

MILLS & BOON



Vintage *Cherish*

The Tycoon's Takeover

LIZ FIELDING

Liz Fielding

The Tycoon's Takeover

Аннотация

Taking on the boss...India Claibourne is bright, beautiful and the boss of an exclusive London department store. Jordan Farraday is a devastatingly handsome tycoon—and his number one aim is to take over that store! Jordan may make her heart pound with excitement, but no way is India going to let that happen. The battle of wills commences—the final showdown that will dig up past secrets and shake up everything that is dear to India and Jordan. There was only supposed to be one winner—but perhaps this time there will be two....

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“Is that the way the Claibournes close a deal?” he asked.

“I’m sorry? Did you want something in writing?”

“Nothing so formal.” Even while she was sending frantic signals to her brain, he raised his hand, sliding his fingers through her hair, cradling her head, holding her captive. He gave her his personal interpretation of sealing an agreement with a kiss.

This was a kiss intended to make a lasting impression. He was completely in control, while she was hot, flushed and vibrantly aware that every cell in her body was being given a wake-up call.

“Now,” he said, “we have a deal.”

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the climax of my new trilogy, **BOARDROOM BRIDEGROOMS**.

I do hope you’ve enjoyed reading about the three talented Claibourne sisters—Romana, Flora and India. I’ve loved writing their stories, bringing to life the drama and emotion as they’ve clashed with the Farradays, three dynamic businessmen determined to regain control of Claibourne & Farraday, “the most stylish department store in London.”

This time it’s India’s turn to meet her match in a thrilling showdown. Elegant, clever and wedded to her career, India is about to find herself locked in a clash of wills with the irresistible

Jordan Farraday. A power struggle in the boardroom and...out of it....

With love,

Liz Fielding

Liz Fielding is the winner of the 2001 RITA[®] Award for Best Traditional Romance. To find out more about the author, visit her Web site at www.lizfielding.com

The Tycoon's Takeover

Liz Fielding



www.millsandboon.co.uk

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SECRET WEDDING IN SAMARINDA

Samarinda, fast becoming the 'must go' destination for those seeking a get-away-from-it-all break, was host to a very private wedding ceremony for Flora Claibourne and Bram Farraday Gifford last week. These charming pictures show the happy couple taking their vows in the stunning setting of the Royal Botanical Gardens, surrounded by wild vanilla orchids, a feature of this delightful venue.

This is the second Claibourne/Farraday wedding in as many months. Forebears of the two families founded London's favourite department store in the nineteenth century, but relations between them, at times, been reduced to near feud status over control of the store.

The new generation, however, have refreshingly decided that it's better to make love than war. Flora's younger sister, Romana, and Bram's cousin, Niall Farraday Macaulay, were married recently in Las Vegas.

We look forward to a new era of co-operation at Claibourne & Farraday, and wish both couples every happiness.

CITY DIARY, LONDON EVENING POST

Another Claibourne/Farraday merger.

There's a new spirit of co-operation abroad at London's

oldest department store, Claibourne & Farraday. The present generation of the two founding families—who famously never talk to one another—are doing more than talk as they finally meet face to face to thrash out the future of the company in the new century. The marriages between the two younger Claibourne sisters and Farraday heirs have been quiet affairs, however, suggesting that nothing is yet settled at the top.

India Claibourne is still Managing Director, and my sources suggest that Jordan Farraday is determined to supplant her in the immediate future. We'll be following events at the store with close interest.

CHAPTER ONE

‘HAVE you seen this, JD?’

Jordan Farraday turned from the e-mail that had just arrived in his inbox. His secretary was offering him a magazine, folded back at the ‘Who Got Hitched’ page. ‘You read Celebrity magazine, Christine? I had no idea you were that interested in the loves and lives of the rich and famous.’

‘I live in hopes of seeing you in there one of these days,’ she replied, as he took the magazine from her. ‘Having a little fun.’ Then, ‘I wasn’t sure if you knew.’ She paused. ‘You didn’t say anything.’

‘I knew.’ He glanced at the photograph of his cousin, caught at the moment he placed a wedding ring on Flora Claibourne’s finger, and felt an unexpected pang of something he couldn’t quite identify. Envy? It was ridiculous—and yet Bram looked different...complete. As if he’d found something he’d been looking for all his life. Nonsense, of course. It was just the reflected glow of satisfaction from a woman who’d got exactly what she wanted. ‘There’s a paragraph in the late edition of the Evening Post,’ he said. ‘Presumably they picked it up from this.’

‘Bram didn’t call you? Before? After?’

He looked up, a wry smile twisting his mouth. ‘Would you?’

She shook her head. ‘Those Claibourne girls are quite something. I wonder what they use?’

‘Use?’

‘Spells, charms, love potions...’ she offered. ‘I’d have said that your cousins were two of the most unlikely marriage prospects in London.’ Then, with a slight gesture that deferred to him, ‘After you.’

‘Thank you,’ he said drily.

‘Yet first Niall and now Bram have succumbed with a speed that suggests something added to the water.’

‘Grief fades in time. The playboy life loses its charm. They were ready to fall in love,’ he said dismissively. ‘My mistake was to put them in close contact with two of the most interesting women in London.’

‘And you’re about to spend a month in the company of interesting woman number three. Their big sister. The boss lady who’s presumably taught them everything they know. Are you crazy?’

‘No, Christine, single-minded.’ He glanced again at the photograph. ‘Unlike my cousins, who seem to have had other things on their minds, regaining control of a department store is my priority. At the end of the month I shall have done just that.’

‘You don’t need to shadow India Claibourne for five minutes, let alone a month, to achieve that.’

‘No,’ he agreed, ‘I don’t. But it’s polite to give the lady a chance to make her case.’

‘Rubbish.’ Her eyes narrowed. ‘You’re up to something.’ And when he didn’t bother to deny it, she said, ‘It’ll all end in tears.’

‘That,’ he said, ‘is the plan.’

‘If you’re suggesting they’ll be her tears, I think you should go back to the drawing board,’ she said, retrieving the magazine and holding up the picture as a warning. ‘Consider what happened to your cousins when they got involved with the Claibourne girls.’

‘That was just a sideshow, Christine. This is the main event.’

‘You’re playing with fire.’

‘It wouldn’t be the first time,’ he pointed out.

‘When it comes to taking a chance with money, I’d put my last silk shirt on you. This is different.’

‘Are you suggesting that I don’t know what I’m doing?’

‘Heaven forbid,’ she declared. ‘I’m simply suggesting that if you value your freedom you should invent a crisis that requires your presence on the other side of the world for the next month. Leave the Claibourne & Farraday business to the lawyers.’

‘Bolt for cover? And have the City Diary editor amuse his readers with the suggestion that I’m running scared of India Claibourne? They would enjoy that.’

‘There are worse things than being laughed at. Marriage isn’t just a word, JD. It’s a sentence. I know. I served nearly ten years before I managed to tunnel out.’

