say? How unfortunate for you I didn't

remain dead." The sea-green gaze had turned arctic.

Slumped in the chair, Clea's whole body ached. Her feet. Her head. Her heart. Was it possible Brand was hurting every bit as much as she was? "I can explain …"

Brand recoiled.

"I don't need your explanations!" He looked down on her from the full height of his six-foot-two-inch frame. His eyes froze her out. "It's easy enough to see what happened." One side of his mouth kicked up. "So who's the lucky man?"

"Will you stop interrupting me?" Her voice rose. Hauling in a shaky breath, she tempered her tone. "We always talked about having a family—"

"*Our* family," he said, pointedly inspecting her belly, covered by the silk of her designer dress and sheltered by her clasped hands. "Not some other man's bastard."

"Brand, wait!"

Clea rose to her feet and reached for him, then dropped her hands to her sides at the icy look he bestowed on her.

"Please listen—"

"What's the point of listening?" There was contempt in the frigid gaze that met hers, and something else …

Disappointment?

His lack of faith stung. She deserved a chance to explain, and she didn't doubt that he'd listen once he'd calmed down. Brand might have a dangerous reputation, but he loved her.

Or did he?

The first shadow of doubt stole over her. Clea stilled. She'd always imagined that something terrible must've happened to keep him away for so long. A horrific accident. Memory loss. Trauma so terrible he hadn't wanted her to see him in such a state.

Instead he stood before her looking breathtakingly hunky in the tuxedo and black shirt, his body even better conditioned than four years earlier—some feat because Brand had always honed his body to perfection. His face was burnished bronze by the sun, contrasting with the color of his sea-green eyes to devastating effect. An aura of reckless danger now clung to him, causing her heart to beat faster.

He might not be the Brand she'd kissed goodbye at the airport—but he wasn't damaged or scarred.

Yet she had to admit, dressed all in black, he looked like the devil incarnate.

Without taking her eyes from him, she toed off her shoes, adding another two inches to the height advantage he already possessed. "So why didn't you tell me you were going to Baghdad?" she challenged.

Brand stared back at her.

Did he cause Anita Freeman's heart to beat faster, too? "Answer me!"

Nothing. Not even a blink. He simply kept watching her with that basilisk stare she was starting to loathe.

"I've waited—"

A brow lifted ironically at that. "Waited?"

"Yes! *Waited.*" Clea pushed a tendril back off her face. "The last decent conversation we shared, you were in London—about to go to Greece. We argued about that. Remember?" She'd wanted to rearrange her schedule and had asked Brand to wait until she could join him. He'd refused—and ordered her to stay home. Clea hadn't taken kindly to being so summarily dismissed. It wasn't the first time that Brand had made decisions for her. She'd sulked. He'd called her once more from Athens—and their conversation had been stilted and brief. Just before he'd cut the connection, he'd told her he loved her.

Then there'd been no more contact.

When he didn't respond, she said, "You never told me you planned to go to Iraq."

His gaze didn't waver. "I didn't want to worry you."

Could the explanation really be that simple? Or had the business trip to Greece been a cover for an affair with another woman? Had the investigators' first theory—supported by her father and Harry—been correct after all?

The ticking of the two wall clocks was the only sound in the room.

Clea broke the silence. "That's all? That's the reason you never mentioned it?" If she hadn't been watching him so closely, Clea might have missed the sideways flicker of his eyes.

Brand wasn't telling her the truth.

Or at least not the whole truth.

The silence stretched until Clea broke it. "Don't you think

concern that you might be maimed or kidnapped or even killed would be a reasonable reaction to being told that you were going to Baghdad?"

He shrugged, his broad shoulders flexing under the tuxedo, causing her gaze to stray for a brief moment before returning to his face. "I served there with the SAS," he said. "I know the territory—and the risks."

Frustration and a feeling of letdown drove her to sarcasm. "Okay, so those risks might not worry super-humans like you … but they sure do worry me."

