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Vintage *Cherish*

Her Secret Affair

ARLENE JAMES

Arlene James

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Аннотация

THE MILLIONAIRE'S SEDUCTION Chey Simmons had entered Brodie Todd's world as part of a business contract. So why did she find her powerful, handsome client so unnerving...and intriguing? Chey didn't know. She only knew that getting involved with the elusive millionaire single father could be dangerous to her heart....When Brodie took Chey into his arms, he knew this woman had a hold on him like no other. But Brodie's life was filled with commitments that kept him from claiming Chey as his own—and a scandal that threatened to tear them apart forever. And yet, once they yielded to soulstirring desire, Brodie knew there was no turning back. That somehow, some way, this woman was bound to be his....

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“We kissed and now you’re avoiding me. I want to know why,”

Brodie said. “It wasn’t because you didn’t enjoy it. That much I do know.”

Chey glared at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you liked it as much as I did. So what’s your problem?”

“I never get involved with clients.”

“Then I’ll have to cancel your contract.”

She immediately launched to her feet. “You can’t do that!”

He rose smoothly and brought his hands to his hips. “The contract that cannot be broken has never been devised.”

“I’ll sue you!”

“Before or after we make love?” he returned smoothly.

Chey folded her arms. “I don’t sleep around.”

“I don’t want you to sleep around,” Brodie retorted. “I want you to sleep with me.”

Dear Reader,

International bestselling author Diana Palmer needs no introduction. Widely known for her sensual and emotional storytelling, and with more than forty million copies of her books in print, she is one of the genre’s most treasured authors. And this month, Special Edition is proud to bring you the exciting

conclusion to her SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE series. The Last Mercenary is the thrilling tale of a mercenary hero risking it all for love. Between the covers is the passion and adventure you've come to expect from Diana Palmer!

Speaking of passion and adventure, don't miss To Catch a Thief by Sherryl Woods in which trouble—in the form of attorney Rafe O'Donnell—follows Gina Petrillo home for her high school reunion and sparks fly.... Things are hotter than the Hatfields and McCoys in Laurie Paige's When I Dream of You—when heat turns to passion between two families that have been feuding for three generations!

Is a heroine's love strong enough to heal a hero scarred inside and out? Find out in Another Man's Children by Christine Flynn. And when an interior designer pretends to be a millionaire's lover, will Her Secret Affair lead to a public proposal? Don't miss An Abundance of Babies by Marie Ferrarella—in which double the babies and double the love could be just what an estranged couple needs to bring them back together.

This is the last month to enter our Silhouette Makes You a Star contest, so be sure to look inside for details. And as always, enjoy these fantastic stories celebrating life, love and family.

Best,

Karen Taylor Richman

Senior Editor

Her Secret Affair

Arlene James



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ARLENE JAMES

grew up in Oklahoma and has lived all over the South. In 1976 she married “the most romantic man in the world.” The author enjoys traveling with her husband, but writing has always been her chief pastime. Arlene is also the author of the Inspirational titles Proud Spirit, A Wish for Always, Partners for Life and No Stranger To Love.

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Chapter One

They peered up through the car windshield at the double doors standing a good ten feet tall beneath the wide overhang of the balcony above, then down at the letter in her hand. She was of two minds. One part of her would have liked to wad up the imperious summons and toss it into the face of the arrogant man who had sent it. The other had waited years to get her hands on the crumbling, century-old mansion known as Fair Havens. Since she salivated at the prospect, she knew that part of her would win. Restoring Fair Havens would be a definite coup for her career and a very lucrative one, not that she particularly needed the funds.

Chez Chey, the elegant little French Quarter antique shop from which she operated her interior design business, was as well known and respected as were her abilities as an architect specializing in renovation and restoration. Five years of hard work had made that so. Only last week her expertise had earned her the spot of honor at a tea sponsored by the influential Heritage Society, which wielded great power in historic New Orleans. It was there that Chey had met Brodie Todd's grandmother. As a result, the wealthy and much-ballyhooed owner of BMT Travel had summoned her here to his dilapidated mansion.

Chey felt a fresh stab of indignation at his high-handedness.

Todd was well known for his eccentricity. The newspapers had speculated heavily about his return to the area, wondering in print if he would also move BMT's corporate offices from Dallas to New Orleans. Then again, it was said that he all but ran his business from his bedroom—when he wasn't playing in some jet-set hot spot. He certainly had no respect for anyone else's schedule. His brief letter had stated flatly when and where he would receive her and had neither left room for negotiation nor made provision for her convenience. It irked her that she felt compelled to respond as dictated. On the other hand, the Fair Havens mansion was the stuff of dreams for her.

Constructed before the Civil War of dark red brick with once-white pilasters and balconies, the house featured deep porches, double doors and windows, and broad, impressive front steps built of brick arranged in an elegant half-circle. Staring around her dreamily, Chey couldn't help noting that all of the exterior woodwork would need scraping, sealing and painting, and that much of the brickwork would require repointing. Furthermore, the brick had crumbled in places and would require replacing.

Overall, however, she was impressed with the building's apparent soundness. It sat level and square upon its foundation, and all of its five chimneys stood straight and whole. If it looked a bit woebegone and tired, it was no wonder. Old Mr. Houser, the previous owner, had neglected the stately dear shamefully. Chey hoped that could be rectified with little more than good grooming, and Brodie Todd seemed of the same mind if the

activity around her was any indication.

The house sat back a good fifty yards from the street and was screened from general view by an overgrown tangle of greenery, but a small army of gardeners were at work taming the jungle that had been allowed to grow rampant. Already the yard was shaping up nicely, and she could see workers in the distance replacing a section of fencing that had been removed for some reason. She wondered if Brodie Todd was building a pool and hoped intensely that he wasn't slapping some garishly modern cement job into the backyard of this graceful old antebellum mansion.

She left the car parked to one side of the wide brick drive that arced in front of the house, gazing sadly at a magnificent marble birdbath which had been toppled onto its side in the grassy center of the looping drive. Measuring at least three feet across, the bowl would require several able bodies to lift it back into place. Chey sincerely hoped that Brodie Todd meant to do just that, and promised herself that she would mention it to him at the first opportunity. Leaving everything but her keys behind in the car, she climbed the steps and crossed the front porch.

For this meeting she had chosen from her spring wardrobe a pale pink designer suit trimmed in light gray with a narrow, knee-length skirt and a brief, tailored, asymmetrical jacket. Pale gray stockings and smoke-gray shoes with high, fashionably wide heels completed the ensemble. With her long blond hair coiled into a tight roll against the back of her head and her makeup sparingly but expertly applied, she presented a sleek,

neat business persona.

A small brass bell suspended from a wrought-iron arm hung by the door, and Chey gave the clapper a vigorous shake. The resulting peal echoed loudly all over the estate, causing the gardeners to pause at their labors and raise their heads and Chey to grab the bell with both hands in order to quell it. The door emitted a rusty crack and squeaked open. A small, pale woman greeted Chey.

“Miss Simmons? I’m Kate, the housekeeper. Won’t you come in?”

“Thank you.”

Perhaps five feet tall and thin to the point of emaciation, Kate wore her medium-brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. She seemed both bursting with energy and dangerously frail. Turning, she said, “The family is in the garden room at the back of the house.” Indicating with a glance over one shoulder that Chey should follow, she set off briskly, bouncing up onto her toes with every step, arms swinging at her sides. No wonder she was so thin, Chey mused, the woman could burn more energy just walking than Chey could at a mad dash. She led Chey down the broad central hall, past the elegant, curving staircase and all the way across the big house in mere seconds, only to abandon her after brusquely announcing, “She’s here.”

Chey had the impression of glass and greenery and cobblestoned floor in the heartbeat before a husky, cultured female voice made her head turn to one side. “Hello, again. It’s

Chey, isn't it? Or would you prefer Miss Simmons?"

Chey smiled at the long, patrician face of the woman who approached her, her long, sleek body dressed in lightweight, pale green bouclé knit with a bright scarf looped loosely about a long, swanlike neck. "Mrs. Todd. Nice to see you again, and Chey is perfect."

"Then you must call me Viola." Long, slender, slightly gnarled fingers curled around Chey's hand. "Let me introduce you to my grandson and great-grandson." She whirled away, and her chin-length, ruthlessly bobbed silver and white hair whirled with her. "They're over here, on the other side of this jungle, wrestling with a weight bench, whatever that is."

Chey followed, thankful for the sedate pace as she wound her way through a virtual forest in pots and wooden boxes. She heard a clang and muttering, followed by a screeching little voice that insisted, "Wet me, Daddy! Wet me!"

Just ahead of her, Viola came to a stop and said urgently, "Seth, don't!"

At the same instant, a deeper, gruffer voice barked, "Son, no! You'll—" a wail interrupted, followed by more clanks and a gusty sigh, "—smash your finger," the man finished resignedly. "Here, let me look at it."

The wails were already subsiding as Chey stepped up beside Viola Todd. The man was on his bare knees, his dark head bent over the small body in his likewise bare arms, a shambles of pipe and padded board beside them.

"It's not bleeding," he said, examining the tiny finger. "The nail looks okay. Just a pinch on the end." He lifted the little fist and lavishly kissed the uplifted finger. "Some strawberry jam ought to fix it. Let Grandmama see to it." He gave the affectionate title a French pronunciation. Grahn-ma-ma stooped and opened her arms. Chey was shocked at the bright red head that hurtled into those outstretched arms.

"Gramuma, I poke my fingder in the jam jar?"

"If you please," Viola assented, grunting as she lifted the child off his feet.

"Pwease," he intoned solemnly, squeezing his grandmother's face between two chubby palms, the injured finger sticking out.

Viola laughed and carried him away, saying only, "Brodie, get up and speak to this woman." Over her shoulder, the red-headed imp stared at Chey curiously and waggled his fingers in a hello wave. She smiled in reply before turning her attention back to the man now rising slowly to his feet.

Something about him made her step back in shocked awareness. Perhaps it was his height, for he stood easily six inches taller than she. Or perhaps it was all that bare, bronze skin, as he wore only jogging shorts, a loose muscle shirt and running shoes without socks. Then again, it might have been the contrast between his pale blue eyes and the coarse, ink-black hair mowed flat across the top of his head and precisely groomed into the neat, meticulous mustache and goatee which framed his sculpted mouth and squarish chin. Or perhaps it was

the face itself, which, while all sharp angles and flat planes, was unabashedly handsome. Or it might have been the frankly curious, blatantly appreciative manner in which that pale blue gaze leisurely traveled over her and came to rest, finally, on her face.

