

The book cover features a man and a woman in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman has blonde hair and is wearing a blue patterned dress. The man has dark hair and is wearing a dark turtleneck. They are positioned in front of a large, modern building with a grid-like facade. The sky is dark and cloudy, with a bright light source visible in the upper right corner. The title 'THE TAKEOVER' is written in large, stylized, metallic letters at the top. The author's name 'MARY SUZANNE' is written in similar metallic letters at the bottom right.

# THE TAKEOVER

MARY  
SUZANNE

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The Takeover

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*To our Family...*

## THE TAKEOVER

Randi McLaughlin jumped out of the cab onto the sidewalk as soon as it stopped in front of the multi-storied office building. People were hurrying along the sidewalk in the business district of New York City, but not one paid any attention to Randi. This city is so impersonal, she thought, wondering why she hadn't noticed it before. Since leaving a month before to secure financial help to save her company, she had worried the entire time she was gone. Although she always tried to keep in touch with the office on a weekly basis, she hadn't heard anything in over a week about how the business situation was doing.

There had been threats earlier of a buyout of her business by a larger company, but Randi figured she had enough time to get the money together that she needed. The bank manager said he would give her a month to comply with the

note that was due. She only hoped that he was going to keep his word.

She had flown to Italy, remembering some of the sources her father had used for financial backing in the past. Once she reached the banking institution near the village where she was staying and filled out the necessary forms, she was told that help for her was only a phone call away from the bank in New York.

The sleepy little village in Italy had problems with their phone system, making it impossible for Randi to find out what was going on at home, or to contact the bank in the states. She had tried to travel to another of the small towns to see if their phone system was working, but hadn't had any luck in placing the calls she needed to make.

There was no way she wanted to lose the family held cosmetics business that had been founded by her father, Mac McLaughlin. Since her mother had died in childbirth, Mac had influenced all of Randi's young life. He had taught her the business, and when he died a little over a year ago, she tried to carry on to make it more successful. What she didn't realize at the time was that the company was so in debt from past mismanagement, only a miracle could save the drowning business.

Her thoughts came back to the present as she reached in the window and paid the cabbie his fare. She turned toward the impressive looking

building housing the cosmetic empire that she owned. As Randi walked toward the revolving doors, she caught a glimpse of her image in the plate glass windows.

The long flowing brunette hair that swept her shoulders had a reddish sheen that reflected brightly in the afternoon sun. The stylish green business suit she was wearing outlined her curvaceous figure in all the right places. The emerald color of the suit matched her snapping green eyes, shrouded by long sooty lashes.

Randi entered the main lobby of the building and noticed right off that something wasn't quite right. The information desk that had always been in the center near the doors was no longer there. As her eyes swept the room, she noticed it had been moved to the far end of the hall. The receptionist that always greeted people when they arrived and provided information wasn't seated at the desk. In her place, was a man that Randi didn't recognize.

She walked across the room toward the desk with one purpose in mind. Randi was determined to get to the bottom of things and find out what was going on. The sound of her heels clicking against the marble floor filled the silent hallway. When she reached the man sitting behind the desk, he glanced up at her.

"May I help you?"

"Yes, I'm Randi McLaughlin and I'd like to know why this desk was moved from the center of the room?" She realized the man didn't recognize her even though she had given him her name.

"You'll have to find out from Mr. Mathews. Would you like me to ring upstairs and find out if he will see you? His office is on the fifteenth floor of the building."

"Are you talking about Jake Mathews?" Her tone was cutting. "I own this company and am not about to ask Jake Mathews questions. And for another thing, *my* office is on the fifteenth floor."

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Mathews didn't mention you to me," he told her as he gave her an odd look. He picked up the phone when it rang and his attention was diverted from Randi.

Surely, Jake Mathews hadn't bought out her company while she was gone. That would be more insulting to her than having him walk out on her as he had. Her thoughts returned to a year ago when she'd been engaged to Jake Mathews. He had decided right before the wedding date that he wasn't ready for marriage. It had taken Randi a long time to rid her mind of the sweat-filled nights when their bodies were entwined and they had made passionate love until the wee hours of the morning. The headiness of the rapture she'd experienced in the past filled her head for only seconds, replaced by anger and disbelief that he

was walking back into her life.

In the past, she remembered how Jake had talked about managing to move in for the kill and find a way to take over a business that was in trouble. That was his specialty, but Randi never thought he would try to do it to her. He had been the one who had wanted out of their passionate relationship. She had suffered over his rejection, but now she had a handle on the hurt that had filled her heart.

She silently wondered if he had changed since she'd last seen him. He stood well over six feet with an athletic build that could still rock her senses. Jake always wore his jet-black hair a little longer than normal, giving him an exciting roguish appearance that could still tweak her heartstrings. No, she would not think about the past. He had hurt her too much and all she wanted was to find out what he was doing in her office.

Waves of anger filled her as she stomped off toward the elevator. In the background, she could hear the man at the desk calling out for her to stop. Instead of listening to him, she hurried into the elevator as soon as the doors slid open.

The nerve of that man, she thought. She shook her head in disgust at being told what to do in her own office building. She intended to find out what Jake Mathews was doing and why he was in her office. And nothing anyone could say would stop



her.

When Randi reached the fifteenth floor, the doors of the elevator opened and she walked out into the room housing the huge office. She didn't see Jake Mathews at first, but when her eyes scaled the room, she found him near the window, looking down at the busy city street below.