‘Christine, we’ve worked together for a long time. You know me probably as well as anyone on this earth. Are you really suggesting that I won’t be able to spend a few hours in the company of India Claibourne without falling so hopelessly in love with her that I’ll be on my knees within the month?’

‘Accounts are already organising a sweepstake on how long you’ll last,’ she replied.

It did not escape his notice that she hadn’t answered his question. But then she didn’t know the full history. For his cousins control of Claibourne & Farraday was just good business. For him it was personal. Deeply personal.

This wasn’t just about a department store. That was the public dispute, one that had been thoroughly rehearsed thirty years earlier, and the outcome was a foregone conclusion—as India Claibourne must know. Her father must have warned her that she couldn’t win, but she was stubbornly refusing to accept the inevitable, refusing to play by the rules.

He wasn’t taken in for a minute by her invitation for him and his cousins to spend time at the store, to ‘shadow’ her and her sisters, see how the store was run in this high-tech media age. She was just playing for time while she and her lawyers tried to find some loophole in the partnership agreement that would allow her to remain in control.

Not that he was complaining. If he’d planned it himself, it couldn’t have worked out better.

That he would take over from Peter Claibourne now that he’d retired was inevitable. India Claibourne’s decision to put up a fight, giving Jordan the opportunity to reverse history, humiliate her as her father had humiliated his mother, was icing spread thickly on the cake.

Christine was still waiting for some response, he realised. ‘A

sweepstake?’ he repeated. ‘On what, exactly?’

‘On how many days it will be before you, um, get down on your knees.’

‘My knees? And why would I do that?’

‘To propose to the lady. Beg her to marry you.’

‘Oh, please!’

‘I realise that’s an alien concept for a man of your wealth, name and all-round fanciability. But it cannot have escaped your notice that she’s got a matching set.’

No, it hadn’t escaped his notice. India Claibourne was as lovely as she was rich. But she had one fatal weakness: she’d do anything to keep control of Claibourne & Farraday. ‘And a proposal would be enough, would it? For some lucky soul to win this sweepstake?’

‘A diamond on the lady’s finger is one option,’ she admitted. ‘But the hot ticket is for a wedding.’

‘Within a month? How likely is that?’

She held up one finger. ‘Niall Farraday Macaulay married Romana Claibourne in Las Vegas on Day 29.’ A second finger. ‘Bram Farraday Gifford married Flora Claibourne in Saraminda on Day 30. I’m sure that anything they can do, you can do better.’ Then, with a grin, ‘Three’s a charm, JD.’

‘Is that so?’ He shrugged. ‘Well, here’s the word from the horse’s mouth. If you’ve got money to waste on such nonsense, make sure you draw the number with “No Wedding” written next to it. Believe me, whatever gossip you may read in your

magazine, it'll take more than a seductive smile to get me in front of a registrar.'

'The lady has more. A whole department store more. Why don't you save time—and lawyers' fees—and propose a dynastic marriage? That way you both win. You have to admit that she'd make any man a stunning consort.'

'I'm admitting nothing. And I thought you were opposed to marriage on principle?'

'Arranged marriages are different. The participants have more realistic expectations. And this would be more like an advantageous merger of two companies—something you know all about.' Taken with the idea, she went on, 'I can't understand why it hasn't happened before—in the days when marriages were arranged for gain, rather than left to chance. The families must have been close at one time.'

'There has been quite enough dynastic marriage-making in the last few weeks without me joining in. And I don't need a consort, no matter how stunning she is. All I need is for the Claibournes to hand over what is rightfully mine with the minimum of fuss.'

'If it was minimum fuss you wanted you'd have sent in the lawyers two months ago. You want something else, and I have no doubt you'll get it. I just hope it makes you happy.' Then, 'But don't eat or drink anything while you're at the store. Oh, and don't, whatever else you do, get a haircut in the salon.' And she grinned. 'Just in case India Claibourne uses hair clippings to cast her spells.'

‘I’m sure you’ve got something important to be getting on with while I’m making my presence felt at London’s favourite department store tomorrow, Christine. Swapping knitting patterns, perhaps? Or phoning your daughter to discuss her latest pregnancy?’ he suggested, signalling that as far as he was concerned that particular subject was now closed.

‘Don’t do it, JD,’ she said, not in the least bit intimidated. But then he hadn’t expected her to be.

‘Or maybe you should give careful thought to the possibility of taking early retirement and becoming a full-time grandmother,’ he continued, his expression still in neutral. ‘I could get one of those sexy girls with long legs and a degree in Business Studies to replace you.’

‘You wouldn’t do that.’

‘Oh? And why not?’

‘Precisely because I’m not sexy. I’m safely middle-aged, plump and motherly,’ she said, heading back to her own office. ‘You know I’m not going to fall in love with you and make life difficult in the office. I’m also the best secretary in the world. Probably.’ When she reached the door, however, she paused and looked back at him. ‘Twenty-one days,’ she said. ‘If she gets you on Day 21, I win the sweep.’

‘Try and get your money back,’ he suggested. ‘Sell your ticket to someone really gullible.’

‘Goodnight, JD. Don’t work too late. All work and no play...’ She left the proverb hanging, closing the door gently behind her

as she left for the night, and he finally smiled. She might be talking rubbish about India Claibourne, but she was right about one thing. She was the best secretary he'd ever known and he wouldn't be trading her in for a younger model any time soon. Then, as he turned back to his PC and the e-mail from India Claibourne, his smile faded. It wasn't long. Just one line. It said:

Two down, one to go. Are you ready to quit, Mr Farraday?

Clearly she'd been afraid that with his advance guard neutralised by her lovely sisters he might change his mind about shadowing her during June. This was a 'dare-you' challenge to his masculine pride.

Christine was wrong, he decided as he switched off the screen. He wasn't the one playing with fire. It was India Claibourne who was about to get her fingers...and anything else she cared to risk...burned.

India Claibourne paused in front of the department store that had borne her family name for nearly two centuries and looked up.

Claibourne & Farraday.

A byword for class and style. The name said it all.

In fact it said rather too much.

The Farraday grated. A lot. Their silent partners hadn't done much—other than accumulate capital and take their share of the profits—in living memory. Her living memory, anyway.

She didn't have a problem with that. They were equal partners and were entitled to their share of the profits—welcome to them

—as long as they kept out of her way. But they weren't keeping out of her way. Since her father's sudden retirement, following his heart attack, they had become disturbingly vocal.

'Good morning, Miss India.' The commissionaire tipped his top hat to her.

'Good morning, Mr Edwards.' She paused, stepping to one side, out of the way of early arrivals at the store. 'The customers seem eager this morning.'

'Summer is always busy, miss. London is full of visitors and they all come to Claibourne's.'

She smiled at the way he automatically shortened the name. Claibourne's.

It had a ring to it. It was easy to say. And once she'd seen off Jordan Farraday that was what the store would become. Claibourne's.