Chey was aware suddenly of the thudding heaviness of her heartbeat, and in the next instant a pair of pictures flashed before her mind's eye: Brodie Todd handsomely turned out in tux and black tie, and Brodie Todd stretched out in bed, drowsing sleepily, his unshaven beard a bluish shadow on his jaw. She blinked, and found herself staring into a pale blue mirror of her own thoughts. She backed up another step, once again taking in the whole of his face. A lazy smile slowly lifted one corner of his mouth, a knowing, challenging, promising smile that made her heart plummet straight to her toes. It terrified her, that smile, triggered a primal instinct for survival, so that her only thought was to turn tail and run, fast and far, the project and everything else be damned. Then he reached for her, and even that thought dissolved.

He clapped one palm onto her shoulder and grasped her fingers with the other as if he meant to shake her hand even if he had to hold her in place to do it. Lightning shot down her arm and sizzled in her chest. She barely suppressed a gasp. He just stood there, staring at her until she looked away in self-defense.

"Brodie Todd," he said coaxingly, his voice pitched low and intimate. "You must be the designer, Chey Simmons."

She lifted a brow, willing her speedy heartbeat to normalcy, and corrected him tartly, “Architect, refurbisher and interior designer.”

“All right.” He chuckled and went on softly, “Interesting name, Chey.”

They stood in silence for several seconds after that. His hands felt heavy and hot. Finally, she forced herself to look at him. The first words out of her mouth were a complete surprise to her. “It’s Mary Chey, actually.”

His smile dazzled. “Mary Chey. I like that. It’s nice to meet you, Mary Chey. You’ve been very highly recommended, your talent much praised. No one bothered to say that you are also quite beautiful.”

Panic surged up in her, and she looked away again. Much belatedly she managed to murmur, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, sliding his hand down her arm from her shoulder. “Let’s have some coffee.” Her feet felt welded to the floor, but he turned her and literally propelled her toward a small, round, glass table off to one side. Viola was there, sitting on the edge of her chair and holding a jam pot for the child, who sat, legs splayed, facing her, his finger in jam all the way to the last knuckle. He pulled it out, curling it at the end, and plunged it into his mouth.

Brodie sat her next to his grandmother, across from the boy, pushing Chey down quite firmly into the slatted iron chair. “How do you take yours?” he asked.

She blinked up at him.

“Coffee,” he said. “How do you take yours.”

“Uh, black.”

He grinned, fully aware of her confusion, and moved to the cart standing next to the glass wall, where he poured coffee from a silver pot into a china cup. Chey followed his every move with her eyes, even as she began to feel more herself. She didn't register the view beyond until Viola asked, “Do you like our pool?”

Chey abruptly, guiltily, switched her gaze, first to Viola's face, then to the vista beyond the glass wall. It was magnificent. The pool had been built to mammoth proportions and was flanked with no less than four Grecian fountains. Gazebos with louvered sides had been built at both ends and surrounded with plants. A chin-high, black wrought-iron fence with impressive scroll work had been erected around the entire area. Chey was relieved to see no slide, not even a diving board, nor could she imagine the typical plastic or aluminum lawn chair in this very classical setting. Apparently neither could the designer, for many stone tables and benches had been grouped among the greenery and beneath the trees. To one side, nearest the house and outside the pool gate in a cool, shady spot, stood an elaborate playground surrounded by several inches of dark pine mulch; a little boy's paradise. “It's wonderful,” she said succinctly.

“The gazebos serve as bathhouse and bar,” Brodie told her. Bringing her cup and saucer to the table, he dropped a thick linen

napkin in her lap. "Have a pineapple tart," he said, placing that plate before her as well. It wasn't a question or even a suggestion, and she bristled slightly at the tone of command, but when she lifted her gaze to his, she found his lips twitching against a smile, and her indignation immediately wilted. "They're one of Marcel's specialties," Brodie went on, "and you know how temperamental chefs can be. You'll offend him deeply if you don't eat."

With that, he presented her a fork. She snatched it from his hand, and he walked around her chair and dropped into the one next to her, mouth quirking with that smile he still strove to suppress. He knew how he affected her, blast him, and she didn't doubt that he was somehow doing it on purpose. Leaning back, he prepared to enjoy his coffee at leisure while watching her steadily over the rim of his cup.

In pure defensiveness, Chey broke the crust of the tart with her fork, anything to distract her from Brodie Todd's sultry perusal. Still warm, the tart exuded a piquant, sharp-sweet aroma that made her mouth water. She cut off a bite and shoved her fork beneath it, lifting it toward her mouth even as she blurted, quite without meaning to, "You're not eating."

He chuckled and sipped from his cup before saying with mock severity, "I'm being disciplined."

Chey closed her lips around the flaky confection at that moment, and the full flavor of the cooked pineapple burst within her mouth. She widened her eyes, savoring the incredible taste as she chewed and swallowed. "Oh, my," she said.

“Which is why Brodie’s already had four of those this morning,” his grandmother revealed with a chortle.

Chey lifted an eyebrow at his version of “disciplined,” but she could understand why he’d stuffed himself. The thing was pure heaven. She began to eat with genuine gusto.

Brodie sipped from his cup again and admitted unrepentantly, “I could eat the whole plate of them. And I will, too, unless some kind soul does it for me.”

“In that case,” Chey said, swallowing another delicious bite, “I just may have another.”

He laughed at that, sliding down in his chair and putting back his head so the sound could roll up from his throat. “I love a woman with healthy appetites!”

“If she eats like you,” Viola said, placing the jam pot between her great-grandson’s legs, “she’ll have to work out like you.” She grimaced and confided to Chey, “All that sweating and grunting. I don’t understand why a person doesn’t just eat less.”

“Grandmama is the queen of self-denial,” Brodie said affectionately. “She won’t even taste one of Marcel’s tarts.”

“Of course not,” Viola sniffed. “I won’t try crack cocaine, either, or tobacco or any number of harmful things.”

“Her list of harmful things, however, does not include mint juleps,” Brodie divulged, and Chey laughed around a bite of tart.

Viola feigned shock. “The mint julep is the most efficacious concoction ever invented by man.”

Brodie smirked. “The mint julep is nothing more or less than

crushed ice, a sprig of mint, some sugar and a glass full of hard liquor.”

Chey wiped her mouth with her napkin and reached for her coffee, while Viola lifted her chin and primly announced that a little hard liquor never hurt anyone. Brodie winked at Chey and said, “Lest you think that Grandmama overindulges, I should tell you that she strictly confines her alcohol consumption to two mint juleps a day, one at lunch and one as a night cap.”

“That’s right,” Viola confirmed, “and I’m as healthy at eighty as you are at thirty-six.”

Chey’s jaw dropped along with her coffee cup, which she barely managed to direct back to its saucer. “You’re eighty?”

“Eighty-two, to be exact,” Brodie answered for his grandmother, who preened blatantly—until a blob of strawberry jam hit her smack in the chest. All eyes turned to the child, who looked as surprised as everyone else. Having buried his hand in the jam pot up to the thumb joint, he obviously hadn’t foreseen the difficulties of trying to clean it by shaking.

“Seth!” Viola exclaimed, while Brodie just groaned and put his head in his hands. Wide-eyed, Seth stuck his entire hand in his mouth, while Viola wet a napkin in her water glass and dabbed at the stain on her dress.

“You’ll have to forgive my son,” Brodie said with a sigh, lifting his head and looking at Chey. “He’s only three.” While speaking, he reached over and removed the jam pot from his son’s lap. “I suppose he really needs a nanny.”

“What he needs is a mother,” Viola retorted.

Brodie sent her a direct look and said carefully, “He has a mother.”

“Humph.” Abandoning the stain, Viola rewet the napkin and reached for the boy, who yelped, scooted out of the chair and ran in a wide loop around his father, right to Chey, reaching for her with both hands. It apparently never even occurred to the little imp that he might not be welcome, and she reacted completely without forethought, as she had done any number of times with her numerous nieces and nephews. Grabbing up her own napkin, she caught that small sticky hand before it caught her. As he was already climbing over the arm of the chair, she quickly guided his feet away from her skirt and, for lack of any better option, settled him in her lap. He laid his head back against her chest, looked up at her and exclaimed loudly, “You pwetty like Mommy!”

Chey smiled limply. Suddenly she wondered why the newspapers hadn’t mentioned Brodie Todd’s wife. The next instant she pushed the thought away as insignificant and said politely, “Thank you. Now if you’re going to sit in my lap, young man, you have to have that hand washed.”

He acted as if he didn’t hear her, but when Viola leaned forward and began cleaning his hand with the damp napkin, he sat still—as still as a three-year-old can sit, anyway. Brodie said, entirely too lightly, “You obviously have experience, Mary Chey. Do you have a child of your own perhaps?”

She lifted her gaze to his and said purposefully, “No. But I do

have thirty-one nieces and nephews.”

His cup rattled in his saucer. “Thirty-one?”

“It’ll be thirty-two before long.”

“How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“Nine.”

When he didn’t immediately reply to that, she looked up at him. His mouth was hanging open. “Ten kids?” He sat back in his chair with a plop. “Holy cow. This one runs me absolutely ragged.”

“I can imagine.”

“I’m sure you can.” He sat forward again. “Don’t misunderstand me. I love this little terror.” He smoothed a hand over the top of the boy’s bright red head. “I wouldn’t trade what I have with him for anything in this world, but I just couldn’t do it ten times.”

“Not many people can,” she said. “The most any of my brothers and sisters have is five. That would be Frank, he’s the oldest, and Mary Kay. Bay and Thomas and their wives each have four. Johnny—he’s the baby—Mary May, Matt and Anthony have three apiece, and Mary Fay has one and is expecting one.”

Brodie was smiling. “Are all the women in your family named Mary?”

“Each and every one,” she confirmed, “including my mother, who is Mary Louise, and both of my grandmothers. I guess my mother’s something of a poet at heart because she rhymed us all. Mary May, Kay, Fay and Chey. I think she ran out of the

standard options by the time she had me. Did I mention that my brother Bailey is called Bay?" she asked rhetorically. "And me, they call Mary. I guess Chey was just too much for everyone."

For some reason he was grinning very broadly. "But you prefer Chey."

"Well," she admitted, "Mary is awfully common, especially in my family."

"There is nothing at all common about you," he told her blatantly.