Looking at the outline of Jake from behind, Randi couldn't see any change in his muscular build. The sinewy muscles of his arms stood out, showing clearly from the short-sleeved shirt that he was wearing. He looked the same as the day he'd walked out on her. She closed her eyes for a second and visualized how he'd looked when they last made love. His tanned torso had been raised above her, melding with the milky whiteness of her body. The warm night they'd made love on the roof of Jake's apartment held all the romance any woman could have asked for. The sky had been full of stars twinkling brightly overhead and only a half moon lit the darkness around them. The erotic thought brought a yearning in her that she thought she'd squelched long ago.

"You can come in," Jake's deep rich voice echoed off the window.

There was a husky sound to his tone that she'd always loved but had forgotten since they had parted. Now, it was all coming back to her in a rush. She felt a weakness in her legs as she silently

listened to him. She didn't want to experience this excitement when it came to Jake.

\* \* \* \*

Eventually, he turned from the window and faced her. He was doing his best to keep his emotions from showing on his face. Lord, but this woman was even more beautiful than he remembered. He thought he had memorized every delicate feature that she possessed, but he was mistaken.

Right then he would have liked nothing better than to brush aside all the papers on his desk and throw her across it. A surge of adrenaline raged through him to possess her, body and soul. It had been so long and he was feeling the loss in the region of his loins. Want for her filled his body to dynamic proportions until he feared the hidden thoughts he was having would soon spill out of him for her to see. That was the last thing he wanted to happen. Even though he ached with an unsatisfied lust, he had to control the urge that was seizing every part of him and discuss with Randi what needed to be said.

\* \* \* \*

Her unhurried inspection of his rugged features told her that he was still the most handsome man

she'd ever met in her life. There was something about him that could still set her pulses racing and put her mind into a whirl of wanting him. There was no denying what she was feeling. The spark was there even though she had suffered hurt and humiliation when he'd walked out of her life.

For the longest time they stood staring into each other's eyes. Jake's dark gaze seemed to drag hers into his. She couldn't break his compelling hold and found for a few seconds that she didn't want to. All of the past came bursting into her head and she experienced the passion that they had shared throughout their time together. There were such sensuous thoughts bubbling out of her that she only hoped her reaction to him didn't show on her face. She had to remember that he had hurt her, but as she let information continue to fill her head, her thoughts returned to what they had shared.

Randi felt as if he was pulling her into a vortex with the magnetic spell he was creating over her. She had the feeling she was drowning in the depths of his black eyes and there was no way she could surface for air. The stifling sensation brought an unexplained heaviness to her chest that she couldn't understand. There was no getting away from the truth, she thought wildly. She wanted him as much as the day he'd walked out of her life, but this time the feeling was more intense. Somehow she was going to have to hide

her reaction from him.

"What do you think you're doing in my office?" she asked sharply, shaking her head slightly to clear it.

"This is my office now, Randi." His tone was cool. "All you have to do is call the bank and Mr. Jeffers will give you all the information you need"

"That's not possible," she told him angrily. "I talked to Mr. Jeffers before I left for Italy and he said that I had enough time to secure the loan, which I did, with some sources my father used in the past."

"Well, some of the shareholders didn't want to wait and see if you could manage to get financial backing." He watched her face drain of all color.

\* \* \* \*

In that moment, Jake knew that Randi realized she had lost the company and was no longer the president of McLaughlin Cosmetics. This wasn't the way he had pictured or wanted their meeting to go after almost a year had gone by.

\* \* \* \*

"How can you be such a thief, Jake? All the while you professed to being in love with me, and a friend to my father, when you were just out to get

the company. Pretending to want to marry me was your way of figuring out a plan to take advantage of us. Now you're ready to take over and leave me out in the cold," she said in a stinging tone.

"That's the farthest thing from the truth. The thoughts that you concocted never entered my head. If you'll sit down, we can discuss what our plans are for the future."

"I don't see how we could have any future together when it would be built on lies," she stated in a grating tone. "You move in and take what you want no matter the consequences. When you walked out on me, I made a promise to myself never to trust you or anyone again. My father was right. You are a ruthless man that doesn't let anyone get in his way. I don't believe we have anything else to talk about. You can be assured I will consult an attorney to find out if what you're doing is legal."

"Will you stop your ranting and raving and listen for once?" he asked irritably. "I have a deal to put to you and if you're interested, we can both make more money than we ever envisioned."

\* \* \* \*

Randi was at a loss to understand what he was talking about. He was certainly going to have to do more explaining before she was ready to

commit to anything he suggested. She still didn't trust him, but something told her that she should listen to what he had to say. Maybe there was still a way to save the company. Hadn't her father told her that a good businessman always considered every option? Well, she didn't have much choice now. It was time to calm down and listen to what he had to say concerning their future.

\* \* \* \*

"What I'm going to propose may shock you, but please listen with an open mind." Jake waited until she slipped into a chair opposite his desk before he started speaking. He sat down and rested his strong arms on the desktop before he started his explanation.

"I'm listening," she answered, meeting his gaze squarely from across the desk.

"We need to get married and work together to make the company the success I know it can be."

His words struck her like a bombshell. Why in the world would he want to marry her now? There must be some ulterior motive behind his proposal. For the life of her, she couldn't understand what it could be.

"For one thing, we need to present a united front to the industry if we want this venture to take hold and be successful." He ignored the

shocked expression covering her smooth features. "You will own fifty percent of the company and enter into all the decisions about the future of advertising and sales in this country and in Europe."

"I'm still not following you," she murmured. "Why do you want to finally get married and give me fifty percent?"