"Which is exactly why I didn't tell you—I didn't have time to soothe you."

Like some clingy child. But this was getting interesting. Brand was lying to her. Clea was certain of it. His face wore a set expression, and his eyes had flicked away again. "So what was so important that you simply went without consulting me? And why no contact since? Surely you can't have been in Baghdad all this time?"

He resumed staring at her, tight-lipped.

Clea tried again. "Were you on some covert mission?"

He laughed at that, making her feel ridiculously melodramatic. Yet she couldn't help thinking of the dark-suited men who had surfaced after his disappearance and asked her why he'd gone to Baghdad—and seemed to know all about his special forces background.

"At least tell me it's classified, if that's the reason."

"I wasn't part of a military operation."

She deserved more than being stonewalled. Drawing a deep breath, Clea eased back against her glass-topped desk and said, "Tell me where you've been, and I'll consider explaining about the baby … on condition that you don't interrupt me until I've told you everything."

"I don't need your conditions—or your explanations," he said. A look followed that slashed her from head to toe—with significant focus on her almost-flat stomach. "I can see exactly what you've been up to."

Brand might not need explanations, but she sure as hell did.

Yet Clea wasn't about to let him see how much she cared. Not while he treated her like a leper. Instead she gave him a reciprocal once-over, taking in every inch of tanned skin and the trim body beneath the tuxedo, and then she pursed her lips. "Let me guess where you've been. Sunning yourself on the Mediterranean? Socializing with the Aga Khan?"

Sleeping with another woman? Clea was too terrified of his response to voice the last suspicion. But was it possible that her father and the investigators had been correct? That Brand had been having an affair? Was it possible that Brand had been living with his lover for the four years he'd gone missing without a trace? He certainly possessed the skills to remain undetected for as long as he wanted—if he wanted.

Brand's face had tightened. "You've developed a sharp tongue."

"Now it's my fault?"

What was she doing?

Clea shut her eyes. Why was she fighting with Brand? This wasn't what she wanted. Remorse washed over her and she shook her head to clear it of the turmoil and confusion, searching for calm. How had it all gone so wrong so quickly? This was Brand. She *loved* him. She'd always believed in him. She'd waited for him to return every day. Every night. Yet now that he was here she was hurting so much she could spit … and doubts were setting in.

They had to stop this.

She fisted her hands at her sides and drew in a ragged breath. When she was certain she had herself under control—that she wouldn't yell, or blubber like an idiot—she opened her eyes and said evenly, "Sorry, I didn't mean to sound like a shrew."

His closed expression didn't thaw. Her body strung tight, Clea wished desperately he would confess he'd been injured, hospitalized, that he'd temporarily lost his memory. Anything.

The silence wore thin.

Still she waited, her hands balled tight and her pulse pounding loudly in her ears. Waiting for an explanation of where he'd been, why he'd stayed away so long. Clea even convinced herself that she'd accept it without question, without revealing a hint of resentment for what he'd *dared* to put her through. Brand was back, and that would be enough. Wouldn't it? She *loved* him. She'd only been half-alive without him. She couldn't

allow his return to break her, when she'd already survived his disappearance … and his death.

But as the minute hands on the wall clocks pressed forward in tandem, Clea gave up.

Brand wasn't going to explain.

Why not?

Because he no longer cared?

Only one way to find out.

"Brand …" Clea unfurled her fists and stepped away from the safety of her desk. Standing on tiptoes, she reached up and placed her hands on his shoulders, searching for a connection. Under the black silk of his dress shirt she could feel the warmth of his skin. She flexed her fingertips. His muscles bunched in reaction.

Need—hot and unexpected—hollowed out the bottom of her stomach. *God, she'd missed him.* His remembered scent—a mix of musk and something sharp and tangy—filled her senses.