"I should hope not," she quipped, ignoring a shiver of delight.

He reached across the table then, and covered her hand with his, and suddenly the comfortable, chummy atmosphere evaporated. "I think it's time I showed you the house," he said silkily, "unless you were serious about that second tart."

"Regretfully not," she said, pulling free her hand and scooting back her chair. "Like your grandmother, I prefer to exercise a little more self-control."

"Don't be fooled by Grandmama," he said, getting to his feet. "As if Seth doesn't provide her with enough exercise, she works very hard out in the garden."

"Gardening isn't work," Viola protested ardently. "It's pure relaxation."

"For you," he said, bending down again to pluck the boy off Chey's lap so she could rise. "It's pure torture for me."

Viola pointed toward the weight bench. "That would be torture for me."

“To each his own,” Chey said brightly.

“An excellent theory,” Brodie commented, passing the boy to his grandmother. “I have a theory about self-control,” he went on, reaching out an arm to bring Chey to his side. “General restraint makes occasionally losing it quite enjoyable. Don’t you agree?” he asked in an intimate voice that stopped her heart and closed her throat.

Chey coughed and muttered, “I, um, prefer not to lose mine at all.”

“Maybe you just haven’t found the indulgence you can’t resist yet,” he suggested softly.

She couldn’t have answered that if she’d wanted to, and he knew it. She saw it in his eyes. Abruptly, he dropped his arm and looked to his son. “Don’t wear out Grandmama. Understand?” The boy nodded, two fingers in his mouth. Brodie bent and took his son’s small face into his hands, turning it toward Chey. “Tell Miss Chey, ‘Good to meet you.’”

“Goo to mwee oo,” the boy said around his fingers.

Viola pulled his hand from his mouth and instructed him to try again. He managed it better this time.

“It was nice to meet you, too,” Chey said. She widened her gaze to include Viola. “It was especially nice to see you again, ma’am.”

“I know you’ll do well for us, dear,” Viola Todd said. Then she looked to her grandson and a silent communication passed between them.

He bent and kissed first the boy and then his grandmother on the cheek. Straightening once more, he moved toward Chey, lifting a hand to take her arm. Automatically, she shied from his touch. It was a foolish thing to do, foolish and telling, and it brought a flush of embarrassment to her cheeks. Brodie just smiled knowingly and clasped his hands behind him, the hunger in his pale blue eyes as blatant as any declaration. Well, Chey mused as she strode off in front of him, she now knew what it felt like to be a pineapple tart on that man's plate.

Chapter Two

“We’ll start down here on the first floor and work our way up,” Brodie said in a brisk, businesslike tone.

They nodded at that and folded her arms tightly as they passed through the doorway into the central hall side by side. “How many rooms are there?”

“Twenty-eight rooms on the first two floors, counting the butler’s pantry and linen storage. The third is made up of the laundry, an apartment belonging to Marcel and Kate, the couple who cook and keep house for us, and the attics, which are a virtual warren of irregular cubicles crammed with furniture and junk. Kate and Marcel have just finished renovating their own space, so that need not concern you, and I don’t foresee using the attics for anything other than storage, but you’re welcome to take a look. Much of the furniture appears usable to me, but you would be the better judge.”

They nodded with interest. “These old houses often turn out to be hiding valuable antiques. It’s possible we’ll find some of the original furnishings.”

“That’s good. I like the idea of authenticity—within reason, of course.” He opened the first door they came to. “This is one of the worst,” he said, “the breakfast room.”

She peeked inside, leaning past him to do so. The room was indeed a shambles. A plumbing leak had caused the ceiling to fall

in and the wallpaper to peel. The carpet had rotted away and left the wood planking beneath exposed. A swinging door, now off the hinges, leaned against one wall. Large, multipaned, ceiling-to-floor windows looked out into the garden room, and like those of many homes of the period, which were taxed according to the number of rooms and doors they contained, the bottom section could be raised to create a direct pass-through. "I assume that doorway leads to the kitchens," she said, pointing to the vacant space next to the unhinged door.

"Yes, via the butler's pantry, which also opens into the formal dining room. We could go through that way since the floorboards are sound, but it's such a mess I'd rather not take a chance on ruining that pretty suit you're wearing."

She ignored the compliment, quickly withdrawing from the room. "I have to come back and take measurements, anyway."

Thereafter, she kept her distance. They made a thorough survey of the entire first floor, which, in addition to the breakfast room and kitchens, included an actual ballroom, a large formal parlor, a formal dining room capable of seating two dozen comfortably, a cloakroom, a billiards room, a "smoking" room, an informal family room, two rest rooms, a "ladies withdrawing room" now claimed by Viola as a type of office, and an antiquated elevator from the 1930s. The kitchen had been completely renovated with modern, restaurant-quality appliances and fixtures, but Chey was relieved to see that the original brick floors, exposed beams and fire ovens had been left alone.

The formal rooms were dingy and unattractive, having been last redecorated in the 1950s. The billiards room had been gutted; some of the floor had rotted. The cloakroom and smoking room had been relegated to storage, while the family rooms were shabby and horribly “updated” with shag carpets and cheap paneling. The two rest rooms were barely adequate, and the library, with falling shelves and a fireplace that undoubtedly leaked, was in deplorable shape.

The second floor had fared better and boasted a long, wide landing that ran the length of the back of the house and opened onto a balcony that overhung the garden room. Two smaller hallways branched off the wider, central one, allowing access to fourteen separate chambers. As in so many older homes, some rooms could only be reached by traveling through others and several doorways had been blocked by previous renovation. A cramped, rickety servants’ stairway plunged straight down into the butler’s pantry, its lower access blocked by a locked door and table. They noted that the shaft, which ran all the way to the third floor, provided perfect access for a central air-conditioning system, which had to be a prime consideration, given the hot, sticky Louisiana summer now rapidly approaching. They decided to make it a priority issue.

Brodie had set up a temporary office in a room at the front of the house that opened onto his personal bedchamber, and he’d had special electrical and telephone lines installed there to protect the several computers that he had up and running. The

electrician he had employed had done a cursory inspection of the remainder of the house and had reported that some sections had been rewired as recently as twenty years previously, while some rooms utilized wires much older and some were without electricity altogether. Brodie, therefore, had engaged the man to draw up a rewiring schematic and present a proposal, which he now plucked from the metal table that he was using as a desk and handed over to Chey, much to her delight.

“Thank you,” she told him, tucking the rolled schematic under one arm. “This will make it easier to put together my bid.”

He seemed amused by her choice of words. “What bid?”

“I thought you wanted me to bid on the project,” she told him, confused.

“I want you to oversee the project,” he said flatly.

“You mean, you’ve already made a decision?” she asked, astounded.

“I made the decision before I wrote the letter,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Before you even met me?”

He folded his arms and perched on the corner of the metal table. “There are better ways to judge a person when it comes to business, Mary Chey. I assumed you’d know that. Besides, my grandmother met you at the tea, went there for that express purpose, in fact, as soon as my investigation confirmed you were the best person for the job.”

“You had me investigated?” she demanded.

“Thoroughly, your business dealings anyway. I never pry into a person’s private life.”

Chey was temporarily dumbfounded. She tried to be offended, but he’d picked her for the job, after all. Still, it rankled somewhat, knowing that someone had delved into her past. “That’s an odd way to conduct business, isn’t it?” she asked with some asperity.

“On the contrary,” he said calmly, “it’s an efficient way of doing business.”

She couldn’t argue with that. Chey glanced around, a purely defensive gesture, and realized that art objects and other items from all over the world comprised much of the clutter. “What about personalities?” she asked. “Clashes happen, you know.”

“The way I look at it,” Brodie said, bringing her attention back to him, “it’s easier in the long run to work with someone who does a good job even if you don’t particularly like the individual, than to discover that someone you genuinely like is going to shaft you with shoddy work.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” she said coolly.

“My way,” he retorted succinctly. “So, do we have a deal or not?”

“That depends,” she said smoothly, though in truth she had no intention of turning down the job. “Exactly what is the deal? I mean, if you don’t want me to bid on the project, then I can only assume you’re offering a salary?”

He shook his head. “Not at all. I know exactly how much this

job is worth to me, how much it will probably cost and what a reasonable profit on it would be for you. I propose to deposit everything I'm willing to spend into a special bank account to which you will have unlimited access. I expect fully three-fourths of the sum will go into the house. The rest is yours. If you overspend, you diminish your own earnings. If you underspend... well, I'm warning you here and now that I expect quality for every penny and I'll be personally inspecting the work and the invoices."

It was eminently fair, provided he put up enough money. "What if I'm not satisfied with the sum you're willing to spend?"

"Then I'll look elsewhere," he said simply. "But I think you'll approve. And just for the record, the way I see it, I'm buying your expertise. That means you are in charge of everything that has to do with refurbishing, repairing and redecorating the house. Everything."

"Except you'll be checking up on me," she pointed out.

"Just to be sure I'm getting my money's worth," he clarified. "I won't be second-guessing you. You are the expert here, aren't you?"

His directness, like everything else about him, unsettled her. She was used to tiptoeing around certain issues, to employing great diplomacy and tact in swaying her clients to allow her to act for them. She said, with a little more asperity than she intended, "You bet I am."

He grinned, the wretch. "I'm banking on it, not that it's much

of a gamble. I happen to know that, in addition to your degree in architecture and design, you have a good deal of experience in restoration and the attendant construction disciplines. In fact, I'm told that you have actual on-the-job experience in trim carpentry, plumbing and masonry."

He actually knew about the summers she'd spent working in the trades with her brothers! She didn't know whether to be offended or impressed. The former felt safer. "Then why did you ask?" she snapped.

He chuckled unrepentantly. "Just to see how you'd respond. I dislike false modesty."

"And I dislike arrogance."

He laughed outright. "Is it arrogant to do your homework? To be sure someone's up to the job?"

She couldn't really argue with that, but she didn't have to like it. Folding her arms huffily, she said with heavy sarcasm, "I suppose you think you're a better business person than I am, because I've never gone to such lengths to check out anyone I've contracted with."

"But then you aren't the one ponying up a million dollars."

Her mouth fell open. It was almost twice what she'd expected, and she'd been prepared to fight, wheedle, beg and wrangle for that! She swallowed her mental exclamations and got her mouth wrapped around a sensible reply. Eventually. "Uh, that...I can definitely work with that."

He chuckled. "I should hope so." He straightened and

extended a hand toward her. "So then, are we agreed?"