"If you go to a lawyer and drag this into court, it will only prevent us from getting started and making a success of the business," he said, with an almost vague sound to his tone. Randi couldn't put her finger on what it was, but he was failing to tell her something. "With the market on the upswing in the cosmetic industry any delays by a court fight will set us back. You don't have a chance of winning in court and it will take most of your money to fight me."

"I'll accept your offer of half the business, but I don't believe we have to go as far as getting married," she said. "We were going to try that once and you can see what a disaster that turned out to be. You just weren't ready for any type of commitment."

"The commitment I'm willing to make now is for the success of the business," he answered. "With a marriage, we're more apt to present a unified front to our competitors. Fighting each other won't solve anything and will only hold us

back."

Randi couldn't believe she was even considering what he was proposing, but her mind had drifted to what it would mean not to have to fight him for any part of the business. This way, he was giving her an option if she wanted to take it. It was going to be half or nothing.

"If I do agree to this crazy plan, when will it take place?" She wondered why she was being so foolish. Shouldn't she call the bank first and talk to Mr. Jeffers? Another thought struck her right then. How did she know Jake Mathews was telling the truth about his take over of her company?

"We'll set the date for next week. That should give you time to check with Mr Jeffers at the bank and an attorney. Once you find out that I'm telling you the truth, we can go ahead with the ceremony and get the business started."

How could he have known what she was thinking? It was as if he was reading her mind and she wasn't at all certain she liked that. Of course she'd want to check out his story before committing herself, but she didn't believe Jake would pick up on it so quickly. Instead of confessing that he was right, she stood and lifted her handbag, preparing to leave.

"I'll give you my answer tomorrow." Randi expected Jake to make an objection in having to wait until the following day, but he didn't say a



word.

He made his way around the desk and managed to fall into step alongside her as she walked toward the elevator. Jake reached out and pressed the button on the elevator, gazing down at her from his lofty height.

She had almost forgotten how tall he actually was until he drew alongside her. Her five feet four was only made to look taller since she had worn a pair of shoes with five-inch heels this morning and he was still taller than she was. As she turned toward him, she caught the scent of his familiar aftershave lotion. There was no way in the world she'd ever forget the delicious smell. Hadn't she breathed the aromatic scent in for over a year when they were together?

Just then the elevator doors opened giving her the reprieve she needed. She turned and glanced at him before stepping into the carpeted area. "I'll call you tomorrow," she told him.

"Better still, I'll pick you up for dinner tomorrow night," he told her. "Where are you staying?"

"I moved into my father's house after he died," she answered. "I'm sure you remember the address."

"Yes, I remember," he said. "I'll be by tomorrow evening at seven."

"See you then," she murmured just as the doors

closed behind her.

On the ride down, Randi's mind was filled with all that had taken place just a short time ago. She most definitely was going to call Mr. Jeffers the next day and also consult with her attorney. She supposed her attorney would be able to dig into the legal arrangements that Jake Mathews had gone to in buying out her company.

Randi stepped out into the lobby and walked straight toward the door. She didn't bother looking either way and could feel the man sitting at the receptionist's desk watching her. He was probably wondering why Jake Mathews hadn't thrown her out before now.

When she reached the street, she hailed a cab and decided on the spur of the moment to see her lawyer. She gave the cabbie the address of Ryan Kincaid, whose office was located across town. It would be better to go to his office and get things straightened out in person than to try to explain everything over the phone. She figured her lawyer could call the bank and find out all the facts about Jake's business deal in buying her company.

She reached her lawyer's office and found that he hadn't left for court yet. After explaining everything to Ryan, she told him she wouldn't keep him any longer and that he could call her at home when he found out any news concerning the situation.

It didn't take Randi long to wave a cab down and give the driver her address. She sat back, her head filled with thoughts over all that had taken place that day. She didn't know if Jake was trying to pull a fast one on her, or if he had bought the company out legally. The only thing she could do was wait until her lawyer called with his findings.

When the cab pulled to the front of her home, she paid the fare and walked to the back of the property toward the garage. Randi flicked the button on the garage opener and waited until the doors lifted. She had to make a trip across town and pick up her luggage that was still at the airport. There had been a delay in removing the luggage from the plane, so she had left word with the front desk that she would drive over later for it.

She walked into the garage and backed the car out. Leaving the engine idling in the drive, she went through the side door into the house. After checking her mail and catching up on the messages on the answering machine, she was ready to leave for the airport.

It didn't take long to collect her luggage and drive to her home. Once she unloaded everything, Randi checked the answering machine in case Ryan had called with the information she wanted. She was in luck when she heard his voice echoing out from the small black box near the phone.

According to Ryan, he'd checked with Mr. Jeffers and had the bank fax copies to him of the deal Jake had made for the purchase. There wasn't anything that he could find that was improper about what had taken place. Jake had bought the company fair and square.

Randi dialed Ryan's home phone and heard his deep voice answering on the fourth ring. She sighed, feeling happy that she could talk to him in person to find out what his thoughts were on the situation.

"If I were you, Randi, I'd take Jake up on his offer," Ryan told her. "What do you have to lose?"

"But, he wants us to get married as part of the deal," she told him.

"You didn't mention that part of it when you were at my office," he said thoughtfully. "What reason did he give you for wanting a marriage?"

"He said something about presenting a more united front to our competitors. I'm not certain I understand his reasoning behind it."

"Do you still care for him?"

"I didn't think so until I saw him again today," she admitted. "I'm not at all sure what I feel anymore for Jake Mathews."

"Give it some time and think it over."

"Jake wants an answer by tomorrow night. He's taking me out to dinner and we're supposed to discuss the marriage and our future with the

business."