No more Farradays. Ever.

'My wife showed me the wedding picture of Miss Flora in Celebrity magazine last night,' he continued, as she lingered at the entrance, her fertile imagination supplying a pleasing picture of the frontage with just one name above the door. 'She looked quite radiant. It's wonderful for the store...both Miss Romana and Miss Flora marrying Farradays.'

Which brought her swiftly back to reality. Jordan Farraday's advance guard, his cousins and partners in his bid to take over control of the store, were now her brothers-in-law.

Her delaying tactics—having the Farradays shadow them to

see what running a department store actually entailed—had backfired. Badly.

But she smiled nonetheless. ‘It’s very exciting for them. For all of us. I wish I could have been with them.’ Her sisters, however, having fallen under the Farraday spell, had chosen to get married first and only tell their families afterwards. Or, in Flora’s case, leave them to find out like everyone else when they read it in the newspaper.

She couldn’t fault their reasoning. In their shoes, she’d have done the same.

Meanwhile they were all wisely keeping their heads down in their honeymoon hideaways, leaving the field clear for the main battle.

It was between her and Jordan Farraday now. But then, it always was going to be between the two of them. She was in control of the store, sitting in the seat he believed to be rightfully his.

Her sisters, his cousins, were interested parties. But she and Jordan were the ones with the most to gain—or lose.

She had one month left—this month—to show him that if the Farradays thought they could run Claibourne & Farraday in their spare time they were wrong. This was no longer an emporium for gentlemen, a place where the customers were all known personally.

Her father had continued to think of it that way long after reality had suggested otherwise. But she had hauled it into the

modern era and, now he'd retired, the sky was the limit. But first she had to see off the Farradays. More specifically, she had to see off Jordan David Farraday.

It shouldn't be difficult. The man was a venture capitalist, not a retailer. He really couldn't want to take on something so time-consuming. It was control he wanted. The last word. At least she hoped that was all he wanted. A prime site, the name alone, would be a big prize for one of the retail chains. But he wouldn't...couldn't...

A shiver, as if someone had walked over her grave, goosed her flesh.

Jordan Farraday showed his pass at the rear entrance of the building, parked his sports car in the space that had been allocated to him, then asked the security guard at the staff entrance to ring through to India Claibourne's office to let her know he'd arrived.

She wasn't there.

'Will you pass on my best wishes when you speak to her?' India, dragging her mind back from a nightmare vision of the plans Jordan Farraday might have for the store, glanced at the commissionaire. 'Miss Flora,' he prompted as he opened the door for her. 'I hope she'll be very happy.'

'Thank you, Mr Edwards. I'll tell her.'

Most days she used the staff entrance at the rear of the store, but occasionally, having parked her car, she took the time to walk around to the main entrance, look at the window displays and

enter the store as if she were a customer. Remind herself of that first time when, four years old, she'd been brought to the store by her grandmother to visit Santa's grotto and had believed she'd walked into the Aladdin's cave in her storybook.

As she walked into the marble and mahogany entrance hall, spangled with coloured light from the Tiffany stained glass window that rose up three floors through the stairwell, the rush of excitement, the sense of wonder was as powerful as ever.

She would not give this up for anything. Ever.

But it occurred to her that sitting in her office waiting for Jordan Farraday to turn up and take it away from her was entirely the wrong strategy. Romana had dragged Niall off to a charity bungee jump. Bram had been given no choice but to join Flora on a research trip to a tropical island.

Neither of them had had time to draw breath, settle into the standard 'I'm a man and I know best' routine.

They hadn't known what had hit them until it was too late. She had to ensure that for the next month she was the one in front and Farraday was always following her. If he ever turned the tables and took the lead it would all be over.

Sitting at her desk going over last month's sales figures when—if—he responded to the challenge in her incendiary e-mail wouldn't fit the bill. He'd be expecting that and he wouldn't be impressed by her ability to read a balance sheet.

She had to be doing something that was totally outside his normal experience. Something that would give her an advantage.

With a whole department store to play with, it shouldn't be that difficult.

She glanced at the noticeboard listing the special events taking place in the store that day. An all-day specialist doll collectors' fair in the gallery. A cookery demonstration, with a celebrity chef doing his stuff, in the food hall at lunchtime. A book-signing by a well known American author in the country to promote her newest blockbuster novel. Bags of opportunities for photographs, she thought as she took the lift to the top-floor office suite.

She needed to keep her photograph in the papers. Remind everyone that she was running the show. She'd get Molly in the PR department on to that, as her sister was away. The lift door opened to dust sheets and the sound of hammering, and she smiled a little grimly as she crossed to her office.

Jordan Farraday might be sharing it with her for the next month, but he wouldn't enjoy the experience much.

'Indie...' Her PA appeared in the doorway. 'We've got a small problem in the nursery department.'

'How small?'

'Baby-sized. One of our customers left it a little late to do her shopping and she's gone into labour. The paramedics have arrived, and they'll be moving her to hospital as soon as they can, but I thought you'd want to know.'

'I'd better go down there—make sure everything possible is being done.'

'Well, actually...' India paused on her way out. 'There's no

need.'

'No need?'

'It's being taken care of. Since you weren't here, JD took charge—'

'JD?' India frowned.

'Jordan Farraday. His staff call him JD, he said.'

'Jordan Farraday? He's here already? In the store?' Her mouth was working on automatic, she realised. A bit like a goldfish, and making about as much sense. Of course he was here.

She'd been mentally redesigning the frontage, chatting with the commissionaire, taking her morning stroll through the main selling floors while Jordan David Farraday had gone straight to the top floor and was already taking over her job.

'He arrived on the dot of ten o'clock. You said you were expecting him some time today, so when Security buzzed through I told them to send him up.'

'I was expecting him to ring and let me know when he was coming. I wasn't expecting him to just turn up...unannounced!'

'I was supposed to say, Go away, we aren't ready for you?' India raised a hand in a gesture of apology, shook her head. 'I gave him coffee and put him in your office. There is nowhere else,' she complained.

No, there was nowhere else. It had seemed like a great idea when Romana suggested ripping out underused offices and moving Customer Services to the top floor in order to create more selling space. And why hang about? Get in the builders,

create a noisy, dusty atmosphere and maybe, without an office—or even a desk—to call his own, JD Farraday would be less inclined to linger in the store. It was time she needed. Not her arch-nemesis following her every move.

‘I’m sorry, Sally. You did the right thing, of course, but just because he was sitting in my office did you have to treat the man as if he were already running the place? Did you have to tell him about the population explosion in the nursery department?’

‘I didn’t. Someone came rushing in with the news and he just sort of...well...took charge,’ she said, a little breathlessly.

‘Great.’ She took a deep breath. ‘But I really do think I’d better go and see what’s happening downstairs.’ She was in no rush. In fact she had a sudden craving to be somewhere else. Lying on a deserted beach, perhaps. ‘Do you ever just wish the alarm clock hadn’t gone off? That you’d slept through the day?’

