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Oh, baby. Come to mama...

Mia Briscoe had never been one for flights of fancy, but the big, bruising man sprawled out in First Class seat 2B made her want to drop to her knees and thank nature for producing such a fine specimen.

If the long, muscular legs clad in soft denim were any indication, he had to be at least two or three inches over six feet. The jeans, worn in all the right places, drew her gaze to what promised to be an impressive package. His black T-shirt hugged thick, sinewy arms roped with muscle and stretched across a pair of well-defined pecs. A ball cap hid his face, but she sensed a firm, square jaw. He stared at a magazine that lay open in his lap, as his long, masculine fingers touched the page.

Mia told herself not to stare, but damn, how could she not when the man's body was so ... mouth watering? She whimpered. She actually whimpered.

She'd *never* been affected by a man like this before. Not even in high school, when other girls swooned over rock and movie stars. To have this reaction here, on an airplane, of all places seemed ... strange. And wonderful.

It took her mind off the fact that the last time she'd boarded an airplane it'd been to sit at the deathbed of the woman who'd raised her after her parents died in a car accident. She'd been thirteen. Aunt Eva took her in, loved her and guided her to make the right choices in life. Eleven months later, her aunt's absence still felt as raw as an open wound. Don't think about it.

Mia gathered herself, realizing she stood in the middle of the aisle salivating over a piece of man-candy. She glanced down at the boarding pass in her hand. 2B. Her eyes flickered to the bulkhead.

Wait a minute. Mr. Studly is in my seat!

The Wedding War

by

Jenny Gilliam

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

The Wedding War

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CONTENTS

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

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Dedication

To my father, Kenneth Wayne Gilliam, who always told me I had the patience to write a novel.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter One

Oh, baby. Come to mama.

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months later, her aunt's absence still felt as raw as an open wound. *Don't think about it.*

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Wait a minute. Mr. Studly is in my seat!

Wow, she must have managed to repay one hell of a karmic debt, because good fortune shone on her today.

A coiffed and polished flight attendant gave Mia a plastic smile as she passed by. Mia looked back down at Mr. Studly, still engrossed in his magazine.

She cleared her throat.

No response. She tried a more direct approach. "Excuse me. I think you're in my seat."

He finally glanced up and Mia's heart all but stopped. *Oh, my.*

Blue eyes, as deep as the crystal-clear waters of the Caribbean, stared up at her, an unreadable expression on his face. Intelligence shone in those gorgeous depths, and his dark brows pulled into a frown as he gave her face and body a slow perusal. Mia felt his gaze as if he'd touched her with those tough, masculine hands. She suppressed a shiver.

She'd been right about that square jaw. At eleven in the morning it showed signs of a heavy beard. His strong chin boasted a faint cleft. She'd always had a weak spot for a man with a strong chin with a faint cleft.

He broke eye contact, returning his attention to his magazine. "I'm not moving."

Huh?

"I beg your pardon?" Mia asked.

"You heard me," he said, in a deep baritone.

"But ... you're in my seat." She thrust her boarding pass under his nose. "See? It says right there. Seat 2B."

"I can read, sweetheart," he said, sending Mia's blood near boiling point.

Is this guy for real? A hunk of studly man-love he might be, but he had the manners of a garden rock. Wishing he had just kept his mouth shut, she drew up to her full five feet nine inches. "Are you sure about that?" she asked sweetly.

"Lady, I'm not gonna sit here arguing with you all day. You better sit your pretty little ass down or you're gonna be in for a rude awakening when we take off."

Of all the pigheaded, misogynistic things to say! Mia's blood pressure skyrocketed as a fine red mist gathered before her eyes.

Mia wasn't one to stand by while people trampled over her in order to get their way. No, sir. She was no one's doormat. And it infuriated her that this guy expected her to toe the line simply because he said so.

She planted her feet and propped a fist on her hip. "I'm not going anywhere. You're the one who should move."

He glanced at her and smirked. Why did the colossal jerk have to be so damn gorgeous? It wasn't fair.

"Not gonna happen," he drawled.

"The hell it's not."

One black brow lifted sardonically. "What are you gonna do? Tell on me?"

"You bet your ass I am." Mia spun on her heel and smacked into the Barbie-doll flight attendant she'd seen moments ago.

"Is there a problem?" she asked Mia.