"That certainly doesn't give you much time to make up your mind," Ryan said. "If you had a few weeks, you could see things more clearly then. I don't know what kind of advice to give you since this is such a hurried affair."

"I'll just have to do some serious thinking tonight," she murmured. "Thanks again, Ryan, for all your help. As soon as I find out what's going on, I'll call you."

"Whatever you decide, I know it will be the right decision," Ryan said. "Good night, Randi and I'll be talking to you later."

"Good night, Ryan," she answered, replacing the receiver and heading for the bathroom.

Randi decided a long, warm soak in the tub was in order to clear her chaotic thoughts over Jake Mathews. She wasn't at all certain that would work either.

\* \* \* \*

The following day Randi mulled over Jake's proposition of marriage. She had come to the conclusion that she didn't have any choice if she wanted to save the company her father had worked so hard for. Her answer would have to be yes, but by saying yes, she felt a little humiliated over the way he had walked out on her before. It

seemed as if she was almost groveling to him and she didn't like the feeling this brought to her. She would just have to swallow her pride and go along with Jake's plans.

By seven Randi was dressed in a black dress that curved her delicate curves to perfection. The style of the dress was an off the shoulder creation showing a full view of her milky skin with just a hint of cleavage protruding from the top. The sound of the doorbell filled the house just as she slipped into her heels.

As she made her way through the hallway, her gaze drifted to the oval mirror on the wall for one final look at her appearance. Her makeup looked flawless and her hair swept her shoulders in a graceful style.

When she pulled open the door, she had to drop her eyes and swallow hard to keep her nervous system under control. She couldn't believe how much she'd forgotten in the last year about Jake. Dressed in a suit and tie, his sexual aura reached out to her. She felt almost devastated by the sight and couldn't control her pulse as it sped out of control. The way her blood raced speedily through her veins brought a heady sensation to her. Eventually, she lifted her green gaze and found that he was watching her in much the same way as she was watching him.

There was a hungry light dancing in his eyes as

they drifted down the length of her. She remembered that look so well because she'd experienced it many times in their torrid relationship. The embers she'd thought were cold and burned out had suddenly rekindled into a silent burning blaze. There was no mistaking the desire and want filling his dark eyes in that instant. She was almost certain hers contained the same expression, but she was doing a better job of hiding her feelings by keeping her lashes lowered.

"I see you're ready to leave." His voice sounded husky with emotion.

"Yes," she murmured. "You did say seven, didn't you?" Why had she gone and said that? She knew he had said seven, but her nervous system was all out of kilter when it came to Jake.

"I made reservations for eight," he told her, glancing at the gold watch strapped on his wrist. "We should just about make it if the traffic isn't too heavy"

"Where is this restaurant?" she asked as they walked toward his car parked near the curve.

"Charlie's is the only place that I could get reservations with only one day notice." He glanced at her face.

Randi felt as if the world was crumbling around her. How could he be so cold? She wondered silently, the anger rising in her. Charlie's was the restaurant where she had found out for the first

time that he no longer wanted to marry her. She visualized the scene that night and the total rejection she had felt over his words. For the life of her, Randi was going to show Jake that going back to Charlie's wouldn't bother her in the least. She pasted a smile on her lips as she looked up at him when he opened her car door.

"Charlie's sounds great," she murmured, hoping her voice remained even. Her stomach felt sick and her heart beat erratically, but she wasn't about to show him her reaction.

As Jake was shutting the door behind her, she noticed how he was watching her. Not for anything would she give away her inner feelings to him. If he knew how much he had hurt her, he would probably wonder what she was doing with him tonight. But she knew she didn't have a choice if she wanted to keep half of her company.

"I didn't know if the place held any bad memories for you," he said as soon as he joined her in the car.

"Why should it?" She hoped her tone was calm. "We just decided to go our separate ways. That's pretty common in today's world. The past is the past and shouldn't interfere with us going to eat at Charlie's."

Randi turned her head and gazed out of the window. *You're going to hell, Randi McLaughlin, if you don't stop telling those outright lies.* She wasn't at



all certain he believed her, but he didn't say anymore about it as the car picked up speed and merged with the busy city traffic.

It wasn't long before Jake was pulling the car onto the lot at Charlie's. Dusk was falling and the outdoor lighting was just starting to blink on. Randi glanced around and noticed how full the lot was tonight. She only hoped that they didn't meet up with anyone they knew from the past.

When they walked into the foyer of the restaurant, the hostess met them and smiled a greeting to Jake. Randi couldn't remember seeing this hostess before at Charlie's, but she was sure Jake had probably charmed this female as he had always done in the past. All it took from him was a smile and the female population he was showering his attention on was his for the asking. Didn't he have this affect on her as well? If she'd only admit it, she was a goner when it came to Jake Mathews and she knew it

As the woman led the way across the room to their table, Randi heard the sound of a voice coming from one of the tables they were passing. She glanced over and saw the buxom blonde doing her level best to attract Jake and keep his attention solely on her.

Randi kept on walking and noticed Jake had stopped to greet the woman. The hostess was in front and didn't see Jake stopping. She kept on

going and reached the table near the far side of the room.

When she turned and saw that Jake hadn't followed them, she became flustered. "I thought Mr. Mathews was right behind us," she said hurriedly.

"It looks as if he was sidetracked," Randi remarked as her eyes drifted to where he was still engaged in conversation with the other woman.

The hostess quickly left Randi standing alone and hurried down the aisle. Randi watched her departing back and felt foolish still standing near the table. She reached for the back of a chair and pulled it out. After sitting down, she let her eyes wander around the room. The only place she didn't look was where Jake and his friend were still talking.