She'd have been insane to balk at that point. "Absolutely." She put her hand in his. Lightning shot up her arm and down her spine. What was it about him that did this to her?

"I'll have the contract in your office tomorrow morning," he said, then, releasing her, he rose smoothly from the corner of the desk and swept his arm toward the door. "Now, shall we finish our inspection?"

She slipped by him untouched, but she was well aware that he was amused by her reluctance to come into physical contact with him again. She only wished that she could be amused about it. The fact was, it troubled her greatly. Men did not affect her this way; she didn't allow it, and she didn't like it one bit that she seemed to have no control over the matter where Brodie Todd was concerned. It left her little recourse except to restrict her attentions solely to the business at hand and ignore everything else.

He took her through his own Spartan, dreary bedchamber, several empty ones, three cramped, outmoded bathrooms, and Viola's slightly more personable suite. He pointed out every element of Seth's rooms, from the corner cabinet filled with toys in the playroom to the narrow bookcase crammed with reading material in the bedchamber. Brodie was especially concerned about the lack of amenities available for guests, explaining that he often entertained influential people, even foreign dignitaries on occasion, but he emphasized that the family rooms must come

first. They were just leaving another nondescript room when a small body hurtled around the corner and flung itself at Brodie's knees, exclaiming, "Daddy, I see Mama!"

Brodie looked up as Viola came into view, huffing slightly from trying to keep up with the boy. "How is she?" he asked. "Anything new?"

Viola shook her head. "She seems completely unchanged to me, and Brown says she's seen nothing beyond the usual eye flutters and twitches."

Brodie sighed and nodded. Viola stroked his arm consolingly. "Poor thing," she said. "I know you want her to improve."

"I want her to damned well wake up," he muttered fiercely, but before anything else could be said, Seth loudly demanded, "Twucks now, Gramuma!"

A duet of voices, Viola's and Brodie's, instantly instructed the child in the art of courtesy, and he rewarded them with compliance, changing his demand to a plea. "We pway twucks now pwease?"

When Chey and Brodie left the room, Viola was on her hands and knees on the floor unrolling a mat with a scale drawing of a highway system on it while Seth pulled out an entire carton full of toy trucks.

"I really should hire a nanny," Brodie said once the door was closed. "Caring for a small child is too much for Grandmama."

"Why don't you then?" Chey asked, curious despite her better judgment. Silently she was wondering why the child's mother

didn't just step in.

Brodie grimaced. "I don't want my son raised by servants. It might be different if his mother could devote a little attention to him."

"Why can't she?" Chey heard herself asking.

For the first time, Brodie's control seemed to slip. His handsome face hardened, and his hands tightened into fists. "See for yourself." Abruptly, he led Chey down a hallway toward the last of the rooms, saying, "I don't want her disturbed any more than necessary, for reasons you'll understand, I'm sure. I've already seen to her needs as best I can. In fact, I doubt it's necessary or even desirable that you do much with her suite, but I thought you ought to see it, at least." With that he opened the door of what seemed a combination sitting and hospital room. The walls had been plastered and painted coral pink. A ruffled sofa and chair stood around a plush rug and a delicate table over-flowing with a large vase of fresh flowers. The rest of the furnishings were strictly utilitarian, however, from the hospital bed to the monitors and intravenous pole. A small metal cart bearing a tabletop television and stereo was parked at the foot of the bed. Music played softly.

A tall, husky woman with short, tightly curled gray hair stood up from a comfortable chair as they entered the room. Chey nodded, but Brodie ignored the other woman, moving instead to the bed. The big woman's mouth turned down at both ends, but it struck Chey as her usual expression rather than one of present

disapproval. Chey approached the bed more out of curiosity than anything else and watched silently as Brodie sat down beside the small figure lying there. He picked up a slender, manicured hand and held it cupped in his own, speaking softly, telling the other person who Chey was and why she was there. Carefully, Chey sidled toward the foot of the bed, desperately wanting to see the person to whom he was speaking. What she saw shocked her deeply for two reasons.

The first was that the woman appeared to be comatose. The second was that hers was the face of an angel framed by bright, strawberry blond hair flowing over her shoulders and frilly white lace nightgown. Someone had made up her face, adding subtle color and shadow, but the angel herself slept on unaware. Indeed, only the gentle rise and fall of her chest gave any indication at all that she actually lived. Chey felt slightly sick to her stomach and told herself that it was compassion for the poor thing upon the bed, as well as her husband and son. It was at least partly that, but it was also more, and Chey was, at bottom, honest enough to admit to herself that she felt a twinge of pure envy as she watched Brodie reach up and gently cup, then pat one rosy, angelic cheek before rising to his feet once more and joining her at the foot of the bed.

“The doctors say it’s best to keep familiar things around her, so we brought her own furniture with us. We painted the walls her favorite color and set up the room exactly as it was in Dallas.” He nodded at the large woman standing to one side. “As her nurse,

Brown came with us.” Finally, he addressed the older woman. “This is Miss Simmons, Brown. She’s going to transform the house, bring it all up to form for us. If you or Janey have need of changes in your rooms, Miss Simmons is the one to consult.”

“I could use some fresh paint on my walls,” Brown stated matter-of-factly, “and the toilet in the bathroom runs all the time. I don’t need nothing else.”

“And Janey?” Brodie asked. “What about her?”

Nurse Brown bristled. “I take care of her needs.”

A muscle flexed in Brodie’s jaw. “I realize that,” he said tightly. “I meant, do you need any changes to make your job easier?” The woman shook her head. Chey couldn’t help noticing that her eyes were as cold and steely a gray as her hair. Brodie tilted his head. “Fine. If you think of anything later, just let me know.” With that he turned toward the hall door, motioning for Chey to follow. He pulled the door closed behind them, muttering, “Hateful old sow.” He glanced at Chey and said, “Sorry. But that woman rubs me the wrong way.”

“Then why keep her on?”

He grimaced. “Because she’s devoted to Janey. They knew each other before, you see. Brown was, is, a friend of the family. Janey’s mother died when she was small, and I guess for that reason Janey’s always depended on Brown. After the accident, Brown wouldn’t leave her side, and since the doctors think that if Janey wakes up again, it will help to have familiar faces and things around, I’ve kept her on.” He sighed, fingered his short, thick

goatee and said, "I wouldn't have moved Janey at all, frankly, but my grandfather died six months ago, and Seth and I are all the family my grandmother has left, so I decided to move everyone home to New Orleans, and that meant bringing Janey, and therefore, Brown with us."

Chey nodded her understanding, then ventured carefully, "Exactly what is Janey's condition, if you don't mind my asking?"

He shook his head and moved once more down the hallway toward the stairs. Chey fell in beside him as he spoke. "She's in a coma, obviously. The doctors don't know exactly why, some sort of trauma to the brain. She was drinking that night. It was March, Seth's first birthday, as a matter of fact. Anyway, she fell into a nearly empty swimming pool. It's a miracle she didn't drown, but I sometimes wonder if that wouldn't have been kinder."

Chey stopped and waited for him to turn to face her. "I'm sorry," she told him sincerely. "Two years of watching your wife languish in a coma must have been very difficult."

"Ex-wife," he corrected.

Chey blinked at him, the air fixed in her lungs. He wasn't married! Not that she should care. Better if he were. But surely he hadn't divorced his wife after she'd been injured. In Chey's opinion, that would have been despicable. It wasn't, however, any of her business.

He folded his arms and tucked in his chin, looking down at her, his blue eyes holding hers as surely as any physical touch. "We should get up to the third floor now," he said, changing the

subject.

She nodded, and he moved down the hallway once more. As he led her toward the upper and final story of the house, he talked about the changes he had made to accommodate the couple who cooked and cleaned for him. He'd had everything updated to their personal specifications, including the plumbing and wiring. Obviously, he considered it their private domain. The attics, however, were of prime interest to her, and she was right about the treasures hiding there.

Though dusty and disorganized, the place was crammed with enough antiques to keep an antique-lover happily busy for days just cataloging and investigating, exactly what she determined to do. At first glance it looked as if she could furnish the entire house with what she found there. It was an absolute treasure trove, and though she wasn't dressed for it, Chey could not resist digging through the most easily accessible portion. Before she realized it, she was absorbed in her discovery. She forgot about the pristine condition of her suit and everything else. It was one magnificent find after another, and the next thing she knew, Brodie was pushing hair out of her face, hair that should have been confined in its usual sleek twist. She looked up at him, shocked speechless to find him so close. He wound a golden-blond strand around his forefinger and tugged gently. She felt it all the way to the soles of her feet.

"I thought Wonderland was the temples of Malaysia or the rivers of India," he told her softly, "but I see that for you it's a

musty old room full of used furniture.”

Her heart, which seemed to have leapt up and lodged in her throat, was beating so hard she could barely speak, but somehow she managed to form the words, “Not used, antique.”

His smile spread all the way across his face. “Antique,” he conceded. Then she realized that his face was descending toward hers, that he meant to kiss her. She tilted her chin up, but at the first electric brush of his lips against hers, she yelped and hopped away, bumping her upper thigh on a sharp corner. Dumbly, she looked down and recognized a walnut sugar chest, probably built about 1840. One part of her mind spun out an assessment. A plantation piece from the days when sugar was a precious commodity kept under lock and key, it was not found much north of the Mason-Dixon line and would make an excellent occasional table. Another inner voice screamed that she should run before something awful happened, something that would change her life forever, something for which she was not prepared.

Defensively, she grabbed a lamp and cradled it in front of her as a shield, babbling, “I have to get back to the office, but if you don’t mind I’d like to take some of these things with me for appraisal.”

He looked at her for a long moment as if trying to decide whether or not to remove the impediment and press the advance, but then one corner of his mouth kicked up in a wry smile and he nodded. “Just show me what you want, and I’ll carry it downstairs.”

Inwardly, she breathed a sigh of relief—and tried her best to ignore the underlying disappointment.

Brodie stood leaning against a pillar on the front porch, thoughtfully stroking his goatee as he watched Chey's flashy little car roll down his drive toward the street, the almost nonexistent back seat crammed with several items he'd lugged down from the attics for her, among them the lamp she'd latched onto when he'd tried to kiss her. The lamp might be a priceless, once-in-a-lifetime find, but it was more likely that she'd latched onto it in pure self-defense, because he'd definitely scared her with that attempted kiss. What he didn't understand is why the hell he'd done it.