Shutting her eyes, she leaned into him, her body quivering as it came into contact with the taut length of his. The warmth of his big body seeped gradually into hers, reviving her after the heart-numbing chill. For a long moment she half dared to hope that their bodies might communicate even while their brains seemed estranged.

The baby moved.

And even as her lips brushed his chin, Brand tore out of her embrace.

Putting two yards between them, he came to a stop near the

doorway, breathing heavily, his eyes glittering, the golden skin stretched taut across his cheekbones.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Clea tried never to swear, but the force with which he wrenched away offended her. This time *she* wasn't going to close the distance between them.

"You need to ask?"

Clea resented being treated as if she were contaminated. Her thoughts flew to the baby. She was pregnant, not contagious. Her condition was her salvation.

"Yes!" She *did* need to ask. And she was prepared to listen to —and accept—any explanation he cared to make for his absence. But he wasn't prepared to extend her the same courtesy. It looked as if they'd finally reached a deadlock. Because as her ire grew, Clea was finding herself less willing to offer him any explanation until he showed her the respect and trust she deserved.

"What the hell does it matter what's with me?" His voice was flat and cold. "Whatever we once had is gone."

"Gone?" At that her heart bumped to a stop. Forgetting her resolve to keep away, Clea took a step closer and stared at him in horror. "Brand! You don't—*can't*—mean that."

"Yes, gone." He raked her with his ocean-blue gaze. But for once, rather than setting her alight with sensual, arousing heat, it froze her to the core. "It's been a long time. Too long, I suspect, for us to have kept what we once had."

Pain ripped through her. Clea's world came crashing down around her as she struggled to sort the thoughts crowding her

brain into some kind of order. *Had* Brand been unfaithful? Had he come back only to claim a divorce?

Cold emptiness settled in her stomach. Clea was starting to realize that her steadfast belief in Brand had been awfully naive.

"Did you ever live with Anita Freeman?" She blurted it out with no premeditation.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"You dated her."

He stood, unmoving. "For a time."

"A short time?"

"Why these questions about something that was over before we met?"

Clea's brain was working overtime. Brand was prevaricating. He hadn't wanted her with him in Greece; without consulting her, he'd gone to a country he knew she would deem too dangerous. According to the investigators, both times Anita had been with him. In Athens they'd been photographed together and witnesses that the investigators had spoken with had seen them together in Baghdad. They'd appeared inseparable.

At the time Clea had refused to believe him capable of that kind of treachery. Brand loved *her*.

The last words he'd spoken to her had been that he loved her—but she hadn't reciprocated. She'd been annoyed with him for turning down the opportunity for a romantic idyll in Greece. Okay, so perhaps it was her own guilt that had prevented her from facing the truth earlier, Clea decided wearily.

Had his avowal of love been motivated by guilt? Had she blamed herself on some unconscious level for his disappearance because she'd been sulking the last time they'd talked?

Finally, she said, "I want to know if you ever lived with her." She already suspected what his answer would be: Brand had lied in the past.

His mouth slashed down in displeasure.

He wasn't even bothering to deny it. The last bit of hope she hadn't even realized she was clinging to deserted Clea.

"Who told you I once lived with Anita?" Brand broke into her despair.

"Does it matter? By your reaction I take it that it must be true. Why lead me to believe it was nothing more than a couple of casual dates? You lied to me by omission."

"So in retaliation you went and cheated on me and got yourself pregnant?"

Clea's mouth fell open. "You have the gall to walk in here after an absence of four years and accuse *me* of cheating on *you*."

"You're pregnant," Brand snarled. "And I sure as hell haven't been around to give you a good time."

The force of his harsh words caused tears to prick. Clea bit her cheeks until it hurt and the tears dried up. She half wished she'd never started down this track. But, after years of stubborn denial, admitting her stupidity and acknowledging that Brand had been with someone else was hard.

Whatever we once had is gone.

For now that was all she needed to know. Brand had made his choice.