Randi could have kicked herself for coming tonight. She should have known what to expect. Hadn't he let her down in the past? Jake had a way of making her feel foolish without really trying. Eventually, she caught a movement to her right and saw that he had made it to their table.

"I'm sorry," he apologized as he pulled out his chair. "That was an old friend."

"Thank you for managing to tear yourself away," she uttered in a sarcastic tone.

He glanced at her with narrowed eyelids "The sarcasm doesn't suit you, Randi," he said softly.

"Let's not get into an argument before we've had a chance to eat."

"That's fine by me," she murmured, trying to still the resentment that was filling every pore of her body. If she didn't watch herself, she would surely have him believing that she was still in love with him

She silently wondered if she still did, or if it was an attraction she felt. There was no way she could come to any definite decision on what her heart felt right then. It would take time for her to sort out her emotional feelings toward Jake.

"Well, have you come to a decision on what I asked you yesterday?" His eyes didn't quite meet hers.

"It doesn't look as if I have much choice," she answered glancing across at him.

"Don't sound so romantic over what we're going to do," he muttered in a sharp tone.

"There isn't anything romantic about the situation we're in," she answered, deciding not to continue with this line of conversation. Nothing would come of it but resentment on both their parts.

"With that settled, let's call a truce and enjoy our dinner," he said. "I'm going to order champagne to celebrate tonight."

After having several glasses of champagne with their meal, Randi felt the relaxed sensation

entering her body. She had been tense all evening, but the drinks were beginning to cause her to unwind.

By the time they left the restaurant and drove to her home, Randi was in a better frame of mind. As Jake walked her to the door, she removed her key and inserted it in the lock. It was close to eleven when she pushed the door open and the old grandfather clock chimed out the time.

"Aren't you going to invite me in for a nightcap?" Jake asked, joining her in the dark hallway.

"Yes, come in," she murmured airily, still feeling the headiness the champagne had caused to her thoughts. "Go ahead and fix your drink, I won't be a minute."

"What will you have?" He called out to her as she walked down the hallway.

"Just a glass of wine," she answered as she headed toward her bedroom.

Once she reached the bedroom, Randi began stripping off her clothing. She had decided downstairs to put on casual clothing to feel more comfortable. After removing her heels and nylons, she stood in the middle of the room without a stitch of clothing on. Moving gracefully across to her walk-in closet, she opened the door.

Randi was so intent on finding something to wear, she wasn't aware that Jake had entered her

room. When she felt his hand on her shoulder, she jumped in alarm. Even though they had made love many times in the past, she still felt a little humiliated at him catching her stark naked.

"Oh," she blurted out, but that was all she could manage to say as he turned her to face him.

Without warning his lips came down, crushing hers beneath his. Instead of trying to fight him off, Randi was finding that she was accepting his passionate kisses. His tongue wedged its way into the warm recesses of her mouth and she could taste a hint of liquor wafting out to her from him.

When his arms dropped to his sides and he made a scooping gesture, lifting her close to his chest, she wasn't even aware of what he was doing. She was so lost in the feeling of want for him that her mind had drifted off to another realm in time. All she wanted was to continue feeling his lips covering hers and bringing her the pleasure she craved so right then.

Jake carried her gently across the room and placed her on the bed. He eventually withdrew his lips long enough to start stripping off the clothing he was wearing. It wasn't long before Randi could see him standing before her with every inch of his muscular body showing. The sight made her breath come out in short gasps as she remembered how this same body had made love so erotically to her when they were together.

He took his time about joining her on the bed as his eyes continued to feast on her milky softness revealed to him against the blue satin sheet. His narrowed eyes traveled from her head on down her body in a slow descent that brought an even more heightened awareness racing through Randi. In the excitement coursing through her, she wanted him to continue gazing at her, but she also wanted to have him make love to her again. It had been so long and she had missed the intimacy they had shared.

Jake didn't disappoint her as he joined her on the bed. His mouth covered hers in a lingering kiss, but was soon changing course as his head made the journey down her body. Reaching her dewy moistness, he slowly brought his tongue repeatedly across the swollen part of her body. Sexual excitement filled every part of her and she couldn't contain the movement her hips were making. When she saw how he was watching her, Randi let him know by her dreamy expression how much pleasure he was giving her.

Slowly, he left the sweetness of her and let his tongue blaze a trail up her body toward her protruding nipples. His teeth gently, but greedily caught one of the nipples. His tongue ran smoothly across the raised mound, causing Randi to feel the intensity throughout her body.

Her hand slipped down and grasped his penis

between her fingers. She gently ran her hand down the hard length, ready and waiting to appease her. She couldn't wait any longer as she tugged on his shoulders to pull him on top of her.

Jake entered her slowly, but the tempo was quickly heating up. The frenzied lovemaking matched what they had shared in the past, although this time it was more intense. Randi couldn't get enough of his loving and rained kisses along his strong neck and muscular chest. She could feel a release starting to swell in her and knew she was ready to climax. An explosion filled her just as she felt the eruption Jake was experiencing.

They lay in each other's arms, sweat drenched from the heated exchange they'd just shared. Not very much time passed before Jake started kissing Randi again. It was as if he had been without her so long, he needed to continue making love to her until he had satisfied his lust. Long into the night they made love, but eventually, when they were taking a much-needed break, Randi drifted off to sleep feeling like a feline cat that had just been fed warm milk.

The next morning she awoke to find Jake gone and she was alone in bed. She started to sit up, but a throbbing ache raced through her head. The only thing she could blame it on was the amount of champagne she'd drunk the night before.