"As a matter of fact, there is. This ... this *person*"—she infused plenty of meaning into the word so there was no mistaking what she thought of squatters, "is in my seat." She shoved the boarding pass at the flight attendant, who stared at it as though Mia handed her a smelly sock. "It's right there. 2B." She whirled back on the interloper. "He's in my seat."

While it pleased her enormously to vent her frustration, Mia realized her behavior was a tad childish. True, the man occupying her seat had started this whole mess, but as an adult she should have risen above it. She ran a successful—okay, successful was stretching it—wedding planning business, for crying out loud. She dealt with disasters worse than this on a daily basis.

"Sir?" the flight attendant asked. "May I see your boarding pass?"

He smiled, the act transforming his entire face. Mia wasn't going to fall for his charming act this time. Uh-uh. No way. However, Airline Barbie was a different story. She looked ready to climb on his lap and take *him* for a ride. While she perused his boarding pass, he flicked a glance at Mia. And smirked.

Bastard.

"Sir, it does say here you're in 2A." She seemed disappointed.

He turned that megawatt smile back on Airline Barbie. "It's just I have this thing about planes," he explained, speaking to the flight attendant as if Mia had ceased to exist. "I have a real hard time flying as it is, so it helps if I sit in the aisle. I thought I was getting an aisle seat, so I just sat here."

"That's the biggest load of crap I've ever heard. You are not seriously going to believe him, are you? He's totally playing you." Mia huffed and folded her arms under her breasts.

Airline Barbie turned on Mia. "Ma'am, you need to calm down right now or I'm going to have you removed from the aircraft."

Mia's mouth hung open. Outrage sang through her blood, but logic and reason, temporarily out to lunch, decided to make a comeback.

"If he would have said that to begin with, I would have gladly given up my seat." There. She even managed to sound the teensiest bit contrite—though she spoke through clenched teeth. "He can have the stupid seat if he's afraid of flying. Okay? It's not that big a deal."

Mia's temper often landed her in situations such as this. However, had The Jerk explained his fear of flying in a calm and rational manner when she'd first spoken to him, she would have gladly traded seats. But, nooo, he had to be a big ol' butthead about it.

Really, The Jerk deserved Mia's ire.

Airline Barbie didn't look convinced. In fact, she and The Jerk shared a commiserating glance, as if Mia had lost her

mind. She knew she fought a losing battle. And the hell of it was, she had to sit next to him for the next five hours.

Her first time in First Class, paid for by her best friend, whose wedding she would be planning for the next two weeks, and it had been ruined by a misogynistic pig who, quite unfairly, resembled a dark, delicious and seriously yummy god.

Well, crap. It appeared her good fortune had turned into a curse.

* * * *

"We'd like to welcome you Savannah," the captain's smooth voice announced over the PA system, after the plane touched down.

Jake Ryan reached above him and stretched his arms, eager to get off the plane. His baby brother, Gabe, was getting married in South Carolina's Low Country to a woman he'd known less than six months. Her parents owned a chunk of land on some island, where the wedding would take place in two weeks. Not one of his brother's smarter ideas, but then Gabe wasn't known for his prudence.

Yeah, it had been a long flight all right, especially seated next to the most uptight woman he'd ever seen. Her head rested on a pillow lying against the tiny window, her eyes closed. Even in sleep she appeared rigid and irritated.

When he'd first stared into those great big green eyes, that old Travis Tritt song *T-R-O-U-B-L-E* filtered through his brain. She might have been gorgeous, but she had man-eater written all over her.

He'd never been afraid of flying, but she had thrown such a tizzy about the seating arrangement he'd felt oddly compelled to piss her off even more. During the flight, he had passed the hours by counting how many times he could push past that polished exterior and get her riled. She'd been so inflexible, he'd been peevishly determined to discover if an actual living, breathing woman lived inside.

Sitting sprawled in his seat, he'd intentionally used his body to invade her personal space. He'd passed blatant, lascivious looks her way, poked his nose into her work on her laptop and sung The Steve Miller Band's *Space Cowboy* in a low voice over and over.

He smiled. As far as plane rides went, this one had been entertaining.

His seatmate stirred, lifting her head from its prone position against the window. She rolled her neck from side to side to work out the kinks, and then ran a hand through her pretty red curls only to encounter one of those claw-like torture devices women used to hold back their hair.