Oh, she was a spectacularly attractive woman, and he'd fully meant to kiss her from the instant he'd laid eyes on her—starting with those small, slender feet and those long, slender legs and ending with that long, slender neck, pretty oval face and sleek, pale golden hair. He wanted to ruffle her cool exterior, pull down that hair, kiss off that pink lipstick, rip the buttons from that neat, tailored suit, watch those light green eyes darken with unregulated passion. He wanted to strip her naked and lay her down. But Brodie Todd was a pragmatic, if sometimes emotional, man, and he'd realized from the beginning that she wasn't likely just to topple over and invite him to join her.

Unlike so very many women of his acquaintance, this one was going to take finesse. He accepted that as part of the challenge, a sort of enhancement. In her enthusiasm over the contents of

the attic, she'd given him proof of the passion he'd suspected all along, and he'd lost sight of the big picture, the ultimate goal. She had gotten so caught up in her dusty, jumbled finds that she hadn't even noticed when her stockings shredded and her bright hair began sliding free of its confinement. He had become so caught up in her that he'd forgotten to go slowly, to move cautiously—until she'd literally leapt away from him, and then it had taken all his control not to drag her back to him. He was surprised that she hadn't bolted in that very instant, but she'd taken her time, pretended indifference by concentrating her attention and her enthusiasm on the things in the attic. Then she had run, and she was running still.

He wondered how far he would have to let her go before he could coax her back to him. He did not wonder why he was so damned certain that he was going to do it, not that he was at all certain that he should. It would be complicated. Chey Simmons was not some casual conquest to enjoy one night and forget the next morning. She was going to be around for a while, beginning Monday morning when she had promised to fax the formal designs for his approval. Unfortunately, his fax was going to be down on Monday morning. Yes, continued interaction with his family was guaranteed. Luckily, they had liked her. True, she hadn't seemed particularly taken with Seth, but she'd handled him well. Then again, she ought to have, considering the size of her family.

Nine siblings. He was still surprised and a little awed by that.

He wouldn't have thought it would, but somehow the size of her family added a complex cachet to her persona. His only frame of reference was the closeness that he had shared with his younger brother. The idea of multiplying that by nine boggled the mind. For the first time, the thought occurred that if he'd had more siblings, he wouldn't be so alone now. Then again, people couldn't be replaced. His brother would still be gone, still be missed. He would still have a hole in his life and heart that could not be filled.

Pushing thoughts of his brother and the accident that had ended his life from mind, Brodie turned back into the house. He was relieved to find that, despite its dilapidation, the place was really starting to feel like home. Mostly it was his family, of course, and part of it was the city—the old queen had lost none of her allure—but a lot of it was the house itself. It spoke to him in the quiet, wordless whispers that only the heart could hear and understand. It fairly begged to be restored to its original and rightful splendor. Nevertheless, he'd dreaded the refurbishment—until now.

Now he was actually looking forward to it, thanks to sweet, aloof Chey Simmons.

Stopping at one end of the staircase in the wide, bisecting hall, he placed one hand on the graceful, curved banister and looked upward. Her concern for Janey had been as genuine as his own, though not for the same reasons, of course. He shook his head and began to climb the stairs toward his son's room. Along the

way, he allowed himself to feel the disappointment of diminished hope for Janey's condition. The doctors had warned him not to put too much stock in what had happened, but he'd been there, and the impact of the moment remained with him still. It had occurred as they were moving her, when the medical personnel were putting her into the ambulance for the trip to Louisiana from Dallas. After more than two years of unknowing, unseeing, nearly immobile silence, she had opened her eyes, looked at the young man holding the door and said quite distinctly, "Hello."

Brodie, who had just come out of the house, had stopped dead in his tracks. Then he had rushed to her side, but her eyes were rolling, as they often did, and she had not responded to his attempts to elicit further response. In that instant, she had seemed, sounded, perfectly lucid, but to his knowledge she had not been so since. He had so hoped, had prayed, that she was going to come back to herself and go about her life as they'd planned. He wanted that. He wanted Seth to have a real mother. He wanted her not to suffer. He wanted to be free of the unexpected, unbargained-for responsibility. And now, he wanted Chey Simmons. And he was determined to get some part of what he wanted.

As he moved toward Seth's room, he made a mental note to call the new doctors again before getting back to work on his exercise equipment. They might not have anything to offer him, but at least it would keep his mind off Chey Simmons. For a while.

Chapter Three

She didn't even glance away from the computer when her assistant Georges came into the office from the shop. "What is it now?"

"You have an important visitor," he announced with a flourish, "and I took the liberty of bringing her back."

Chey looked up with a practiced smile in place. Her mother moved gingerly through the doorway, the strap of her scuffed patent-leather purse clutched tightly in one gloved hand. Sighing inwardly at the sight of the small, warped, straw hat perched atop her mother's usual coil of smoke-gray hair, Chey pushed back from the desk and got up to kiss the other woman's cheek. It wasn't the fact that her mother's hat was decades out of fashion and that the sprig of honeysuckle which had been pinned to it was wilted and browning that pained Chey, but that she had purchased for the woman any number of stylish new hats which were never worn. As far as Louise Simmons was concerned, nice things were an unconscionable waste. It was as if she simply could not stop being the selfless mother who dared not dream of anything beyond the basics for her children and never of anything for herself. Chey wondered if her mother ever even thought of herself as anything other than just that, a mother. And while Chey was deeply grateful for, even in awe of, that kind of dedication, she had never wanted it for herself, precisely because

it seemed so very limiting.

Louise allowed Chey to steer her to the lyre-backed chair in front of the French Provincial desk and sat down, drawing off her gloves. She laid them atop the little pie-crust table at her elbow and said chattily, "I once gave five dollars for a table just like that at a second-hand store. Do you remember that table, Mary?"

Chey pressed her pink, professionally manicured nails to one smooth, golden-blond temple and tamped down her impatience. "I do, but that old pie-crust table is not why you're here, Mama. What's going on?"

Louise went straight to the point. "Kay and Sylvester are wondering if you're going to attend their little fais-dodo for Melanie's graduation. I told her of course you would, but she said you said something about not being sure of your plans, but it's only April, and that's plenty of time to arrange your calendar, so I was sure it wouldn't be a problem. Still, I thought I'd ask and have a little visit with you at the same time. We don't see you often enough, you know."

Chey sat down during this cheery speech and busied herself straightening the already neat desktop as a familiar sense of guilt stole over her. She would, of course, attend the graduation party. She wanted to. And yet, these family celebrations often left her unhappy and resentful.

"The term little fais-do-do is a contradiction in terms, Mama," she said smoothly, "especially in this family."

With nine siblings, all married and all with families of their

own, Chey sometimes felt like the lone member of a large tribe who just didn't get it. They were all content to carry on in the time-honored traditions of their clan, marrying young and birthing babies with the same casual joy with which they might play the accordion or fiddle for an impromptu dance in the backyard. Only Chey had resisted the mold. Only Chey had other plans, dreams. Only Chey had remained determinedly single and childless, reserving her dedication for her career. Only Chey did not fit in.

"Kay says that the kids stay out all night long and get into trouble when left to themselves," Louise went on, ignoring Chey's comment. "She wants to keep Melanie well occupied with family that night. I thought she was over-doing it a bit, but Frank says she has the right of it, and—"

"Frank would know," Chey said for her.

"Since his five have turned out so well," Louise finished with satisfaction.

If by "well" one meant that they'd all gotten through high school before they'd started having babies, Chey mused silently. Only she and a few of her nieces and nephews had gone on to college.

"By the way," Louise said, changing the subject. "Fay went for her ultrasound yesterday, and the doctor says it's almost surely a girl. Isn't that perfect? Now they'll have one of each."

"Any hope they'll stop at one of each?" Chey asked acerbically.

Louise rolled her eyes in apparent exasperation. "For heaven's sake, Mary Chey, most people like babies!"

"I like babies," Chey said. "I just think the Simmons clan has enough. I mean, am I the only one who thinks that life is about more than making babies?"

Louise answered that with a deep sigh. "It's about more than making money, too, you know."

Chey rolled her eyes and spread her arms. "This isn't about money, Mother. It's about accomplishment and quality of life. It's about doing something meaningful and being someone admirable."

"It's about you, dear," Louise Simmons said softly. "You've accomplished a great deal professionally, and I'm very proud of you. But don't you see that not everyone is fixated on their profession?"

"I'm not fixated, Mother," Chey retorted defensively.

"You have no life apart from this business. You don't even date," Louise pointed out. "How will you ever meet a man if you don't even date?"

An image of Brodie Todd flashed across her mind's eye. She banished it immediately, snapping, "I don't care about meeting men."

"But don't you grow tired of being alone, dear?" her mother asked, going on when Chey merely shrugged. "I know you don't want children, and that's fine. Parenthood isn't for everyone, and goodness knows I've no reason to complain with thirty-one,

almost thirty-two, grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren, but I do worry about you being alone.”

“Mom, I have just as much family as you do,” Chey pointed out.

“But you don’t have anyone of your own,” Louise said gently.

“You should talk. Daddy’s been gone for twenty years, and in all that time, you’ve never even looked at another man.”

“When you’ve had the best—” Louise began a familiar litany.

“I know that you loved him,” Chey interrupted, “and it just proves my point. That kind of love is very rare.”

“All your brothers and sisters are happily married,” Louise pointed out, “and here you are, thirty years old without even a steady boyfriend. A woman as pretty and bright as you ought to have a husband.”

“Mother, please, not now,” Chey pleaded impatiently.

Georges appeared just then, a sheet of paper in his hand. “Sugar, would you look at this invoice? I can’t make heads or tails of it, I swear.”

Louise subsided immediately, grasped the handle of her purse with both hands and looked down. “You have work to do,” she said softly, rising to her feet. “What shall I tell Kay and Sylvester, dear?”

Chey managed a smile. “Tell them I’ll be there, of course.”

Louise beamed. “Of course you will.” She reached across the desk and cupped Chey’s cheek in one worn hand. “Come for dinner soon, will you?”

Chey nodded, warmed despite her irritation. "Soon, Mama." She placed her hand over her mother's and hugged it briefly between her own palm and her cheek. She stood and smiled her mother through the door, then braced her hands flat against the desktop and bowed her head. "Thank you, Georges."

He wadded the piece of paper in his beefy fist, not at all to her surprise. The invoice had never been written that Georges Phillips could not decipher. It was part of what made him so valuable to her.