When she thought of how she'd willingly gone to bed with Jake, a crimson flush coated her cheeks. This wasn't what she had wanted to happen between them. But then again, she was only kidding herself. She had wanted him as much as he had wanted to make love to her.

Randi realized she was going to have to call Jake and find out what the arrangements were going to be for their wedding, and when he wanted her to begin working at the office. She had decided that when he mentioned marriage, she wanted something simple at the courthouse. There was no telling how Jake would react to her suggestion, but Randi felt determined to stand her ground

After showering, she picked up the phone and dialed the office. When he answered, she almost hesitated in saying anything as thoughts of the night before drifted through her head. A flush rose on her cheeks and she was thankful that he couldn't see her reaction to talking to him.

"Jake, this is Randi. I wanted to call and find out what the arrangements are for the wedding and when I should start work. I'd like something simple for the wedding. Maybe the courthouse would do with a Justice of the Peace performing the ceremony.

Instead of an argument, she was surprised by his words. "That should work out, but we may



have to bump up the wedding sooner."

"Why is that?" She was curious.

"I'm supposed to leave for a cosmetic convention in Paris in a couple of days," he told her. "I thought maybe you would take care of running the business while I'm gone. You can start right after the ceremony."

"I can handle that," she murmured, feeling the excitement rising in her over the thought of being in charge of the company again.

"Good," he answered. "I wanted to explain why I left so early this morning. There was a board meeting that couldn't wait. Since you and I are going to be business partners, I let the board know ahead of time about the new arrangements."

"Oh," was all she could say. She had been angry when he had been missing this morning from her bed, but knowing where he had gone to made her feel much better.

"Why don't we plan the wedding for tomorrow?" He surprised her again. "This will give us time to get settled in before I have to leave for Paris."

"All right," she agreed.

"I'll be by at one," he told her. "Oh, there's another call coming in, so I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you then." Randi replaced the receiver.

A smile lined her face as she walked through the house. Things were beginning to look up for

her. She had felt so alone when she had returned from her trip to Italy to secure financial help. But now everything was falling into place. She silently wondered if her father was watching over her at this point in her life. She had depended on him more than she knew and losing him had crushed her.

\* \* \* \*

The next day Randi searched through her closet for something to wear to the courthouse. She decided on a simple beige suit and matching heels. After bathing and dressing, she walked into the living room to wait for Jake.

At one on the dot she heard his car pulling into the drive. Randi felt an excitement stir in her that she had thought died when he walked out on her the year before. It was back in full force and she couldn't contain the sensation.

Jake looked handsome in his dark suit and tie. Instead of looking him in the eye after the way she'd given herself to him so freely the night before, she kept her gaze lowered. If he noticed her hesitancy in meeting his look, he didn't let on by his actions.

Once they reached the courthouse, they applied for their license and sought out the Justice of the Peace down the hallway. The ceremony didn't

take long to perform and when Jake slipped the ring on Randi's finger, she felt her eyes becoming moist; it was the same ring she'd thrown at him when they had broken up.

As they walked from the courthouse, Jake reached over and clasped her hand in his. "Well, how does it feel to be Mrs. Mathews?" he asked, with a slight grin.

"I can't tell the difference," she murmured.

"Well, I'm going to make you see the difference once we reach home." He laughed.

She hadn't expected him to say that, but she wasn't against the idea of going into his arms and having him possess her again as he had the night before. In fact, she was anticipating the next few hours as the excitement built in her. It seemed Jake was in an almost jovial mood and she wondered what had happened to change his disposition.

It didn't take long to drive from the courthouse to Randi's home. They had decided earlier on to use her home as their home together. She had told Jake that she wasn't ready to move away from the only place that had provided her security all through her life. He had given her a tender look and agreed to her terms.

True to his word, Jake didn't waste any time in getting Randi into the bedroom. She didn't have any objections and must have shown her anticipation by the way she was undressing. For

some reason she didn't feel any shame in what she was doing. She had discovered she loved him with all her heart, but she couldn't let him find out what her feelings were. Maybe if he would show her he cared for her, then she may be able to confess her innermost feelings to him.

Before too long they lay across her bed and Randi raised herself on one elbow to gaze at his muscular body stretched out full length on the sheet. She ran her lips across his chest, feeling the springy hair tickle her soft skin. Working her way down his chest, she found herself at his hip line.

Her lips moved purposely toward his erect penis. Her mouth enclosed the hard shaft and she let her lips move softly in a gliding motion up and down until she felt his body jolt with the pleasure she was giving him. The faster her mouth worked in its movements, the more she felt the spasms jerking through his entire body. When he reached for her, she refused to relinquish her hold, only wanting to show him she could give him the same pleasing sensations as he had always shown her in the past.

Eventually, he managed to lift her away and on top of him. When she was stationed in a prone position above him, she felt the hard length of him entering her vagina. Leaning forward, she began to ride his desire, causing friction to pass between them. The faster she moved, the more excited he

became. The erotic feelings encompassed every part of Randi's body until she thought she might burst with the euphoric sensation.

Suddenly, she felt her body quake with a climactic eruption sending shockwaves through her. It wasn't long until she could feel Jake's response to her continued lovemaking. The white-hot lava shot into her, bringing a heady sensation to Randi's senses.

All through the afternoon and night, they made love, only stopping to rest in between the pleasurable acts. While they were lying close, Randi felt a lethargic feeling enveloping her. She could hear the sound of her stomach rumbling and realized she hadn't eaten all day.