Choking back tears, Clea slipped her feet back into her shoes then headed blindly for the door. As she drew level with Brand, she braced herself and said with the last shred of dignity she could muster, “Maybe you’ll be prepared to tell me more once you’ve had a chance to think. Close my office door when you leave … it will latch behind you. This is an important night for me, and I’m going to celebrate my success.”

Clea edged past him, taking care not to brush against him.

And Brand didn’t try to stop her.

Three

"Bourbon, double on ice. Your order?"

Brand gave a curt nod in acknowledgment of the barman's question and reached for the heavy-bottomed glass, while keeping a wary eye on the gaggle of journalists who'd shown a great deal of interest since he'd reentered the gallery.

The first slug hit the back of his throat. Brand grimaced. In four years he'd forgotten the punch that whiskey packed. Picking up the pitcher on the bar counter, Brand added two fingers of water to the bourbon.

Glass in hand, he retreated to a deserted spot behind a column topped with a woman's head carved from marble to sip his drink. Out of sight of the media contingent, Brand searched for his errant wife. He located her in a group that included a senator, the senator's wife and a well-known art auctioneer. As he studied Clea, he tried to fathom why he hadn't already departed.

With the media about to erupt into full bay at his mysterious reappearance any moment, it made no sense to still be hanging around. Not unless he wished to make front-page news … and that had never been Brand's style.

Clea's laugh rang out and Brand stilled, his eyebrows jerking together. She looked vivacious and happy—not as if she'd just had a rip-roaring argument with the husband she hadn't seen for four years. Clearly at ease in the company of power, she'd

developed a poise and sophistication she hadn't possessed four years ago.

His wife had grown up. He'd left a young bride and come back to find a woman. Brand's gaze dropped to her stomach.

Make that a *pregnant* woman.

Her father joined the group. Brand's frown deepened as the senator welcomed Donald Tomlinson with a wide smile. When they'd first met, Clea had told him her father would love him—after all, they had much in common. Donald Tomlinson imported rugs, ceramics, wooden furniture and selected antiquities from Afghanistan, Iraq and Turkey for a string of up-market stores he owned. Clea considered it a miracle they hadn't already encountered each other.

Brand had known from their first handshake that Donald Tomlinson didn't care for him. Meeting Clea's childhood friend had explained why—Harry Hall-Lewis was the man Donald had singled out for his daughter to marry. Ivy League-educated, a successful import-exporter with whom her father had a close business relationship, Harry was affable and easygoing. That Harry's family could trace their genealogy back to the *Mayflower* also helped.

An ex-special forces soldier from a rural New Zealand family of no repute could hardly compete, regardless of the reputation for integrity he'd built—or his rapidly growing fortune based on the ever-escalating value of the ancient artifacts he dealt in. Millions meant little to Donald—he had enough of his

own. When Clea had chosen a hasty marriage in Las Vegas's Chapel of Love to her soldier-turned-antiquities-dealer, Donald's displeasure had become outright enmity.

"Brand … it *is* you. How wonderful. Where have you been?"

Brand turned his head. Clea's mother stood beside him, her dark hair swept into a chignon, her black dress timelessly elegant. Diamonds glittered at her throat. He'd only encountered Caroline a handful of times during his marriage to Clea. The only child of a wealthy industrialist, Caroline had walked out on her marriage to Donald when Clea had been ten years old and remarried soon after her divorce had come through. A successful businessman, her new husband was a widower with a daughter—the same age as Clea—and a younger son.

"It's been a while." Brand gave her a careful hug. After so long without close human contact it felt strange. "You look beautiful."

"Flatterer." Caroline Fraser Tomlinson Gordon hugged him back, before stepping away with a small smile. "You look surprised to see me here. Of course, you should be—I wasn't invited. I had the sense not to bring my husband, but I wanted to see Cleopatra's exhibition so I slipped in—the doorman told me I had the same eyes as Cleopatra and never considered refusing me entrance. I've been admiring the exhibits. She's done a magnificent job. I'm so proud of her." Caroline's emerald eyes shimmered with emotion.