She turned to him and frowned.

"You snore," he informed her cheerfully.

She clenched her teeth and closed her eyes, and Jake wondered if she was trying the old 'count to ten' method. Somehow, he knew if she counted to a thousand, she'd still be pissed.

As the plane taxied down the tarmac toward the gate, he nodded at the briefcase resting next to her high-heeled feet. "Are you one of those uptight career women?"

She opened her eyes and glared at him. "What is the *matter* with you?"

He smiled. "Yep," he said, nodding. "Definitely uptight."

The plane arrived at the gate and a bell chimed within the aircraft, signaling passengers. Everyone stood, seemingly in a hurry to debark the plane and get on with their travel plans.

Jake felt the heat of the woman behind him. An unwelcome wave of lust overcame him, so powerful it almost dropped him to his knees. *Pheremones. That woman must have 'em in spades.*

His body reacted as nature intended, so he picked up his latest issue of *Hot Rod* and used it to cover the bulge in his jeans. His sudden reaction baffled him. A hot number, no doubt, but *definitely* not his type. He liked his women easygoing with little interest in sticking around for the long haul.

Jake stepped out into the aisle and let his seatmate precede him; he didn't want her to catch the Ponderosa-sized woody he sported. He followed her out onto the jet way, his rebellious body enjoying the way she filled out her prim little business suit. She was a tall woman; probably five-ten or so. Not many women who came close to his own six-four. She wasn't bony and lithe; she was built the way a woman should be. He made out curvaceous hips and a defined waist, all topped off by legs that stretched for miles.

Ripping his eyes away from her, he headed up the jet way. A young mother and her small son walked ahead of him. The little boy dragged a tattered teddy bear in his right hand while his mother pulled him along by his left. Somewhere in the

fray, the boy loosened his grip on the bear and it lay there, forgotten.

Jake snatched up the stuffed animal and jogged to catch up with the woman and her son. "Excuse me," he said.

The woman turned, her expression harried. "Yes?"
"You dropped this." He held out the bear to the child.

Both mother and son's eyes lit up. Feeling awkward and embarrassed, Jake forced a smile.

"Thank you so much," the woman gushed. "If we'd lost Mr. Sticky Paws, Dawson here would've been devastated."

Jake looked at the kid. "That's a pretty cool name for a teddy bear."

The little boy hid shyly behind his mother's leg. "Have a good day," Jake said and left to find his brother.

Mia walked purposefully through the Savannah Airport, all the while cursing her hormones. She really needed to go out more often. If she'd focused some of her energy on dating instead of funneling it all into *Weddings by Mia*, then maybe she wouldn't have stood there on the plane like a dolt drooling over The Jerk.

Mia hiked the strap of her briefcase on her shoulder, her body still humming from her encounter on the plane. She hadn't been to Georgia for five years, the heat and humidity were a distant, though unfriendly, memory. Even in mid-October, the sky dropped a steaming wool blanket over the earth.

After checking her watch, Mia picked up her pace. She could feel The Jerk back there, had the uncanny sense he

watched her right then, but she forged ahead and focused on her priorities.

Her best friend, Jillian Tyner, would be waiting for her at the security checkpoint, with her new fiancé. They'd arrived from San Diego the night before. Only for her oldest friend would Mia brave the Southern Atlantic coast during hurricane season.

She walked at a clipped pace, mentally reviewing her to-do list. Two weeks until the wedding left her little time, considering the date had been set just three weeks ago. Precious little had been done for the event. She certainly had her work cut out for her.

Mia passed security and saw Jillian standing at the edge of a throng of people awaiting passengers. Her friend waved her hand. "Mia!"

Pleasure bloomed as she embraced Jillian. It had been too long since she'd last seen her friend, despite the ninety-minute drive from L.A. to San Diego that separated them. "Oh, sweetie. I'm so happy to see you!" She held Jillian at arm's length and studied her.

Jillian had always been stunning, but love had unquestionably enhanced her natural beauty. Her blonde hair was cut in a stylish bob just above her chin, and her wide brown eyes sparkled. A blush rose on her cheeks, lending a warm, happy glow to her face.

Jillian tugged the arm of the dark-haired man standing next to her. "This is Gabe Ryan. Honey, this is Mia Briscoe, my oldest and best friend."