Randi turned on her side and glanced at Jake. "Are you hungry?" she asked, with a grin.

"Now that you mention it, I'm starving," he told her. "How about if I whip up an omelet for us?"

"You can cook?" A surprised expression lined her features. There wasn't very much she knew about Jake, only that she loved him. In the past, she hadn't bothered finding out what he could do and what he couldn't do. All of their days and nights had been filled with passion. She was going to have to get to know what his likes and dislikes were.

"Of course I can cook," he murmured

"I didn't know that," she said as she reached for her robe.

"There's a lot you don't know about me," he told her. "I'm going to enjoy letting you find out every little detail."

When they eventually got up, Jake followed Randi into the shower. She wasn't surprised because this had been one of their routines in the past. After finishing with the shower, they made their way into the kitchen.

Randi pulled a stool out and sat down. "Everything you need is in the refrigerator," she told him. "I'm going to sit here and watch."

Jake had their food prepared in no time. Randi had to admit he did know how to cook. By the time they finished doing the dishes, it was late. Randi tried stifling a yawn but she wasn't successful.

"Why don't you turn in?" Jake asked. "I'll be along a little later. There's a batch of paperwork that I haven't finished."

"All right." She stood and started to walk toward the hallway.

"Randi." He said her name softly before she got very far.

"Yes?" She turned to look at him.

"I'm thinking about leaving for Paris tomorrow. The show began two days ago and the sooner I get there, the sooner I can get back."

"I wasn't aware that it had already started," she murmured. "When you mentioned it before, you said something about a couple of days."

"The main buyers will be there then. This way I can get in on the ground floor and make my choices before things are picked over."

"How long are you planning on being gone?" She already missed him after hearing of his plans.

"I should be back by next week. I'm sure you can manage things while I'm away."

She nodded her head in agreement. That wasn't what she had meant at all. She knew she could handle things, that wasn't a problem for her. The thought of Jake being gone for an entire week had somehow upset her. She would miss him more than she thought, but she couldn't mention it to him.

"There shouldn't be any problems," she managed to say while keeping her emotions from filling her voice.

"I may not see you in the morning because my flights scheduled to leave at five a.m."

So Jake had planned this in advance. How would he have such an early flight otherwise? Randi wondered when he had intended telling her. This was such a last minute surprise that she didn't have anything to say.

"If I don't see you in the morning, have a safe flight," she told him as she turned and made her

way down the hallway. There was no way she wanted to let him see the distraught expression lining her face over the fact that he would be gone for an entire week. The more she kept her emotions hidden, the better off she'd be.

\* \* \* \*

The following day Randi got up early but it wasn't in time to see Jake leaving. She felt a little sad over missing him, but she had known that he was going to have to be at the airport by five. She fixed breakfast and dressed for work. It was going to seem strange going into the office as only half owner, but it was better than nothing.

When she drove into the underground parking lot, she walked across to the elevator. After the doors slid closed behind her, she took a deep breath and expelled it heavily to calm her agitated nerves. It wasn't as if she didn't know the business backward and forward. It was just the idea that she was newly married to the other half owner of the business. She wasn't at all certain any of the board members knew of her new status. She figured it wouldn't be long until she found out.

As she entered the building, the man that had greeted her only days before in the lobby smiled as she walked by. There was no sense at being angry with the man because he hadn't known who



she was that day. By the time the elevator reached her office Randi had decided to call a board meeting and let the members know that Jake would be back by next week.

Walking over to her desk, she pressed the button on the intercom for her secretary. Jan Johnston's office was down the long hallway. When she heard Jan's voice floating out to her, Randi requested that Jan come to her office and bring her steno pad.

It wasn't long before she heard the light tapping of heels on the tiled floors. When she glanced up, she smiled a greeting at the woman that had worked for her for the past year. Jan's brown hair was confined in a bun and her clothing wasn't stylish, making

Randi wonder why the other woman tried to play down her appearance. With a little fixing up, she could be a real stunner, Randi thought silently.

"Jan, I need to dictate a few letters and I want you to make notes about informing the board of the meeting this afternoon," she told her. "I'd like everyone to meet in the conference room by three."

"I'll make sure everyone gets the message," Jan assured her. "I hear congratulations are in order. Mr. Mathews told everyone the two of you had married yesterday."

"What was the reaction by the members to the

news?" Randi asked, hoping that everyone accepted the changes going on in the company.

"They were all for it," Jan said with a smile. "Mr. Mathews seemed very happy over the new set of developments."

"He did?" Randi asked in a questioning tone as her voice trailed off into silence. Jake had acted upbeat when they had gotten married, but she was never quite sure of what he was really thinking. She glanced at Jan and realized that she was waiting for her to begin. "I suppose we'd better get started on those letters."

For the next hour Randi dictated letters to be sent out by that afternoon. Some were to clients, while others were to advertising firms that they hired to display their products. Once Randi finished the last one, Jan excused herself and walked from the room.

Randi decided to look through the file cabinet to see if Jake had changed anything after he had taken over. Her eyes quickly found a new file to the back that had been added. It was marked the personal property of Jake Mathews. Randi knew she shouldn't look at the contents because they were none of her business. She shoved the thick folder back in place and continued going through the files.

The more she tried to ignore the folder, the more curious she became. What would it hurt if

she glanced through it? She was Jake's wife now and there shouldn't be any secrets between them. Slowly, she removed the folder and carried it over to her desk. She quickly dropped it on the desktop as if it had burned her.