‘Not this one, I promise you. JD Farraday is not a man I’d ever want to miss.’

‘That’s all I need. A secretary with a crush on a man who wants to take over my store.’

‘His name is above the door too. And I don’t have a crush. My personal life is fully spoken for.’ Then she grinned. ‘But I’m not dead.’

‘That’ll be a comfort to you when he’s sitting in my chair and you’re looking for a new job.’

‘Oh, come on. That’s never going to happen.’

‘Two months ago I might have agreed with you.’ Suddenly she

wasn't so sure. Her fallback position was the equal opportunities argument. He had a centuries-old agreement stating that control should pass to the 'oldest male'. She was basing her equality on being 'oldest female'. Would a lot of old men in wigs be swayed by the logic of that argument? Or would they—as she suspected—go for just plain 'oldest'. Farraday, after all, was a man with a track record for making money. All she had to offer was a lifetime's knowledge of the business and a passion to turn Claibourne's into a household name—not just in London, or Britain, but in the world.

'Hey, if all else fails you can always do a Claibourne on him.'

Dragged back from the yawning chasm of failure, she frowned. 'A Claibourne?'

'Flutter those long dark lashes at him. Once he's in love, he'll forget all about taking away your toy.'

'Oh, great. I'm trying to convince everyone that I can run this store on merit and you want me to seduce the man. Whatever happened to thirty years of women's liberation?' As she turned angrily away she snagged her tights on a battered cardboard box. Great. The day that she'd begun with an uneasy feeling of foreboding was rapidly going downhill. 'Sally, what the devil is this?'

'Oh—' She sucked in her teeth as she saw the damage to India's tights, took a new pair from a supply she kept in her bottom drawer and handed them over. 'Sorry. The builders left it there. They're files from your father's office. Pretty old stuff,

but I thought you might want to look at them before I sent them down to the basement.'

'But I cleaned out all the filing cabinets in Dad's office.'

'These were right at the back of that big walk-in cupboard. It looked like a box of old catalogues, but, knowing how disorganised your father was, I thought I'd better check before it went down the chute into the skip. The files were at the bottom.'

India flicked through the top file. Thirty years old, it dated from the time her father had taken over the store from JD Farraday's grandfather, and her scalp prickled with a rush of excitement. 'Sally, that designer skirt you've been drooling over...it's yours. Charge it to my account.' Cutting off her thanks, she went on, 'Just shift these files first,' she said, peeling off the torn tights and replacing them. 'I'd hate JD Farraday to fall over them and sue us.'

'Why would he do that? Wouldn't that be like suing himself?' Then, realising that it was not a conversation with a future, she said, 'I'll put them in your office.'

'No!' India took a deep breath. 'No, don't do that. Arrange for them to be put in my car.' The last thing she needed was Jordan Farraday looking over her shoulder as she went through them.

Correction. The last thing she needed was Jordan Farraday. Full stop.

CHAPTER TWO

INDIA took another deep breath before she pushed open the door to the nursery department. She seemed to be doing that a lot this morning, but it was fortunate that her lungs were loaded with air, because she didn't breathe again for what seemed like an age.

JD Farraday was the kind of man who would always make the need to breathe redundant.

He didn't court publicity, but she'd gathered what information she could about the man. The grainy photographs from the financial pages of heavyweight newspapers had suggested an averagely good-looking, dark-haired man in his mid to late thirties. They didn't do him justice. There was nothing average about Jordan Farraday.

His features were arranged in the conventional manner, it was true, but the combination achieved something far from ordinary. There was something about him that transcended mere good looks.

As if that were not enough he was taller, his hair darker—the touch of silver at his temple only emphasising just how dark—than just tall, or just dark. But that was the superficial, obvious stuff.

What set her midriff trembling like a joke jelly, prickled her scalp and set up the tiny hairs on her skin, was the way he dominated the room, the way every person in it was looking to

him for guidance, leadership.

Jordan Farraday was the archetypal dominant male. Alpha man. Leader of the pack. The kind of man who would always make other men appear ordinary, who would attract women like iron filings to a magnet. In short, he was the most exciting man she'd set eyes on in months...years...possibly ever...

And she'd taken him on in a winner-takes-all battle for control of Claibourne & Farraday.

Not that he appeared in the least bit threatening at the moment. Far from it. As she stood there he crouched down to gently sandwich the hand of the very young soon-to-be-mother between both of his, reassuring her as she was fastened into a chair trolley by a paramedic, his smile a promise that he would let nothing bad happen to her.

'You're going to be fine, Serena. I've phoned your boyfriend and he's going straight to the hospital.' His voice was low, calming, like being stroked by velvet. 'He'll be waiting for you when you arrive.' He glanced at the paramedics. 'Ready?' One of them nodded. 'You'll be there in just a few minutes.' As he turned slightly the light behind him lit up a classic profile—the kind that Greek sculptors had reserved for gods. 'Would you like me to come along with you in the ambulance?'

By way of reply, the mother-to-be gripped his hand more tightly. 'My bags...' she began, less concerned with the swoon quotient of the man at her side, apparently, than the fate of her shopping. But then she was in labour—and India caught her

breath again as the woman was seized by a contraction.

In her place, she probably wouldn't give a damn about how good-looking a man was either. She swallowed. In her place, she'd want someone exactly like Jordan Farraday holding her hand...

He glanced around. A few feet away a hovering assistant was holding a couple of bags, and as he straightened to take them he saw her standing in the doorway. For a moment he remained perfectly still as their gazes locked, held, and for a long moment she was his prisoner.

'Miss Claibourne...' She jumped at the sound of her name and the moment passed as the department manager came between them. 'We've had quite a morning.'

'So I see,' she said, making an effort to give the woman her full attention, despite the charged feeling at the back of her neck that suggested JD Farraday's gaze was still fastened firmly upon her. 'It appears one of our customers left her shopping trip rather late.'

'Well, no harm done. Mr Farraday has been wonderful. He calmed that silly girl when no one else could.' India thought that was probably a first. It seemed unlikely that was his usual effect on girls—or women—of any description. 'Then he phoned her boyfriend, and when people wouldn't move away he sent them all over to the coffee shop for complimentary coffee and cakes.'

About to ask why it had been left to him, why the manager hadn't done all that herself, she bit back her irritation at the woman's ineffectiveness, and her lack of sympathy, and

concerned herself with the fact that Jordan Farraday had witnessed it and taken charge.

So much for throwing him off balance.

It was not a great start.

‘I hope it was all right to do that?’ the woman added uncertainly, when India didn’t immediately respond.

‘Absolutely right,’ she said, discovering for herself what the expression ‘through gritted teeth’ actually meant. ‘Should anything like this happen again, don’t hesitate to do that,’ she said, and made a mental note to have the training department bring it up at the weekly workshops they ran for the managerial staff. With a reminder not to refer to the customers as ‘silly’ under any circumstances.