Omitting to mention that he was also a gate-crasher, Brand said gently, "You ought to have been invited."

Brand suspected that the estrangement between Clea and her mother hurt Clea more than she'd ever admit. She had always craved family and she needed her mother—even though she was too stubborn to admit it.

"My daughter will never forgive me for leaving them."

Brand shifted uncomfortably. There was no tactful response to that. Finally, he settled for saying, "She needs you, she just doesn't know it yet. Give her time."

At a scuffling sound behind him, he turned his head a fraction. His peripheral vision caught sight of a newsman changing the lens of his camera.

He turned away. Afghanistan, Iraq and other hot spots during his days of active duty had taught him the game. There was no glory in a back-of-the-head view: Cameramen wanted to see the torment in the eyes of their prey.

Caroline said quietly, "Cleopatra must know you're back?"

"Yes." Brand's answer was clipped as he focused on what the cameraman's next move might be.

His mother-in-law tapped his jacket sleeve. "Brand, you know I've never been in her confidence, but I do know she missed you terribly after you … disappeared. The weight that fell off her was evidence enough."

Her eyes were full of questions. Questions that he couldn't—wouldn't—answer. Not yet.

He gestured to where Clea was talking and smiling. "So much that she's pregnant?"

“Pregnant?” Caroline examined her daughter’s figure. “Cleopatra?”

Brand scanned the crowd. The cameraman had disappeared, but two others were hunched together talking furtively. “Uh-huh.”

“She can’t be!”

He turned his attention back to Clea’s mother and bent forward. “Trust me, she is.”

Caroline had paled. “I didn’t even know she was seeing anyone. But why would Cleopatra tell me? We don’t talk.”

Brand heard the movement beside him, and then a light flashed. He ducked his head and retreated farther behind the pillar. Someone swore softly.

Another movement. Brand tensed. He had no compunction about breaking a lens if a camera was aimed directly at him. Clea, however, might take a dim view of such behavior. It was time for him to leave.

But instead of a cameraman, Caroline peered around the pillar at him, her eyes the same intense green as her daughter’s.

Wondering if she had any idea how close she’d come to triggering the violence and rage that simmered within him, Brand flexed his fists and forced a smile. “I seem to be causing something of a stir—I have to go. The last thing I want is to cause an incident. This is Clea’s evening—it should be a wild success, not a brawl.”

She nodded, and then whispered conspiratorially, “There are

two journalists on the other side of the pillar—I'll stall them. Civility can be very hard to get away from. But, believe me, you and Clea always had something special. Whatever the problems, I'm sure you can get through them."

As Brand headed out, he wished he shared Caroline's confidence—and wondered if she'd noticed she'd finally called her daughter *Clea.*

Of course her bravado didn't last.

The sight of Brand leaving caused Clea's hard-won composure to flag. Faced by a flock of beaded and feathered designer ball gowns, ever-circulating trays of champagne and endless curious stares due to Brand's unexpected return, the last thing Clea wanted to do was party—even if it was to celebrate her success.

She wanted Brand back—the Brand she'd married, the husband she'd adored. To be held in his arms. To curl up against his body. Most of all, she wanted his assurance that he loved her, and that everything was going to be okay …

And she wanted to know where he'd gone … when she would see him again.

But duty called. So she plowed on, talking, laughing, saying all the right things. Refusing to reveal how shaken she'd been by the Brand she'd faced in her office: a dangerous, hard-eyed stranger. Or how her rock-solid confidence in what they'd once shared had been eroded.

An hour later, her father found her, his expression pugnaciously set in what she privately called his bulldog face,

causing her inner tension to escalate. Helping herself to a glass of soda from a waiter's passing tray, Clea glanced surreptitiously over the rim of sparkling bubbles to her father's barreling approach. What she wouldn't give to be able to go home and crawl into the bed she'd once shared with the old Brand and examine every moment of the painful reunion with his frigid doppelgänger.