When she sat down in her chair she continued to gaze at the folder, undecided whether she should pry into what was inside or put it back in the filing cabinet. Curiosity got the better of her and she slowly opened the flap revealing the contents inside.

Some of the papers were dated over a year ago. There were a few enclosed that bore her father's signature. The more she studied the legal documents, the more she realized her father had gotten loans from Jake for the business. On one of the sheets, it looked like some sort of deed to the business property. There was another name on it other than her father's that Randi didn't recognize. The same legal document was changed again and the person's name she hadn't recognized was dropped, with Jake Mathews taking the man's place as owner of the company. This didn't make sense to Randi because the papers were drawn up before her father had died.

Something was very wrong here and she couldn't figure out what it was. Surely, her father hadn't gotten a loan from Jake to keep the business afloat. She knew he always secured loans

in Italy, but never personal loans from business people like Jake.

Why hadn't he told her he was giving her father money? He wouldn't have had to share a thing with her, or even marry her. Randi decided that when Jake returned from his trip, they were going to have to have a long talk.

She also wondered if any of the people that were on the board knew he was the owner for over a year. If Jan knew, she hadn't let on. Randi was almost certain Jan would have told her unless Jake had convinced everyone that his ownership must remain a secret and she wasn't to find out. She still couldn't understand why he had let her work for a year trying to make a go of the business.

Another thought struck her right then. Why had her father called Jake ruthless? He was taking money to keep the business going so how could he have judged Jake as being such a callous person. It didn't seem as if he was that ruthless if he was willing to keep her father supplied with loans.

Randi felt her head beginning to throb with unanswered questions. She didn't know how she was going to get through the rest of the day, but somehow she had to. There was no way she wanted the board to find out how unsettled her thoughts were that day. She was going to have to put on a cheerful front and forget about what

she'd discovered today.

By five Randi was more than ready to go home. She had looked forward to going back to work, but what she'd found had upset her so much, her head continued to ache.

\* \* \* \*

For the next few days she continued to run the company, and preside over meetings, but this time it wasn't as challenging as it had been in the past. There was this little niggling doubt that her father had been up to no good and had hid everything from her.

On the day Jake arrived home, Randi was sitting in the living room going over some paperwork she'd brought home from the office. She heard the door opening and glanced up to see Jake walking into the room.

He headed straight for her and reached down lifting her gently into his arms. His mouth dropped onto hers in a hungry kiss letting her know that he had missed her while he was gone. For a few seconds Randi forgot her troubling thoughts all that week and returned his kisses.

When he lifted his head, his dark eyes gazed into hers. "I see that you missed me," he murmured huskily, his mouth starting to claim hers again.

"Yes, I've missed you, but we have to talk." She pulled back, glancing up into his eyes. "There are a few questions I need answered."

"What questions?" He led her over to the couch and pulled her down next to him.

"I know I shouldn't have looked, but the folder you had in the cabinet at the office, was too much of a temptation for me," she confessed. "Why did my father get all that money from you?"

"I should have remembered that folder and moved it," he said in a low tone. "There was no way I wanted you to find out what went on a year ago."

"What did go on?" She asked, already dreading what the answer may be.

"Your father had a gambling habit and almost lost the company a number of times," he told her. "I was out of the country when he did actually gamble it away. That's why the other man's name is on the deed. After I got back to the states, your father asked me to pay off his notes to the man."

"Why is your name on the deed to the company?" She held her breath, waiting for his answer.

"I had to track down the man and buy back the interest so the stockholders didn't find out. I didn't get a chance to give the company back to your father because he died right after I was able to purchase it back"

"How could my father have done such a thing? He hid everything so well I never suspected anything. That's really a disappointment to me."

"I wouldn't be too hard on him," he told her. "It was a sickness that he couldn't control. There wasn't any way that he wanted you to be hurt by it. That's why he always came to me."

"That still doesn't explain why you walked out on me."

"At the time, I realized you weren't ready for marriage. My solution was to back out of the picture and give you a chance to run the company. Make no mistake about it, I was always in the background waiting to help you out in case something happened."

"When were you going to tell me that the company was actually yours?" She remembered that she had been hurt when he had broken it off with her. But as she thought back to last year, she had wanted some freedom then. Her goal was to try her hand at running the business. If she had been honest about it a year ago, a little selfish streak made her believe that marriage would have taken more of her time than she had been willing to give. It looked like Jake could read her better than she could read herself.

"When the time was right," he told her, finally answering her question concerning the ownership of the business. "I've been waiting a year for

something to come up so that I could get back into your life. The reason you had to go to Italy for a loan was the plan I concocted. I set it up with Mr. Jeffers to tell you the note on the company was due, when in fact there wasn't a note. He didn't want to do it to you, but I persuaded him that my intentions were honorable toward you."

"What do you mean by that?" She lifted her eyes and met his dark gaze.

"I've loved you for always, Randi," he groaned huskily, burying his face in her soft neck. He began raining kisses along the column of her throat causing Randi to shudder with desire.

"I didn't realize how much I loved you until you walked back into my life," she confessed in a ragged tone. "I've loved you all along with all my heart and almost blew it by wanting to run a company."

"We're going to put that all behind us and start fresh," he promised as he lifted her into his arms and headed toward the staircase.

Randi knew the next stop was the bedroom and she couldn't wait to show Jake how her love had matured for him. She silently hoped that they would be able to spend the rest of their lives together. Today was the beginning of that journey...



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**M**ary Ann Reed has worked in various offices as a secretary and loves to read. She now devotes her time to writing romantic stories. Suzanne Merritt worked as a cashier at a local school district. She also spends her free time writing and is an avid reader.