‘Miss Claibourne.’ The quiet authority of his voice matched his appearance. Just the way he said her name necessitated another deep breath before she turned to confront JD Farraday.

‘Mr Farraday.’ She extended her hand in a manner she hoped was sufficiently businesslike to counteract the breathlessness of her voice. Perhaps it didn’t matter. If her reaction—and she was famously difficult to impress—was anything to go by, he must believe that all women were chronically breathless. ‘I had assumed you’d call before you arrived, or I would have come straight up to my office instead of taking my usual morning walk through the store.’ She glanced at the mother-to-be, who was rapidly disappearing behind the door of the goods lift. ‘You seem to have kept yourself busy, however.’

‘It’s been an interesting morning,’ he admitted.

‘A little different from your office in the City.’

‘We do have women in the City. Some of them even have babies, although we do encourage them to take maternity leave rather than have them in the office.’ She’d expected him to be dour, cool. He was the enemy, after all. They both knew that. Yet his wry smile indicated a sense of humour, and the firm manner with which he clasped her hand, held it, suggested that he’d waited all his life to meet her.

Making a determined effort to collect herself, she retrieved it. ‘We’d rather they didn’t do it here either,’ she admitted. ‘But there’s nothing like being thrown in at the deep end. Since I arrived too late to do anything more than hold things up I thought it best to leave you to it. You seemed to be managing,’ she added, in another of those ‘gritted teeth’ moments. Then, ‘I was under the impression that you were going to be holding the young lady’s hand while she’s whizzed through the traffic to the hospital.’

‘I thought someone should offer,’ he replied. As a criticism of her department manager’s ineffectuality it was masterly in its understatement. ‘However, the paramedics were kind enough to assure me that I’d be in the way. They suggested I might to go along later—with her shopping.’ He held up a couple of their trademark dark red glossy carrier bags, the store’s name printed in elegant copperplate gold lettering. She had a momentary flash of her vision of the way it would be—Claibourne’s, all in lower-case modern type—once she’d seen him off. ‘They didn’t seem

to think she'd have much use for it in the next hour or so.'

'What? Oh, no, I imagine not.' She looked around. 'Excuse me.' The assistants were busy returning the department to normal, and she crossed to thank them for the way they'd handled a difficult situation.

'You will let us know what happens, won't you, Miss Claibourne?'

'Of course. Maybe you'd like to choose a card and sign it from everyone in the department? I'll phone the hospital later, and when we know that everything has gone smoothly I'll take it to the hospital with some flowers. And her shopping. Maybe one of you would be kind enough to take it up to my office?' She turned to JD Farraday. 'Or maybe you'd prefer to go on behalf of the store?' she offered. 'See the job through?'

'Since I'm spending the next month observing you at work, Miss Claibourne, I think you should give her the flowers,' he said, surrendering the bags to a blushing assistant. 'While I watch.'

Before she could quite make up her mind whether he was being serious or sarcastic, he smiled, which short-circuited any but the most positive thoughts, making it difficult to remember that it was her intention to spend as little time as possible in his company.

'If you've nothing more pressing this evening, of course you're most welcome to join me. But it's not compulsory. Even a "shadow" has statutory rights regarding working hours,' she said, making an effort to keep things cool and businesslike. Then she

spoiled it all by smiling right back. 'Excuse me, I'd better just go and let everyone know they can resume shopping.'

For a moment, the space of a heartbeat, as he'd looked up and seen India Claibourne standing in the doorway watching him, Jordan had known he'd made a mistake. That his secretary had been right and that he was playing with fire. That he should run, not walk away from this woman.

He already knew she was lovely. Every single photograph of her, since her first photo-call at the age of four, sitting on Santa's knee in the C&F Christmas grotto, had been filed away with the newspaper articles on the store supplied by a cuttings agency.

With her little cap of dark hair cut into a neat fringe, her eyes huge with the excitement of it all, there had been the promise of beauty even then.

As she'd grown into a lively teenager, a dashing young woman, her face had changed from that of a round-cheeked child into the fine-boned elegance of genuine beauty. One with style, class and the indefinable something extra which made a woman special: the something extra that reminded a man there was more to life than making money.

Only her eyes had never changed. They were still huge, eager, burning with life, and for a moment the heat they generated had seared him in a vivid affirmation of Christine's warning on the dangers of playing with fire.

Then she'd turned away to speak to her department manager and common sense had kicked in.

He was that rarest of commodities, a wealthy bachelor. His world had never been short of lovely women. But he hadn't lost his head over one of them yet, and there was absolutely no chance of him losing it over India Claibourne.

That wasn't his plan at all. In this relationship there would be only one loser.

For a moment he watched her walk across the sales floor towards the coffee shop. Tall, willowy, her long legs emphasised by high, high heels, her elegant figure merely sketched at by the suit she was wearing. Burgundy-red, rich and dark and expensive, with discreet gold buttons. Claibourne & Farraday's livery colours.

That she'd chosen to wear it today in order to make some kind of statement he never doubted for a second.

She'd fight him for possession of her domain with her last breath. The knowledge sent a ripple of excitement through him that was far more pleasing than all his cold, calculating plans.

Before the month was up she would surrender everything to him. More than surrender. She was the one playing with fire and she was going to get burned.

And with that pleasing thought he went after her.

'Ladies, gentlemen...' She didn't raise her voice, or rap on a table, yet there was an immediate hush in the coffee shop, a tribute to a presence that was rare in a woman. Confidence, self-belief, a power that came from within. She was a worthy adversary. 'I just wanted to thank you all for your patience. You

can continue with your shopping whenever you're ready.' For a moment she was deluged with questions about the young mother-to-be. 'I'll be calling the hospital later for news of our newest customer,' she continued, 'and if the parents give their permission we'll post news of the birth on our website.' Then, checking her watch, she turned to him and said, 'I have to go. I've got an author arriving for a book-signing in a few minutes.'

'I saw the posters when I arrived. Is it simply a meet-and-greet? Or will you have to stand by and hand her an endless supply of pens?'

'She can manage her own pens, but she does merit the full red carpet treatment. Fortunately she doesn't have time for lunch today.' Then, 'Or maybe I make a less attractive lunchtime companion than my father. He always took her to the Ritz and plied her with champagne,' she added, with a sideways glance from beneath dark glossy lashes that appeared to suggest that if he took over he'd have that pleasure to look forward to.

'You could do that.'

'I don't think either the Ritz or the champagne would make up for my father not being there to flirt with her.'

'He's certainly had plenty of practice,' he agreed blandly. Then, as her cheekbones flushed pink with anger, 'I'd have doubted a book department was a cost-effective use of space these days,' he said as they both reached out to press the button to summon the lift. He beat her to it by a fraction of a second, and their fingers tangled momentarily before she

snatched them back, as if stung. Her nails were polished the same deep burgundy-red as her suit. As her smooth, soft lips. ‘Can you compete with the big book chains?’ he enquired, making an effort to concentrate on business.