Solidly middle-aged and decidedly rotund, he was an odd combination of flamboyance and distinguished style. At the moment he wore a vanilla white suit and matching silk ascot with a flame-red shirt on his stocky, yet graceful body. His thinning, dark blond hair was combed back ruthlessly, allowing the silver of his temples and winged brows to challenge his blunt nose and plump mouth for dominance of his round face. His physical appearance and droll manner of speaking always put Chey in mind of a slightly slimmer, fitter Alfred Hitchcock, albeit one given to sometimes absurd sartorial splendors. Unfortunately, he was as astute with people as with billing invoices.

"Don't thank me," he told her snippily. "I didn't do it for you. I did it to spare that old dear's feelings. She's concerned about you."

"Well, she has no reason to be," Chey protested. "Why can't she understand that I'm perfectly happy just as I am?"

"Perhaps because your lifestyle is completely foreign to her,"

he suggested, “and just possibly because you aren’t as happy as you want everyone to think.”

“I am so!” Chey refuted hotly.

“Sugar, this is Georges you’re talking to. I know you better than you know yourself—and so does your mother, I suspect.”

“You wish,” Chey retorted sourly. “Just because you’ve been married countless times doesn’t mean that everyone has to trip down the aisle after you.”

“Four,” he corrected primly. “You have more fingers than that on each dainty hand, and don’t change the subject. Honestly, Chey, if you weren’t married to this business, you’d have a personal life like your mama wants. You’d have a man, a husband.”

“Maybe I should just marry you,” she retorted. “That would be good for business and get my family off my back, too.”

He made a face. “Not my style, darling. It’d be like marrying my sister.”

“Georges! Do you have a sister?” she teased, knowing perfectly well that he was one of three brothers.

“Don’t be cute. And if you want your family off your back, then find a man and fall in love!”

“You should know better than anyone that it’s not that easy,” she insisted.

“At least I try,” Georges said huffily, putting his round chin into the air.

“And you’ll keep on trying,” Chey said drolly.

“We’re not talking about me,” he said, pursing his cherry-red mouth.

“No, we’re talking about your boss,” Chey pointed out dryly, “the person who signs your paycheck.”

“The person who would be lost without me,” Georges added confidently.

He was right, darn him. She’d be lost without him as her assistant and friend, but he was wrong about the other. She had no intention of ever marrying. It would be unfair. Her career was much too important to her and left no room for the depth of dedication necessary for marriage and especially parenthood. Her family and friends didn’t understand that, however.

Chey sighed and slumped back in her chair. The position gave her a new perspective on the picture on her screen, and she immediately leaned forward again to tweak the placement of a certain element in the room design. For days now she had done little else but work on the Fair Havens project, and this was the final preliminary design.

“What do you think of this layout for the master suite?” she asked Georges, who walked around to lean over and study the computer screen.

“From a decorator’s perspective,” he finally said, “I love the claw-foot tub. From a man’s perspective, give me a real shower stall.”

“But the whole room is effectively a shower stall,” she explained. “It uses special waterproofing so curtains and stalls

aren't necessary."

"He's still standing in a bathtub to take a shower," Georges pointed out. "I wouldn't like it. Okay, so the shower stall is not a period piece, but we can make it look period."

Chey sighed and reached for the mouse. "You're right. Let's try this." She deleted the claw-foot tub and quickly inserted a partially sunken, built-in tub-and-shower combination of faux marble.

"Oh, that's good," Georges commented. "The faux marble keeps it lightweight for a second-story installation, and this particular design eliminates the need for curtains and doors. And it has the right look."

A chime sounded, alerting them that someone had opened the front door. "I'll go," Georges said, turning away from the desk.

Chey nodded absently, muttering, "Thanks. I want to get this faxed over to Fair Havens."

She manipulated the computer mouse and clicked. The expensive, photo-quality printer spooled up and began to spit out a black-and-white, computer-generated sketch. The ink wasn't even dry before Chey spun her chair and loaded the first sketch into the fax machine. She had added Brodie Todd's fax number to her computerized telephone book days earlier, and she called it up now. The fax machine was dialing even as the printer was spitting out the second sketch. Unfortunately, before the printer finished disgorging sketches, the fax machine reported that no connection could be negotiated with the dial-up number.

Drat. She would just have to take the drawings over herself then. After quickly making copies, she stuffed them into a folder, grabbed her briefcase and swept from the room. Georges was showing a unique brass-and-wrought-iron chandelier to an off-the-street customer, probably a tourist.

“I have to go to Fair Havens,” she announced, moving swiftly to the door. “Won’t be long. I’m just going to drop off the preliminary designs.”

Georges nodded and focused again on the customer. They walked out onto the banquette, or sidewalk, and turned left, then left again into the narrow, tunnel-like passage that led to her courtyard and tiny garage. It was only a few hundred square feet walled off from the rest of the old city block, but it was her own personal haven away from the world. She often sat here in the evenings, nursing a glass of wine, the scent of honeysuckle so thick that the sounds of the old city seemed to float on it. But she hadn’t done so lately and, she admitted, probably would not anytime soon. She tended to immerse herself in every project, and the bigger the project, the deeper that immersion. With Fair Havens, she couldn’t even see sky.

She opened the garage door and let herself into the driver’s seat of the car. Moments later she eased the car through the passage and paused level with the banquette until a break in traffic allowed her to pull out onto the narrow street. A quarter-hour later, she turned the small coupe onto the Fair Havens drive, marveling at the newly restored view from the street. Gone were

the scrubby undergrowth and wild vines that had hidden a six-foot-tall, black wrought-iron fence, not to mention the house, from the view of passersby. The grounds were immaculately groomed, and the massive birdbath in the circle in front of the house had been restored to a balanced, upright position. A stone bench and three marble garden angels of different sizes and styles had been added. Even with the exterior of the house still in a sorry state, the effect was simply stunning.

Suddenly, she was uncertain that her designs were up to the challenge. Perhaps she should return to the office and take another look at what she'd done, think it all through a little better. Yet, even as she considered the notion, she knew that her designs were not the root of her sudden reluctance to march up those steps and ring that loud brass bell. Her heart was racing for another, entirely different reason. Brodie Todd.

He unnerved her, intrigued her, disturbed her in ways she just hadn't expected. It was humbling to be so intensely physically aware of someone. She'd been telling herself for days now that the man could not be as wildly attractive as she remembered, and even if he were, the man was not for her. He was a client, and she never got involved with clients. It was unprofessional. Besides, the man had divorced his comatose wife! And he was a father.

Closing her eyes, she told herself sternly that it wasn't Todd as much as the job. She hadn't had a challenge like this in far too long, but it was a challenge to which she could, would, rise. She put the car in Park, shut off the engine and got out,

grabbing her briefcase from the passenger seat. She couldn't deny an alarming quiver in the pit of her belly as she climbed those steps, however, and when the door opened, her self-lies died abruptly and ignominiously.

Her mouth dried up at the very sight of him, standing there in crisply pleated, pale linen slacks and a loose, deep blue silk shirt that made his darkly lashed eyes glow like sapphires. The top three buttons of the collarless shirt were undone and the long sleeves were rolled up, exposing a small portion of smooth, bronze chest and strongly corded forearms. His smile flashed warmly.

"Hello."

She found it difficult to be pleasant simply because she so desperately wanted to be. "Your fax is not receiving," she said, embarrassed that her voice sounded breathless rather than brisk.

"Yes, I know," he said simply. "Sorry about that."

She lifted one knee slightly and attempted to balance her briefcase against it while extracting the file folder. "I'll just drop off these sketches."

She held up the file, but he didn't take it. Instead, he stepped aside and drew the door wide. "Come in."

She thought wildly of tossing the file inside and running. Instead, she stepped decorously over the threshold, letting him know that she didn't intend to stay. "I'll just leave them. You can look them over at your leisure and let me know what you think."

He didn't reply directly to that, just closed the door and

instructed, "This way," before turning and walking down the hall.

She wanted to throw something at his back, but she took a deep, calming breath and followed reluctantly. He took her all the way through to the garden room again, where everything had been rearranged. The fully assembled exercise equipment now occupied one end of the room, with the small forest of plants forming a privacy barrier of sorts. The table and chairs had been placed as close to the glass wall as possible, and a pair of small dry-sink bases had been brought down from the attic and arranged in such a manner that they did not block any portion of the view even while standing handy for service. One now held a pitcher full of iced tea and several slender tumblers. A marble plant stand held an old-fashioned oscillating fan, and a pair of oil lamps hung from two crooked lamp stands that flanked the table. They could almost see the room by the soft glow of lamplight, the table laid with china and silver and white linen. A table laid for two. She shook away the vision, commenting, "Someone's been busy."

"Do you approve?" he asked, lifting both arms wide.

"Very much," she answered, placing her briefcase atop the table.

"I won't mind if you make changes."

The way he said it told her a great deal, and she looked at him in a new light. "You did this."

He tilted his head in acknowledgment. "Grandmama really only has a care for the gardens." He pushed a hand through his

hair, admitting sheepishly, “And I’m getting a little impatient with the house.”

“Well, maybe these will help,” she said, placing the folder flat on the table.

He immediately turned away. “Care for some tea?”

“Oh, no. I have to get back to the shop.”

“I’d rather just go over them now, together. It’ll save time in the long run.”

It sounded like an order. Biting back an outright refusal, she pulled out a chair. “In that case, iced tea would be fine.”

He got busy pouring the tea then carried the drinks to the table and took the chair closest to her. After sipping from his glass, he sat forward and pulled the folder around to flip open its cover. The sketch of his grandmother’s suite was on top of the stack of renderings. He looked at the floor plan carefully, tracing the traffic pattern with his fingertip, then switched to the artistic conception.

“Oh, she’ll like this. Didn’t I see this sofa in the attic?”

Chey swallowed the mellow tea in her mouth and said, “Absolutely.” She leaned forward, intending to elucidate, but he laid aside that sheet and picked up the next, which was a rendering of the nursery. Brodie laughed aloud and leaned back in his chair. “This is wonderful!”

A delicious warmth spread through Chey. “I’m glad you approve.”

“Very much,” he said, setting aside that one and picking up the

next, which was his own. He tilted his head, studying the sketch. Chey found that she was holding her breath, and she literally flinched when he picked up the next sheet with his free hand, that of his office suite. “This is almost perfect,” he finally said.

She felt an irrational stab of disappointment and immediately scolded herself. Almost perfect was practically unheard of in her business, especially at this stage. “What’s the problem?” she asked anxiously.