"That bastard's got gall showing up here after deserting you."

"Hush, Dad, let's not make a scene."

Donald tempered his voice. "The evening is over—people are leaving."

Clea glanced around. Plenty of onlookers still filled the museum. "So we can leave, too?" She tried to keep her voice light as she linked her arm through her father's.

In the foyer downstairs, the doorman saw them coming and picked up the handset to call her driver, Smythe, to bring the car around, while the cloak attendant retrieved her wrap. Clea smiled her thanks.

"Did he say where he's been?" her father asked as they exited through the glass doors.

There was no need to ask who he was referring to. Clea averted her face, not wanting her father—anyone—to read her confusion. She shook her head. "He wouldn't talk. He's angry about the baby."

"You told him about the baby?"

Clea picked her words with care. "I didn't have to. He guessed

that I was pregnant."

"And he's far from pleased, I take it. What did you expect?"

Her father had tried to persuade her against having the baby, but Clea's mind had been made up.

"I told you it was a rash decision, that you shouldn't do it. But you wouldn't listen. Now it turns out your obduracy might just save the day."

"Dad …" Clea's voice trailed away. *Please, please don't let him say Brand shouldn't have come back.* She wouldn't be able to bear it. As much as the confrontation with Brand had shaken—shocked—her, the heady euphoria that he was actually alive still flickered under all the pain.

But her father was already saying, "You should not have married the man. It was a mistake. You should've married Harry—he's one of us."

One of us.

The thing her father had held against Brand all those years ago. *He's not like us.*

But from the moment Clea had encountered Brand at an auction, where he was inspecting the coins she'd been sent to bid on, she'd been fascinated. Still a student, her father had arranged a vacation job for her at the museum. She'd been briefed to bid on two Roman coins, and her enthusiasm had bubbled over. Until Brand told her that the coins were fakes—which was why there wasn't more interest in them.

Tall, handsome and with the kind of raw physical command

she'd never encountered, Brand had intrigued Clea. His reasoning had been persuasive, his expertise obvious. In a quandary, Clea had first tried to call the assistant curator, then Alan Daley, and finally her father without any success.

So she'd made the decision not to bid.

Afterward, Brand had offered to buy her lunch but, knowing she had to get back to work and explain her decision, she'd declined. When he'd invited her to dinner instead, Clea had been overjoyed. By the end of the evening she'd been lost. She'd fallen in love with all the desperation of her nineteen-year-old heart.

Donald gave a deep sigh that broke into her reverie. "That man was trouble from the start."

"How can you say that?" The Lincoln was purring at the curb, but Clea made no move toward it. "Brand saved the museum from buying overpriced fakes the first day I met him."

"And had you in his bed within a week." Donald headed for the car.

It wouldn't be politic to admit that it had taken Brand far less time than that. Instead, Clea followed her father to the car and clambered into the backseat. Once inside, she said instead, "He married me a month later."

"A hasty affair that wasn't what you deserved."

"Dad, it was what I wanted." She wasn't in the right frame of mind to hear her father's favorite, much expounded opinion that Brand had only married her because she'd inherited a sizable sum of money from her maternal grandmother. "I can't cope with

another lecture." Not tonight.

Tears pricked her eyes as Clea stared out the window, watching the city lights pass in a blur of color.

"Surely you're not going to cry over him?" Donald snapped. "The man deserted you, had an affair and got himself tangled up in God only knows what kind of mess in Iraq. You need to get rid of him."

His insensitivity caused her shoulders to stiffen. "I don't know that for sure."

"You saw photographs of a young beautiful woman who couldn't keep her hands off him." Her father gave a snort of disgust. "What more do you need? Fool yourself all you want, but at some stage you're going to have to face the truth."