‘The decision to close the book department was made several weeks ago,’ she replied. Again that little sideways flicker of eyelashes. This time they said, You see? I’m one step ahead of you. ‘It’s part of the rationalisation of floor space that’s in progress at the moment. We’ve started on the top floor, as you must have noticed.’

‘Impossible to miss,’ he agreed. ‘It must make concentration difficult.’

‘I never have any difficulty in concentrating on the important stuff.’ The lift arrived and they got in. ‘Ground floor, please,’ she said, abandoning competition in favour of making it appear that he was at her beck and call. He pressed the button that would take them to the ground floor without comment. She was, he had to admit, a fast learner. ‘We’re reducing the office area by half. My father has retired...’ she glanced at him ‘...but then you know that.’ She paused momentarily, as if expecting him to enquire after the man’s health. When he didn’t, she went on, ‘And Flora rarely uses her office, so they are both being ripped out. Romana’s office is being remodelled to provide space for the two of us—the centre partition will be movable, for full-scale planning meetings. Once that’s done, my office will go too.’

‘May I see the plans? I’d like to know what you’re doing with

the space you've made. The reasoning behind the changes. When you have a moment.'

'I'd be delighted to explain what we're doing, Mr Farraday. Just as long as you accept that I'm extending you a courtesy, not seeking your approval.'

'Of course. Control is absolute. We both understand that.' He certainly wouldn't be seeking approval from the Claibournes for his plans. Their helpless howls of rage as he sold the store would only sweeten his triumph.

They reached the ground floor and he followed her across the entrance lobby to the main door, where a staff photographer was waiting, along with a group of fans eager to catch the first glimpse of their idol. 'Any sign of her, Mr Edwards?' she asked the commissionaire.

'She's stopped just down there at the traffic lights. You've got about thirty seconds.'

'The white stretch limo,' she explained. 'The lady is a celebrity. She likes to make an entrance.' Then, 'Maybe we'll have a little time between the book-signing and the celebrity chef.'

'Celebrity chef?'

'In the food hall at twelve o'clock. He's making some Italian dish to promote a new product line. I'm afraid you've chosen a rather hectic day to visit us, but maybe we can find some time to look at the plans before he arrives.'

He didn't miss her suggestion that he was 'visiting'. That this was her territory. 'Perhaps you'd be good enough to run

the programme for the rest of the month by me too,' he said, reminding her that his visit wasn't a day-trip. 'When you have a moment.'

'I'm sorry. This must seem very tedious to you. But a store of this size needs to provide constant entertainment value—something to draw the crowds.'

'And you keep a very high profile.'

'It's not the way you do things in your world, I know, but then high finance is, by its very nature, a secretive business.'

'I think the word you want is confidential.'

'Is there a difference?' She glanced up at him with those cool dark eyes. 'Apart from tone?'

Not that much in the meaning, perhaps, but in the dismissive manner in which she said it there was a world of difference. 'Tone is everything.'

'Perhaps. This is different. Every day is showtime, and since it's my name above the door I have to be centre stage.' Meaning that he'd have to be front and centre too, when he took over? 'Our customers like the fact that if something goes wrong I'm here, not hidden away in some anonymous head office.'

Again there was the slightest pause, as if she expected him to say something. Did she really expect him to comment? Promise that he'd be on call for any customer with a complaint? She did something with her shoulders. Nothing as definitive as a shrug, but it made its point loud and clear. It said that he didn't measure up to her ideal of a CEO for Claibourne & Farraday. It was a

situation that she apparently found immeasurably satisfying, if the small smile tucking up the corners of her mouth was anything to judge by.

‘I’ll check my diary,’ she continued. ‘I might have that “moment” to run through the event schedule later. Of course there’s nothing stopping you from picking up a programme at the information desk. Or even going to the website to check it out for yourself.’

‘Like your customers, I prefer the personal touch. You can tell me all about it this evening.’ Which dealt with her smile, reducing it to a puzzled frown. ‘After we’ve visited the hospital. Over dinner, perhaps?’ Then, almost as an afterthought, ‘You do manage to find a little time to eat?’

‘Yes, but—’

‘I’ve cleared my diary in order to indulge you, Miss Claibourne. I think I’m entitled to a little consideration in return.’

‘India, honey!’ Before she could respond, she was enveloped in the warm embrace of her guest.

India greeted the exuberant author with more than usual warmth. She deserved it for rescuing her from having to cope with a remark that she suspected had been finely judged to wind her up.

He’d indulged her?

He made her sound like some wilful little girl, who’d been given her own way under sufferance, but who would shortly be sent to bed unless she was very, very good.

And then the author spotted him, and lit up like the Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square. ‘Who,’ she demanded, ‘is this beautiful man?’

India was about to introduce them, and invite Mr Farraday to escort the lady novelist up to the book department, when the beautiful man in question pre-empted her. ‘Farraday,’ he said, taking her hand with a dazzling smile. ‘Jordan Farraday.’

She laughed. ‘You mean I get a Claibourne and a Farraday? This is so special!’ As she turned to face the cameras for the PR shots she snuggled up to him, before taking his arm and sweeping towards the escalator, leaving India trailing in their wake.

‘We should have lunch, Mr Farraday,’ she said, as they arrived at the book department and she finally released him.

‘How I wish that were possible,’ he said, with every appearance of deepest regret. ‘Another time, perhaps.’ He looked around at the queue of women clutching copies of her book to be signed. ‘I appear to be keeping you from your fans.’ And with that he gave India a look that seemed to say, Well? How did I do? Could Peter Claibourne have done it better? And the answer, of course, was no. Then he glanced at his wristwatch. ‘If you’ll excuse me?’ Then, to India, ‘I need to make a phone call.’

‘Please, use my office.’

She could have gone with him, but she was glad of a moment to herself. She wasn’t taking anything for granted, however, and used the internal phone to call Sally.

‘Mr Farraday is on his way up. You can give him the event

list for June, but he isn't to see the new office plans. Or anything else.'

'Anything?' Sally replied, with a throaty chuckle.

A distraction in the form of her sexy secretary, whose highest ambition was to flirt for her country in the Olympic Games, might be useful, but try as she might she couldn't summon up any enthusiasm for the idea. Instead, rather lamely, she said, 'Oh, please...'

She couldn't quite understand why the idea bothered her, and she put it firmly out of her mind, returning to pose for photographs for the website with the author and some of her fans.

After that there was nothing to stop her going back to her office and rejoining her shadow. The temptation to go down to the archives—a place where she could not be found unless she wanted to be—and hide out for the rest of the day was compelling.

She pushed open the door to the stairs. Up or down?