Gabe's piercing blue eyes and chiseled face seemed familiar, but Mia couldn't place him. She thrust out a hand. "It's nice to meet you."

To Mia's surprise, he pushed aside her hand and drew her into his arms. "I've heard so much about you, I feel like you're *my* best friend."

"Where's Jake?" Jillian asked.

"Who?"

"My brother," Gabe answered. "He should've been on your flight."

"Well, I don't know about your brother, but I sure met an asshole on the plane." Mia's temper ignited at the mere memory of her tumultuous flight.

"Oh, there he is," Gabe said.

Mia turned and could only stare. You have got to be freaking kidding me! This could absolutely, positively not be happening.

She watched The Jerk saunter up to them, a cocky smile on his lips, the ball cap pulled low over his brow. He glanced at Mia briefly before resting his eyes on Jillian.

"So, you're the woman who's trying to ruin my brother's life, huh?"

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Two

"This is insane."

Mia paced across the plush carpet of the guest cottage. From the large picture window, the wide threshold of the Atlantic Ocean lay beyond the sandy bluffs. It should have been peaceful.

"Why are you so upset?" Jillian asked.

Mia turned from the window to where her friend lounged on an overstuffed sofa upholstered in soft green fabric. "I think a better question is why aren't *you* upset? That—that *man* insulted you!"

Jillian smiled, fueling Mia's ire. From the moment The Jerk—no ... Jake—had approached them in the airport, Mia's short-lived peace had been shattered. Never in her whole life had she ever been so stunned. The Jerk was Gabe's brother. This day just got better and better.

"At least your fiancé had the good sense to fight back," Mia grumbled. Gabe's worth had shot up exponentially in Mia's opinion when he'd risen to his bride-to-be's defense. Jillian's failure to do so herself confused Mia.

The slim fingers lying across the back of the sofa fluttered. "Jake's a difficult man, Mia."

"I can think of a few other choice words."

The hour drive from the Savannah airport to the small barrier island of Majestic off the South Carolina coast had been rife with tension. Jake Ryan had sat in the backseat of Gabe and Jillian's rented SUV, his posture as lazy as it had

been on the airplane. After that shocking moment in the airport, he hadn't spared Mia a second glance.

Which suited her just fine.

The less she saw of that infuriating man, the better. Of course, he was still as handsome as two devils and just as bad, but apparently her hormones couldn't be counted on for logic. Damn it all.

"When Gabe and Jake were boys, their mother took off," Jillian said. "It devastated their father. He spent the rest of his life drinking and sleeping around." Jillian shook her head, a pained expression on her face. "He wasn't there for them."

As if against her will, Mia's heart softened for the two boys who'd lost both parents. Her own mother and father were killed when she was thirteen. She, too, had experienced the world ripped from beneath her feet.

"Who took care of them?" Mia asked.

"Jake. He cooked, cleaned and helped Gabe with his homework. When he was old enough to drive, he shuttled him around to football practice." Jillian's features softened. "He did everything."

"Guess it didn't leave much time for being a kid."

Jillian nodded. She rose from the sofa and walked over to Mia. Placing her hands on Mia's shoulders, she looked into her eyes, her chocolate gaze meeting Mia's. "Gabe thinks something else was going on, too. Some kind of abuse, but he's never had the nerve to ask." Jillian's eyes turned serious. "Jake's had a rough time of it, to say the least. He thinks Gabe's making a big mistake marrying me."

"That's ridiculous!"

"He's only seen the painful side of marriage. His parents' selfishness ruined lives. Cut him a little slack." She searched Mia's face. "Please?"

She frowned. Her friend was too forgiving, too trusting. But this was Jillian's wedding. Jillian's life.

"I'll try. But if he so much as glares in your direction, I'll string him up by his balls."

Jillian's big brown eyes filled, and she crushed Mia to her chest. "I love you, Mia."

Mia patted her back. "I love you, too, kiddo."

When she released Jillian, her friend wiped a tear from her eye. "You okay?" Mia asked.

Jillian nodded. "I'm just emotional. The wedding and everything."

Mia had seen her share of brides lose it over the near-Herculean task of planning a wedding. A few of them were downright scary. Jillian's nervousness was nothing compared to the bridezillas she'd seen.