He waved a hand. “Nothing important. It completely has to do with the office. I have my own system, and the office arrangement has to facilitate that. We’ll fix it. Otherwise, I like what you’ve done. Very much.” She smiled, and he smiled back. Then, instead of picking up the next drawing, he leaned toward her suddenly and asked, “Are you hungry? Because I’m starving, and it is almost lunch time.”

She immediately began to disengage. “Oh, I—”

“Grandmama has taken Seth on an excursion,” he interrupted, “and I find I’m not crazy about eating alone anymore.” He reached for her hand and folded his own around it, his gaze holding hers. “Have lunch with me? Marcel will be thrilled. He constantly complains that he doesn’t have enough to do.”

She knew without doubt that she shouldn’t, though she’d had lunch with clients before, of course. Yet, this was different. Staying would definitely be foolish, so she smiled, shook her head and intended to say, No, thank you. What came out was simply, “Thank you.”

“Excellent!” He was up and moving before she could correct herself. He disappeared into the house, and returned again moments later. “I hope you like seafood salad in pita bread with yam chips. Marcel is a genius with yams.” He sat down and leaned close once more. “Marcel is a genius with food, period. Now let’s have a look at the rest of these.” She smiled wanly and watched in silence, puzzled by her own acquiescence, as he went over the renderings of the downstairs rooms.

He made a few suggestions about the game room, saying that he’d found among the articles in the attic a sideboard which would make a marvelous wet bar and a classic old billiards table for which he’d ordered new slate. She took out a pencil and lightly sketched in the changes, barely noticing how closely together their heads were bent until he took the pencil out of her hand. Looking up, she sat back and watched as he made a few changes himself, her heart suddenly pounding with awareness.

“Will that work, do you think?” he asked, leaning his shoulder against hers.

She barely glanced at the paper. “Appears workable to me.”

He looked up, something dark and intense shadowing his blue, blue eyes. Just then, a tall man dressed all in white wheeled a cart into the room. Having already met his wife, small, pale Kate, Chey was somehow unprepared for big, black Marcel with his round, shaved head and hands the size of small hams.

“Ah, company at last!” he exclaimed, flashing her a smile.

“I promised Marcel that he would get to cook for a great

many people,” Brodie explained indulgently, “and he’s growing impatient.” The big man chuckled as he prepared the table with the previously imagined china, silver and white linen. All that was missing, Chey mused wryly to herself, was the lamplight, and thank God for that!

Marcel took his leave the moment the food was on the table. Brodie hadn’t exaggerated the big man’s talent, and it only took one bite to know it. The flavors of diced shrimp, crab, clams, celery, brown rice, pecans, onion, bell pepper and mayonnaise flavored with chili powder and other spices mingled on her tongue. When she followed it with a cinnamonony sweet yam chip, the effect was exquisite.

“Coconut cream cake for dessert,” Brodie announced before taking a huge bite of his own pita.

Chey rolled her eyes and shook her head, but her traitorous gaze strayed to the second tier of the serving cart where an old-fashioned shortcake had been piled high with custard, whipped cream and toasted coconut.

“I’d get fat if I lived in this house,” she blurted.

His blue gaze swept over her. “I don’t think so. You seem to have a naturally svelte figure. I’d lay odds you don’t even work out.”

“I’d have to if I ate like this all the time,” she retorted, tacitly admitting that he was correct and purposefully ignoring what felt very much like a compliment.

“Some workouts are hugely satisfying,” he said softly, then

looked away before she could determine what exactly he meant by that. He went on, admitting, "I love good food. It's one of the great luxuries of life, don't you think?"

With her mouth full of the most scrumptious seafood salad she'd ever eaten, she could do nothing more than nod her head in agreement. He smiled at her, a slow, lazy, speculative smile that set her insides to quaking. Determinedly, she fixed her mind on work, specifically this very room. What a lovely place it was with its view of the gardens and pool. The potted plants seemed to bring the outside indoors. She looked up, thinking that two or three ceiling fans would be welcome additions. She imagined strings of twinkling lights, tables scattered among the plants for an informal dinner party. How charming it would be.

"You know," she said absently, "since you expect to entertain a good deal, we may want to rethink how you're using this room."

"What do you have in mind?" he asked, leaning on one elbow. She told him and could see the approval building in his eyes. "Okay, sounds good, but you didn't say where the workout equipment would go."

She thought about it, winnowing through her ideas aloud. "We could use the old smoking room, turn it into a regular gym, but it's right in the middle of the formal rooms downstairs, and I don't like the feel of that."

"No one will use the equipment other than me, anyway," he commented.

"Then we should dedicate a space for it in your suite," she

said, reaching for the folder that had been pushed to one side. She flipped open the cover and removed the drawing she wanted, then shoved aside her plate and plucked the pencil from behind her ear. Swiftly, she began sketching again. Brodie shifted his chair closer and watched, munching his pita idly. "If we removed this wall," she muttered, marking it out, "and opened the dressing room this way, we could put in an exercise room. We could make the bathroom a little smaller if needed."

"Uh-uh," he said. "I like that bathroom. I love that bathroom."

"Okay, leave the bathroom," she said, putting back what she'd been removing. She tilted her head, studying the drawing again, and tapped an area of it with two fingers. "I wonder which of these rooms is the largest. I plugged the data into the computer, of course, but I didn't put the figures on the print out, and naturally I can't remember now."

Brodie popped the last of his pita into his mouth and pushed back his chair. "If you've had enough to eat, why don't we just go look? I have a measuring tape around here somewhere."

"Good idea."

He got up and pulled her chair out for her as she followed suit. Marcel appeared as they were moving away from the table. "You can remove the lunch plates," Brodie said genially, "but leave the dessert. We'll be back for it."

"That seafood salad was luscious," Chey told the chef, and he beamed.

"Now you've done it," Brodie told her, pulling her arm through

his.

“What?”

“He’ll meet you at the door with a plate of food the next time you arrive,” Brodie warned, only half joking. “Marcel lives to cook. Feeding people wonderful food is his primary mission in life. I sometimes worry that if I don’t get some empty bellies in here for him to fill he’ll leave and go back to restaurant work.”

“No wonder you’re impatient to get the house into shape,” she said.

“The satisfaction of my stomach depends upon it,” he quipped dryly.

She shook her head, laughing, and only later, as he escorted her upstairs, did she reflect that this man’s charm was lethal. They went into his office, where he searched out a small, flimsy measuring tape that did not exceed ten feet in length. Just to complicate matters, the silly thing would retract without warning, snapping right out of her fingers, which meant they often had to start all over again. It took several tries to get two measurements in the outer chamber, and by the time they managed it, Chey was holding on to the end of that tape measure for dear life, reluctant to let go for any reason, so when it retracted again and it seemed she couldn’t stop it, she stupidly followed it—right into Brodie Todd.

She bumped against his chest and, startled, looked up, the tape measure and their hands trapped between them. For an instant, he seemed as shocked as she was, but then he let go of

the measuring tape case, and it hit the floor between her feet with a clunk, leaving her with the end of the tape still clamped between her fingertips and her wide gaze trapped by his own rapidly darkening one. He moved his hand, dropping it slightly and opening it to slide his palm across her ribs, just beneath her breast. The other hand he clamped around the nape of her neck. She couldn't seem to look away or move.

He bent his head, then brought her mouth to his with the gentle pressure of his hand at the back of her head. Sensation swamped her, radiating from his hands and mouth into her skin, muscles and bones, suffusing her with a trembling warmth that sent her good sense begging and pooled heavily in her breasts and belly. At first the kiss was light, tender, easy, just a simple meeting of lips. Then, entirely of their own accord, her eyelids fluttered shut, and everything changed.

He wrapped his arms around her, tilted his head, and opened her mouth with his, sliding his tongue inside. She heard a hiss and was dimly aware that it must have been the tape sliding into the case, which meant, of course, that she had let go of the end, which would explain how her hands came to be sliding up his chest and around his neck. He made a sound of acute pleasure and tightened his arms, plastering her body to his as his tongue delved deeper.

She forgot why this was a bad idea. She forgot everything but the desire for more. She wanted to be closer, to feel more, to do more. She needed more from his mouth, more from the hard,

sculpted planes of his body, more from the hands now kneading her flesh with mounting urgency as she moved against him. As if he knew exactly what she needed most, he dropped a hand to her bottom, cupping and lifting her against him even as he wedged a knee between hers, shoving her skirt indecently high. She melted from the inside out, undulating instinctively against him.

Suddenly they were two wild things, grabbing and grinding, trying to devour each other. She was so lost that she didn't even hear the little voice that shattered it. All she knew was that one moment she wanted to tear his skin open and crawl beneath it, and the next instant he was shoving her away. She blinked up into his face, astonished to be doing so and then more astonished by all that had just happened. She didn't have time to be embarrassed, thankfully, because Seth hurtled past her and threw himself at Brodie.

"Daddy, I saw pishes!" He held out his arms. "Gweat big pishes!"

Brodie finally looked away from her and smiled down at his son. "That's great!" They became aware of another person entering the room then, and heat bloomed in her cheeks. She turned away, folding her arms, and pretended to be studying the far wall. "Did you go to the aquarium?" she heard Brodie ask.

Viola answered him. "No. We were walking along the street and..."

They barely listened to the story, something about a truck delivering fish to a local restaurant and a broken crate, ice going

everywhere. Chey became aware, belatedly, that everyone was laughing, but she couldn't manage more than a smile as the full realization of what she'd done finally settled over her.

Kiss seemed too small a word for what they'd shared. A mere kiss didn't make your insides tremble and clench long after the fact. It didn't make you curl your hands into fists just to keep from reaching out for more. Even her throat was trembling so badly that she could barely swallow. Suddenly she had to get out of there.

"I think I have everything I need for now," she announced abruptly, turning and heading toward the door. "I'll show myself out." He said something to Viola, then Chey heard him coming after her and picked up the pace.

He caught her at the top of the stairs, hauled her around easily, his big, exquisite hands with those long, tapered fingers and wide palms encircling her upper arms. His blue gaze plumbed hers. "Chey, we haven't even had dessert."

She managed to look away. "None for me, thank you. I really have to go."

"When will you be back?"

"Soon."

"Very soon, I hope." His voice was rough, husky. "As soon as possible."

"As soon as possible," she agreed, which wouldn't be soon at all. He slid his hands up and down her arms, and then he finally let her go.