She'd never know, because Jordan Farraday was leaning, one shoulder against the wall, legs casually crossed, cutting off any chance of escape. She jumped nervously, and to cover her reaction laughed. 'Mr Farraday. I thought you were using my office to make your phone call.'

'I didn't need a desk and I have my mobile.'

'In other words it was simply a device to escape being pressed into joining the lady for dinner instead?'

'I've already got a dinner date. With you.' And he dropped the

cellphone he'd been using into his pocket. 'What next?'

'Coffee,' she said as, cut off from retreat, she took the stairs up to her office, cursing herself for not having thought of inviting the author to join them. She glanced back over her shoulder and found her eyes were on a level with his. They were dark as pitch and just as unfathomable. 'You wouldn't be able to walk away so easily if you were running the show.'

'When I'm running the show, Miss Claibourne, I'll pay someone else to play clown. I'd offer you the job, since you enjoy it so much, but somehow I don't think you'd want to work for me.'

Ignoring his comment about playing clown—but mentally filing away the fact that he planned on putting in a manager to use against him—she said, 'It would make better sense to leave things the way they are.'

'For you, maybe. Not for me. But you already know that.'

Yes. She knew. While her father had been running the store he'd been able to do whatever he wanted and all Jordan Farraday could do was stand by and watch. He wasn't going to leave things the way they were because he wanted that power for himself. Just for the sake of it? Or did he already have plans that he knew she wouldn't like?

'What time does your next party turn arrive?' he asked, interrupting this disturbing chain of thought.

'I wouldn't let our celebrity chef hear you describe him as a party turn. Not when he's got a knife in his hand.' She ran her swipe card through the security lock and swept through the door

and down the corridor, stopping by Sally's office to ask for coffee and check for messages. 'And schedule a meeting for me with the training manager, will you, please? As a matter of urgency. That woman in the nursery department didn't cope well today.'

'She's just acting manager, isn't she? While the manager is on holiday?'

'Yes, and I'm afraid it showed. We need to make sure everyone knows how to deal with these one-off emergencies. We can't rely on Mr Farraday to be around to take charge and hold hands next time.' She glanced up, challenging him to admit it. Disconcertingly, he smiled, and for a moment she couldn't think what she'd been going to say next. 'And...um...'

'The hospital?' Sally prompted, flirting dangerously with an I-told-you-so smile.

'Check and see how our mother-to-be is doing. As soon as we've got a result I'll want flowers, and a basket of baby stuff in an appropriate colour. And a nice big C&F teddy. It'll look good in a photograph if they're prepared to do a PR piece. I'll want a photographer with me this evening when I visit—with luck we'll catch them on an emotional high that they want to share with the rest of the world.'

'I'll get onto it. We need to finalise the details of the retirement party for Maureen Derbyshire too, when you've got a minute.' And she turned to Jordan Farraday. 'Don't miss it, JD. It's going to be quite a party.'

'I fear Mr Farraday finds our small concerns rather dull, Sally,'

she said, before he could respond. Then, turning to him, ‘You wouldn’t understand, Mr Farraday, but when Maureen leaves it’ll be the end of an era. She started work here on the day she left school. Fifty years ago.’

‘Then she must have known my grandfather.’

Damn! She hadn’t thought of that. Point scoring off JD Farraday was going to be tricky. But she smiled and said, ‘Yes, I imagine so.’

‘I’m sure she’d be thrilled if you could find time to join us,’ Sally said, innocent as a baby. ‘It’s on Thursday evening. In the Roof Garden Restaurant.’

‘I’ll be there,’ he said, his gaze never leaving India’s face, mocking her as if, despite her secretary’s invitation, he understood that she didn’t want him popping up all over the place. ‘On the understanding that India saves the first dance for me.’

CHAPTER THREE

'I CAN'T believe how young she is,' India said as they left the hospital early that evening. 'Or maybe I'm just getting old.'

'That must be it,' Jordan said. She glanced at him sharply and his eyes creased into the kind of smile designed to make a woman go weak at the knees. He was teasing her, she realised. Which was unexpected and had to be against the rules in a situation like this. But then Jordan Farraday undoubtedly made up the rules as he went along. 'What did you have to offer to get her to do those publicity shots?'

'That's confidential.' She'd taken a photographer with her, hoping to catch the new parents in a mood to share their news with the world. They had been. For a price. She and the new mother had done their deal in the man-free environment of the nappy-changing room. Serena hadn't wanted her boyfriend to know the details either. 'Between her and me.'

He raised his brows. 'That much?'

'She may be young, but she's not stupid.'

'Are you suggesting that she stage-managed the whole thing?'

'That she waited until the contractions were well established before taking a turn around the nursery department, you mean? That's very cynical of you, Mr Farraday. I was suggesting nothing of the kind. Simply that she understands the value of publicity.' She glanced up at him. 'You looked quite something with the new

baby in your arms.'

'You pay and I get the publicity. It hardly seems fair.'

'The cost comes out of the PR budget,' she reminded him, trying to keep the edge out of her voice. Jordan Farraday was winning the publicity war hands down. First with the author, then making a hit with the celebrity chef, when he'd asked the kind of questions that made the man look like a towering culinary intellect. And then Serena had insisted he be the one to hold the baby. 'And Claibourne's gets the publicity.'

'In this instance it would seem that it's the "& Farraday" who'll get all the newspaper coverage.'

She shrugged as if it made no difference. 'It'll make a nice story,' she said. She'd like to believe his colleagues in the City would be ragging him about it for days, but had to admit that the prospect was unlikely. They'd more likely be awestruck by his ability to cope in the kind of crisis they'd never want to be anywhere near.

They'd taken a black cab to the hospital, to avoid the hassle of finding somewhere to park, and Jordan grabbed one now that was dropping off passengers. He spoke to the driver, then joined her in the back of the cab.

'Will we have the pleasure of your presence at the store tomorrow?' she asked.

'Today isn't over yet.'

'That's true,' she said, remembering the files in the boot of her car. 'I've got a load of paperwork to get through tonight.'

‘Anything an interested shadow can help with?’

‘No,’ she said, too quickly. ‘It’s... Well...’

‘Secret?’ he offered.

‘Confidential,’ she said. ‘Family business.’

‘It’s all family business,’ he replied, as the cab pulled over to the kerb and came to a halt. ‘One way or another. We’re here.’

‘Where?’ India glanced out at the side street, where they had stopped in front of a small restaurant she knew by name, its reputation for good food, and the impossibility of getting a table.

‘I had my secretary book a table for eight o’clock. We’re a little early, but I don’t suppose that’ll be a problem at this time in the evening.’ He climbed from the cab, holding the door for her.

‘Look, I know you said we’d have dinner, but honestly I’ve got a pile of work—’

‘India,’ he said, cutting her short. And the way he used her given name was faintly shocking. Like being touched. ‘I’ve been chasing you around that wretched store all day. I’ve been very, very patient, and you will now do me the courtesy of sitting down and sharing a meal with me. I want to hear about your plans. How you see the future of Claibourne & Farraday.’