"Thanks for letting me stay in the guest cottage," Mia said.

"Ah, sure." Jillian looked away. "I know how much you value your privacy."

Mia folded her arms across her chest. "What's going on, Jilly? Is there something you're not telling me?"

Her friend's quick, nervous laugh did little to ease her sudden suspicion. "Of course not." She made a show of checking her watch. "Well, I better get back to the house. Pearl's cooking a big dinner tonight."

"Pearl's the cook, I take it?"

Jillian nodded. "Pearl is the cook and Esma's the housekeeper."

Jillian had grown up in a different world. One filled with cooks, housekeepers, nannies and private schools. It was a far cry from the tiny two-bedroom bungalow in Fresno where Mia had spent her adolescence. Aunt Eva worked two jobs to make ends meet, to raise her sister's daughter. A stab of grief shot through her, but she tamped down on the emotion.

It never ceased to amaze Mia how two women from such different backgrounds had managed to forge a bond that held true over the years.

"I'd like to sit down with you and Gabe either tonight or tomorrow morning to go over the wedding plans," Mia said.

Jillian nodded, her face alight with pleasure. "Of course. I'm so excited." She walked to the front door. "I'll talk to Gabe. Dinner's at six-thirty."

Mia nodded. "With bells on, and all that." Jillian slipped out the door. Mia tracked her progress as Jillian made her way through the lush garden path and back to the large main house, a study in Greek Revival architecture.

The gardens would be a wonderful place to hold the ceremony, she thought as she opened the front door to breathe in the salty, tropical air. Although mid-October, the temperature hovered near eighty. The wind blew gently beneath a cloudless blue sky, shaking the tall green grass that covered the sandy bluffs. Her eyes scanned the expansive yard. They could put in an arbor. Maybe string white twinkle lights from the veranda. Bright bougainvillea could trail around the yard and flow over the arbor.

Sensing movement, Mia's eyes narrowed as she caught sight of Jake Ryan, strolling the gardens with Gabe. So, Jake thought his brother was making a big mistake, huh? Mia would at least try and be cordial to Jillian's future brother-in-law. She'd do that for her friend. But, she wasn't joking when she'd told Jillian she would string him up by his balls if Jake made things difficult for her friend. He was a complication Gabe and Jillian didn't need.

If Jake Ryan had visions of 'talking sense' into his brother, Mia mused, she would just have to disabuse him of that notion.

Any way she deemed fit.

* * * *

"This is insane."

Gabe Ryan scoffed. "I'm not having this conversation."

Jake took a breath and looked out across the fancy gardens that languished before the impressive sea beyond the Tyner property. The flowers and trees were okay, but give him a 460-cubic-inch big-block motor any day. Gardens were for women and sissies.

"How long have you known this woman?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter," Gabe insisted. "I love Jillian and she loves me. End of story."

He wished it were as easy as Gabe claimed. In Jake's experience, love had little to do with marriage. "So, what? Three months? Six at the outside?"

Gabe chuckled. "There never was much that got past you, big bro'."

"I know you think you're in love." Jake felt for his brother, he truly did. But Gabe had spent a lifetime operating on emotions and pipe dreams, leaving little room for pesky things like logic and common sense. Since more often than not, Jake cleaned up his fickle brother's messes, he figured he had a stake in the outcome of this particular situation.

"Bro, I know I haven't given you much reason to trust my judgment, but you have to believe me on this one. Jilly's the woman for me."

Jake ran both hands through his hair and brought them down to scrub over his face. This was how each and everyone of Gabe's "trust me, bro" conversations started. "That's what you said about that palm reader in West Hollywood," Jake pointed out.

Gabe waved his hand in dismissal. "She was a nut job."

"Who's to say Jillian isn't?" Jake thought about Jillian's friend, the buxom redhead with the fierce temper and wondered if she might be a few chicken nuggets short of a Happy Meal, too.

To Jake's surprise, his brother's features hardened. "Don't talk about her that way. Jillian's different. She *gets* me."

Jake blew out a pent up breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. This would be more difficult than he thought. And it was the time to shelve this particular argument. For now.

"Just watch your back. The palm reader you thought was a sun goddess cleaned out your bank account."

Gabe scowled. "Promise me you won't insult Jillian anymore."

Jake laughed. "I'm not making any promises. I'll try and keep and open mind, but that's it."