She was in the car before she remembered that she'd left her designs and briefcase in the garden room. She didn't go back for them. She didn't dare.

Chapter Four

Brodie strangled the telephone receiver with both hands, then closed his eyes and tamped down his temper before calmly going back to the conversation.

“Will you please give Ms. Simmons another message,” he said, keeping his tone light and breezy, until the end when he allowed the underlying steel to show through. “Tell her that if she doesn’t present herself on my doorstep within the next twenty-four hours I will personally hunt her down and drag her here!”

He rolled his eyes, allowing her prissy assistant to nervously rattle on and on about how busy she’d been and how hard she was working and how he was personally sure that she’d be back in touch as soon as possible. He’d heard it all before and was no closer to buying it now than the first time. The little coward was avoiding him, but no longer. He wasn’t above using any of the weapons in his arsenal, which was formidable, and she might as well learn it now.

“Twenty-four hours,” he interrupted flatly and turned off the phone.

It had been more than a week since that kiss. He’d called repeatedly, even dropped by her shop to return her briefcase and sketches, but the only face he’d seen, the only voice he’d heard, belonged to that fashionable fireplug of an assistant of hers. George, he thought the name was.

Brodie personally hated assistants. He'd tried to work with them, but they invariably got in his way. It was easier just to do what had to be done himself than to delegate everything. Besides, the business pretty much ran itself from the corporate offices in Dallas. He had a lean, efficient staff operating a mere dozen offices around the world and a state-of-the-art web site. It was a neat, tight operation and a lucrative one. Oh, he knew he could make some fast bucks in a big way if he'd go public, put a BMT Travel Agency on every other street corner, but he knew instinctively that in the long run it would be the death of the thing.

BMT's success was built on personal service to exotic locales. Part of the allure had to do with the fact that not just anyone could get in on the deal. Spaces were limited and prices high, satisfaction an absolute guarantee. His customers were upscale and demanding, just like him, and he personally negotiated every service contract with every nation that sponsored a tour package, which often resulted in travel visas not available to the general public. He also had the final say on every package that was designed and put together by his team, and he always took the first tour himself before any customer was allowed to buy space. Otherwise, he spent most of his time with Seth and Viola.

It was a good life, but he was mature enough to admit that lately it seemed to lack something, something about five-feet-six-inches tall and deliciously curved. He pondered that kiss again. The sizzle was still with him. Every time he looked in the mirror

he half expected to find his eyebrows singed off. It had been a long while since a kiss had so affected him. Who was he kidding? No kiss had ever affected him like that one, and he knew darn well that she'd felt the same thing, so why was she avoiding him?

She could be involved with someone else. He disliked competition, but he could handle it—given the chance. Then again, he firmly believed that a man made his own chances, and so he would see her tomorrow. One way or another.

The bell rang at precisely ten o'clock in the morning, too late for breakfast and too early for lunch but well within the twenty-four-hour deadline. Brodie got up from his desk and started downstairs, aware that someone else within the household would likely beat him to the door.

When Brodie arrived on the scene, it was Viola who stood to one side of the closed door, beaming affectionately as Seth regaled “Mish Chey” with the latest episode of his morning television program, complete with extravagant gestures and sound effects. Chey stood, staring down at him politely as he spoke. Her assistant stood next to her, a familiar briefcase tucked beneath one arm as if to justify his presence. Not even bothering to pretend interest in the prattle of a little boy, he craned his neck to see what could be seen of the house. It was he who spotted Brodie and sent a discreet elbow to his employer's ribs.

Chey straightened as Brodie strode near, and for an instant he thought he saw a flash of heat in her eyes, but it was followed so quickly by wariness that he couldn't be certain. He didn't smile,

though the impulse was strong. She looked like a confection ready to be devoured, all ivory and pale blue and yellow hair twisted into an elaborate knot that begged to be unwound.

He placed a quelling hand on top of Seth's head; otherwise, the monologue could have gone on indefinitely as Seth tended to get caught up in these recitals and embellish them, imagination blending seamlessly with actuality. Seth looked up, caught Brodie's wrist with both hands and tried to climb him like a tree, announcing unnecessarily, "Mish Chey an' some guy come see us, Daddy."

Brodie ignored Chey and concentrated on the assistant, sticking out his hand. "I believe the name is George?"

"It's Zhorzh," the man sniffed, emphasizing the pronunciation with a decidedly French accent. Brodie mumbled an ill-natured apology, and only then did Zhorzh grace him with a handshake.

"This is my son Seth," Brodie said by way of introduction, "and this is my grandmother, Viola Todd."

"How do you do?" Georges said, bowing slightly over Viola's hand.

To Brodie's everlasting amazement, Viola actually blushed and batted her lashes. "A pleasure to meet you, Georges."

Brodie barely restrained himself from rolling his eyes. Georges literally shoved past Chey, saying, "You don't need me, do you, dear?" Before Chey could answer him, he addressed himself meaningfully to Viola. "I only came to get a look at this beautiful old house."

Taking the bait, Viola insisted, "Well, I must show it to you, then. Come along, Seth."

Georges handed the briefcase to Chey and followed Viola and Seth down the hall. Chey stared after them with such barely concealed disgust that Brodie had to discipline a smile. He was perfectly aware why Georges was there, and it wasn't to see the house. He had to wonder just how much buffer she'd thought Georges would be.

"Let's do this in my office," he said, knowing that it would afford the greatest privacy of any room in the house, aside from his bedroom. The business setting apparently appealed to her, for she nodded and started briskly for the stairs. He let her pass him, wondering if she realized how much her hips swayed with her consternation. Grinning to himself, he slid his hands into his pants pockets to quell the urge to put his hands on her.

He followed her up the stairs, admiring the way her slender skirt pulled neatly across her rounded bottom with each step. By the time they reached the landing, his hands had made fists inside his pockets. Counting prudence the better part of valor, he went ahead of her and opened the door to his office. She stepped inside as if expecting to find a trap. He closed the door behind them and went to remove a crate of files from a chair at the end of the desk for her, then slid around to his own chair. She sat down gingerly, crossed her long lean legs and placed the briefcase on her lap. He took his seat and rolled the chair as close to the corner of the desk, and her, as he could. She was already spreading out

the designs. A glance showed him that they were quite detailed this time and many more in number than before. She had been busy, and he gave that industry the respect it was due, studying each design carefully.

The family rooms were much as they'd discussed before, only the designs were fully realized this time. The guest rooms were the big surprise. She had employed specific themes here, each one designed to show off his personal collection of artifacts and art objects. One room was labeled Oriental, another European and a third Polynesian. The big surprise was the room labeled Western Americana. All of the designs, though specific in theme, showed an underlying period fashion in line with that of the rest of the house. He might have been an antebellum planter who had managed to see the world and even the future and bring back pieces of it to decorate his lovely home.

He tossed the last of the renderings onto the top of the pile he had made of the others and sat back in his chair, contemplating the woman who had made them. "These are," he said deliberately, "incredible."

She sat a little straighter, her personal guard lowered by the long minutes concentrated on business. "You approve then?"

"Wholeheartedly."

She smiled for the first time and dove back into her briefcase. "You'll need to look at these lists and schedules then." Eagerly, she brought them out, lists of contractors, supplies, tasks to be completed, schedules for the same. He looked over everything

carefully, nodding his approval.

“How soon can we get started?”

“I thought we’d start with the air-conditioning,” she said delightedly. “I can meet the contractor here tomorrow. He ought to have men on the job in the next day or so.”

He tossed the papers aside. “Do it.”

She seemed surprised. “Just like that? No quibbling over details?”

“We’ve been at least a week longer at this than I would have liked,” he drawled meaningfully.

She immediately bounced up to her feet and began stuffing the papers into the briefcase. “Fine. We’ll be here tomorrow.”

He recognized a bolt when he saw it and sat forward abruptly, clamping a hand around her wrist. “Sit down.”

He meant it as an order, and she took it that way, slowly sinking down into her chair, the briefcase balanced on the corner of his desk.

“I fail to see what else we have to talk about,” she said crisply, her gaze targeted on her lap.

He almost laughed at that. Instead, he got up and walked around his chair to the end of the desk. He parked himself on the corner and folded his arms, intending to be firm. “You know perfectly well what we have to talk about.”

She said nothing.

“I’m not going to let you pretend it didn’t happen,” he told her patiently. She lifted her chin, neither answering him nor looking

at him. He sighed and leaned forward, spelling it out. "We kissed. We were interrupted. You ran, and now you're avoiding me. I want to know why." She looked down but didn't say a word. He straightened and folded his arms again, insisting, "It wasn't because you didn't enjoy it. That much I do know."

Finally a response. She glared at him. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means, you were as heated up as I was." She looked away again. "You liked it as much as I did," he insisted doggedly. "So what is your problem?"

"I don't have a problem," she said with a shrug. "I just prefer not to repeat the experience."

"Why?"

"Why should I?"

He chuckled mirthlessly at that. "Oh, I don't know, maybe because I melted your underwear." She shot him an affronted look. "Mine was smoking, too," he assured her bluntly, noting the flare of satisfaction in her eyes, "which adds up to plenty of reason to repeat the experience as far as I'm concerned."

"It means just the opposite to me," she said, smoothing her hands down the narrow wood arms of the chair, "because I never get involved with clients."

"Until now," he corrected coaxingly.

"Sure of yourself, aren't you?" she snapped.

He went down on his haunches beside her chair. "Is it someone else? Are you involved with someone else?"

She bit her lip, looked down, then admitted, “No.”

“So it’s strictly a business decision?”

“That’s right.”

“Then I’ll have to cancel your contract.”

She immediately launched to her feet. “You can’t do that!”

He rose smoothly and brought his hands to his hips. “The contract that cannot be broken has never been devised.”

“I’ll sue you!”

“Before or after we make love?” he returned smoothly.

She glared at him and folded her arms. “I do not indulge in casual affairs.”

“Good, because this is a long way from a casual attraction.”

“I’m certainly not interested in anything serious, either!”

“Look,” he said bluntly, a little desperate now, “I’m not rushing you to the altar, I’m just trying to get you into bed!”

She went immediately frosty. “I don’t sleep around.”

“I don’t want you to sleep around,” he retorted. “I want you to sleep with me!”

She grabbed up her briefcase and began stuffing renderings into it. “That’s not going to happen.”

He leaned close and said softly into her ear, “No? You really have no inclination to explore this thing between us, this incredible attraction?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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