‘In my hands,’ she replied, without missing a beat. And the changes she had in mind were not for sharing with Jordan Farraday.

His smile was perfunctory. ‘Humour me, as I’ve humoured you all day, or the shadow deal’s off and you can forget all about me playing follow-my-leader for the rest of the month. Instead

I'll instruct my lawyers to invoke the golden share agreement first thing tomorrow.'

That wretched 'golden share'... The two per cent controlling interest in the company that was supposed to be handed on, like some Olympic flame, to the oldest male heir. Not this time.

He might be oldest; she was best.

'In which case,' he added, just in case she hadn't got the point, 'you'll be out by the end of the week.'

'You can try,' she said, not moving. 'Once the lawyers get involved it could take years.' Except that would defeat the whole object. She might be in, occupying the seat, but she wouldn't be able to do a thing. Any move to change the name, change the style, do anything constructive, would be met with legal injunctions. The company would stagnate, wither.

She would surrender before she'd let that happen. She just hoped he didn't know that.

'So...' he said. 'We both know exactly where we stand. No more pretending to be nice. You have possession of the store and you'll do anything to keep it. Something that I can't possibly allow.' Then, 'But we still have to eat.' And he offered her his hand.

Damn! She hadn't planned on things moving this quickly. A fact she was sure he knew. He knew altogether too much. All day he'd been at her shoulder, stealing the limelight, charming everyone he met, apparently interested in the smallest detail, always asking the right questions.

Always there, just at the corner of her vision, close enough to touch but never quite touching.

She'd tossed her sisters into this situation without a thought as to how they'd cope. She'd just wanted the time it had bought her. The time it had bought her lawyers as they tried to make a case to stop the takeover.

Faced with the reality of spending a month in this man's company...up close and as personal as it got...she wished she'd listened to their protests.

She wished they were home, so that she could talk to them. Romana had taken time out from her extended honeymoon to e-mail her detailed ideas for the better use of space—ideas that she'd wasted no time in implementing. And Flora had sent back wonderful cloth, jewellery and design sketches, as well as a report for the travel department on Saraminda.

Neither of them had offered advice on dealing with a Farraday male. Maybe because they knew their solution could never be hers.

She'd never felt so alone in her life.

When she still hesitated, he let his hand drop and said, 'If you doubt that I can do it, I'll tell the driver to take you back to the store. But I suggest you clear your desk while you're there.'

She could scarcely believe her ears. 'You're threatening me?'

'No, India. I don't make threats to get what I want. What I'm doing is giving you a month of my time in which to convince me that you're the only person in the world who can run Claibourne

& Farraday.'

'Why?' The word escaped her lips before she could stop it.

'Why are you doing that?'

'Giving you a month of my time?'

'Yes. What's in it for you?'

'Well, let's see. I'm doing it because your lawyers requested it and my lawyers could see no disadvantage. I'm taking the opportunity to familiarise myself with the store. Get to know the senior staff.' She wished she hadn't asked. He was using the time she'd given him to infiltrate himself into the store, smooth the transition... 'What I'm doing is bending over backwards to be reasonable, so that if we do end up in a court battle I'll impress their Lordships as a reasonable man who's done everything asked.' And he smiled. 'Does that answer your question?'

His answer was so smooth, so pat. So...reasonable! She couldn't fault him. Which meant she'd just have to swallow her pride and play nice.

'Yes, well, I've never suggested I'm the only person in the world who can run the store, JD,' she said, finally joining him on the pavement. If he was going to make free with her name, without so much as a by-you-leave, she certainly wasn't going to keep calling him Mr Farraday. As if he were the boss and she were his underling. They were equals. As he turned from paying the driver, she dredged up a smile. 'Just the best.'

'Jordan,' he said.

'What?'

‘My staff call me JD. You and I are equals.’ Equals? Could he read her mind? ‘Partners. I’d rather you called me by my name.’ He lifted his brows, encouraging her to give it a try.

‘Jordan?’ she offered.

He lifted the corner of his mouth in a wry smile. ‘That wasn’t so difficult, was it?’

Patronising oaf. She didn’t believe for one minute that he considered her his equal, but she’d do her level best to change his mind—and if that involved supping with the devil, she’d do it. She put a little more effort into her smile as he placed his hand beneath her elbow—did he feel her jump as he touched her?—pushed open the restaurant door and held it for her.

‘It’s curious that we’re both named after countries, don’t you think?’ he said, once they were seated at a quiet table.

She resisted the temptation to point out that while he was named after a very small country she was named after a sub-continent. ‘My father met my mother in India,’ she said, perusing the menu. ‘Hence the name. It’s something of a family tradition. My father took his second wife to Florence for their honeymoon, and met his third in Rome on a trip to the fashion shows. She was a model. Hence Flora and Romana.’

‘How fortunate he didn’t have boys.’

She glanced up. ‘Well, that’s original.’

‘What is?’

‘Most people say how lucky it was that the cities weren’t Naples, or Pisa. Tell me about your name. Was that a honeymoon

destination too?’

‘My parents never got around to taking a honeymoon,’ he replied. ‘But then they never actually got around to marriage.’

‘Oh.’ Served her right for asking.

‘According to my mother, my father’s surname was Jordan. Or rather Jourdan. He was French. They met while she was backpacking in Europe before going to university. It was one of those holiday romances. You know how it is. Brief. Passionate.’ He shrugged. ‘Life-changing.’

Was it a big deal having a baby as a single mother back then? She supposed it must have been. Something about the way he’d said ‘life-changing’ suggested it had radically changed his mother’s life. And not necessarily for the better. Not going to university would have been the first of many sacrifices.

‘I did wonder how you came to be using the Farraday surname,’ she said. She’d resisted the urge to ask. She didn’t want to know that kind of stuff. She had to keep this businesslike. ‘You never knew him?’

‘My father? No. He was long gone by the time Kitty realised she was pregnant.’

‘Kitty? You call your mother by her first name?’

He shrugged. ‘A gloss to protect my grandfather’s sensibilities, I suspect.’

‘Oh, I see. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. I just don’t know much about your family history.’

‘We have a lot in common, you and I. We both want the same

thing. We both come from one-parent families.'

She wanted to ask him if his mother had ever found someone special. Wanted to know about his life. Had he been an only child? The son of an embittered woman? An older half-sibling... An outsider... This morning he had been a stranger. Already she wanted to know his deepest fears, his happiest memories.

'She gave you his name,' she said.

'Not the whole name. But she felt I should have something to remember him by. The way your name reminds you of your mother. Do you remember her?'

'No. I was still a baby when she left.' So much for keeping it businesslike. Concentrating on the menu, as if she hadn't already made up her mind what she would choose, and as casually as she knew how, she said, 'According to my grandmother she never settled—hated London. She just wanted to go back to India, kick off her shoes, don her beads and get back to the ashram.'

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