His brother turned his fierce gaze on him, reminding Jake of every time during their childhood when Gabe had begged and pleaded for something. He would swear up and down that "this time is different."

"If you have any doubts, bring them to me," Gabe said.
"Jillian doesn't need any more added stress."

Jake glanced around the property. "Doesn't seem too stressful around here."

"Some place, huh?" Gabe grinned, and just like that, the animosity between the brothers dissipated. "Her dad owns a string of hotels."

"Like the Hiltons?"

Gabe sat back in his chair. "Yeah, but on a smaller scale. Jilly grew up here."

"Who's the redhead?" Jake asked. Damn, but that woman had a temper. And just his luck, he had to spend the next two weeks in her company.

"Mia Briscoe, Jilly's best friend." Gabe lifted a brow. "Why? You interested?"

Jake sat back with a bark of laughter. He clapped his brother on the back. "I don't think so. That one's got 'ball buster' written all over her."

Jake didn't believe in love. There was plenty of scientific evidence that proved it was just a hormonal change. And even if it did exist, which it didn't, his parents had ruined him on the notion twenty years ago. So, yeah, he had first hand

knowledge of the stupid things people did all in the name of love.

He enjoyed women. He liked the smell of them, the shape and feel of their soft curves, and he especially liked slipping into their wet heat. But did he love them? Hell, no.

If Jake could go his whole life without being leg shackled for life to one woman, he would die a happy man.

Been there, done that, he thought bitterly.

* * * *

"Why, Mia, you're even lovelier than the last time I saw you!" Jillian's mother, Sandra Tyner exclaimed.

Mia smiled. "You're looking well yourself, Mrs. Tyner."

She hated these false social niceties, but in her business, they were a necessary evil. The last, and only, time Sandra Tyner had seen Mia had been nine years ago, at Mia and Jillian's college graduation. Jillian had been her dorm roommate from freshman year at Emory University, but until their commencement, Mia had never laid eyes on her best friend's parents. Not like Mia's aunt, who had taken every possible opportunity to fly cross-country to visit.

Standing in front of the very large, very expensive table in the formal dining room, Sandra Tyner fluffed her frosted hair. "Well, I try," she gushed, like the good Southern belle she was.

A door swung open and a large woman dressed in a gray maid's uniform pushed in a pastry cart crammed with silver topped dishes.

"Oh, thank you, Esma," Mrs. Tyner said. "You can go ahead and put those on the buffet."

Mrs. Tyner pronounced the word *boofay*, in the way only the rich managed. Mia took in the efficient movements of the housekeeper and made a mental note to pick her brain later. She wanted to include the household help in the wedding plans if at all possible.

Mrs. Tyner nodded to the well-stocked wet bar that stood beneath a larger-than-life portrait of herself and what appeared to be a poodle with twin afro-puffs.

Wow.

"Would you care for a drink, Mia?"

"I'll have a glass of wine, please."

"Esma, please get Mia and myself a glass of Chardonnay."

While Esma tended to their drinks, Mia took in the surroundings. The hardwood floors were original and polished to a perfect shine. Long, rectangular windows graced one end of the room, and beyond the soft silk drapes, the lush gardens were visible.

Esma handed Mia her drink, and Jillian and Gabe entered the dining room, hand in hand. Mia suppressed a pang of envy at the sight of the couple. When she and Jillian sat up talking into the night all those years ago in college, planning their futures and dreaming about what awaited them, to Mia, the idea of a family had always been elusive. She knew it would happen for Jilly; she just wasn't sure it would happen for her. She still didn't think so, and the reality her best friend was about to take the plunge was a bitter pill to swallow.

All Mia had ever wanted was a family; someone she could come home to at night. Someone to love her unconditionally. So far, she'd been unlucky in that arena.

Maybe I should get a dog.

She'd be thirty-one in two months. Now, she had no family to speak of, only her business. *Weddings by Mia* was her pride and joy, and although still fledgling, she had the sheer determination that would put it on the map. Planning Jillian's wedding would go a long way toward making her dream a reality. The Tyner name wasn't as big as the Hiltons, but it carried plenty of prestige.

"Hello, darling," Sandra said and moved toward her daughter. The women air-kissed instead of embracing. Mia hadn't known people actually did that. Then again, she was from Fresno.