A pang that could only be jealousy pierced her, adding to the turmoil of her emotions. "Dad, the same investigators also said that Brand had been killed in a crash and that locals had confirmed his body was thrown into a grave. They were clearly wrong about that, too." But now Brand himself had caused her doubts …

"Girl—" her father placed a hand awkwardly on hers "—I'm so sorry you have to face this, have to relive all the misery."

She brushed the tears from the corners of her eyes and sniffed. "These are happy tears—Brand's alive."

She tried to convince herself that was the truth. After the scene with Brand earlier, she suspected that a rocky road lay ahead.

Donald's hand tightened over hers and she could feel him studying her. "What was your mother doing at the museum?"

Clea's head whipped around. "She was there? I didn't see her."

"You didn't invite her?"

"No! I'd never do that without clearing it with you first."

The grim line of her father's mouth relaxed a little. "Good. I told her to leave."

Clea fought to ignore the funny feeling in her stomach caused by the news of her mother's dismissal. Then she steeled herself. She was no longer the ten-year-old girl her mother had abandoned for someone else's family.

She'd had enough. She'd had a long day, her feet ached from shoes that were too tight and her head spun from the emotional maelstrom she'd been through—the tussle about marriage with Harry, the shock of Brand's reappearance and her own inexplicable anger at him. She couldn't face discussing her mother, too.

Tomorrow it would be different. Better. Brand would've had a chance to get over his own shock. They'd talk. She'd explain why the baby was so important to her.

And he'd understand. Wouldn't he? She stared blindly out into the brightly lit night. For the first time the thought flitted through her mind that he might not.

Despite the warm evening Clea shivered, feeling more alone than since the night her mother had left.

Four

Brand strode into the Museum of Ancient Antiquities the following morning seething with frustration. He took the stairs two at a time. The glass doors guarding the management wing opened to him. No one manned the reception desk. So Brand continued along the corridor until through the glass wall of Clea's office, he could see her talking on the phone, doodling on a pad, her berry-red lips mouthing words he couldn't hear.

Suspicion, painful and ugly, shafted him. Was she talking to her lover? The father of her unborn child?

He studied her oblivious profile. Despite the sexy red lip color, he noted the absence of preening gestures and flirtatious mannerisms. Brand relaxed a little.

Not the lover then.

He pushed open the door. It made no sound, yet instantly her eyes tracked to him and tension filled the airy space.

"I have to go," she murmured into the handset. "Talk to you later, hon."

A girlfriend. No woman called her lover *hon.* His distrust appeased, Brand took his time surveying his wife's new office. Last night he'd been too preoccupied by Clea to take in the wall of bookshelves. At the foot of the shelves, open books were strewn over the woven carpet, revealing that Clea had been after information in a hurry. It was comforting to know that the

inquiring, impulsive side of her still existed.

He crossed the room, passing a sleek, modern Le Corbusier chair on his way to the picture window. He looked down at the courtyard full of statues below. Visitors spilled out from the coffee shop onto the square, some perching on stone benches set around the edges of the paved concourse among bronze gods and goddesses.

"Very nice," he complimented her.

"Thank you. I've been here for three years, and I still appreciate it."

Three years. Not such a new promotion then. It highlighted how much of her life he'd missed. It had been around three years ago that his captors had gotten antsy. Vehicles had arrived at the camp in the dead of night, followed by huddled meetings. He'd heard the arguments, Akam's voice ringing out above the rest. A few nights later he'd been awakened and bundled into a car, a guard on either side, with Akam, as ringleader of the group, seated beside the driver, an AK-47 slung across his lap. The journey had been tense, but there'd been no checkpoints. No roadblocks. No glimpse of Coalition troops. The location of the new camp had been farther into the desert, the closest settlement an hour's drive away. In the days that followed, Akam's temper had been increasingly volatile, and Brand had known that any hope of escape, or rescue, had just grown slimmer. They'd moved camp regularly after that … but there had been one advantage—he'd only been locked up at night while the others slept. During

the day he was allowed the freedom of the desert camps. It had saved his sanity.

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