"Mia and I were just having some wine. Would you care for some?" Sandra asked.

Jillian shook her head. "I'm going to stick with water." She clutched her stomach. "I'm still getting acclimated."

Mia frowned. Jillian had been acting strange since they'd arrived on Majestic. Of course, if Mia was getting married after a whirlwind courtship and had a mother who air-kissed and said *boofay*, she'd be feeling off, too.

She took her wine and wandered into the hall. A door to her right lay open, and she stepped inside. Miles of books in every size imaginable filled bookcases that spanned three of the four walls. A ladder on each wall hooked into a track at the top of each shelf. A large area rug rich in tones of pale

gold, indigo, dark green and burgundy covered the hardwood floor.

Mia walked along the shelves, running a hand across the spines. Twain, Dickens and Hawthorne occupied space next to London and Steinbeck. Thick, leather-bound texts filled with poetry, Classics and literary collections. An entire wall dedicated to mainstream fiction ran the gamut from Nora Roberts and Jonathan Kellerman to Dean Koontz. The cavernous room smelled of leather, paper and books. For a brief moment she allowed herself the luxury of a long ago memory: sitting on her daddy's lap while he read her *Oliver Twist* and *Huckleberry Finn*, sipping his brandy and puffing on his pipe.

"Snooping, Red?"

Mia started and spun around, frowning. Jake Ryan stood in the doorway, one long, sinewy arm propped above his head as he gripped the doorframe. An intricate black tribal tattoo circled his bulging bicep. In his other hand, a bottle of beer dangled from his fingertips. He still wore the black T-shirt that fit him like a second skin, and those Levis. He'd removed the ball cap in what she supposed was respect for dinner, though she still wasn't convinced he knew how to walk without dragging his knuckles. His black hair was silky, short on the back and sides, a little longer on top. He had close-cropped sideburns that ended at his earlobes. They should have looked ridiculous, but on Jake they were outrageously sexy.

"Don't you ever mind your own business?" she snapped.
"I'm not the one skulking through rooms."

"First of all, who uses a word like 'skulking'? And I wasn't skulking. I was simply taking a look around."

His raised brows said he didn't believe her, but he left it at that. He dropped his arm from the doorframe and walked into the library. He scanned the spines of the books. "Interesting collection," he commented, taking a pull on his beer.

Suddenly, all the oxygen seemed to disappear and her skin felt hot and itchy. Why did she have this response whenever he came close? Maybe it was just hormones. Yeah, that was it. She hadn't had any action in a while and this hulking sexgod reminded her body what she'd been missing. This reaction didn't mean she was attracted to The Jerk. Maybe she could find a handy cabana boy to take the edge off. Of course, The Jerk—Jake—seemed unaffected by her presence.

"They're called books. You know, lots of words strung together into meaningful sentences that tell a story."

One side of his mouth twisted into a sardonic smile. "Never did have much use for all that fancy book learnin'," he said.

Mia's lips twitched. She didn't want this man who was causing mutiny in her ovaries to have a sense of humor.

"Tell me, Red, how much is this fancy shinding going to cost my brother?"

And just like that, the spell was broken. Mia was so grateful, she had to fight the urge to reach over and hug him.

"I see from the look on your face you expected Jillian to make Gabe pay. Never fear, Jake, it's not going to break your brother's bank account; Jillian's parents are footing the bill." She took a sip of her wine and smirked. "Bet you feel a little foolish now."

He smirked back. "There are a lot of things I am, but *little* ain't one of 'em."

Mia flushed but rolled her eyes to cover the reaction regarding the "little" thing to which he was referring. "You're certainly sure of yourself. Overcompensation usually indicates a lack of..." she cleared her throat. "...other things."

He flashed his teeth and moved closer, a predatory gleam in his eyes. "If you're real nice, I'll show you."

Mia was dizzy. The man exuded pheromones like cologne. "I'll pass."

He shrugged and brought the bottle to his lips. He took a long swallow, and Mia stared at his strong throat working. "Your loss," he replied, sucking a drop of beer from his top lip.

Down, girl.

"Somehow, I doubt that." She took a step back and tried to steer the conversation onto safer ground. "Will you be Gabe's best man, then?"

The shift in conversation didn't seem to bother him. "Yeah, I suppose."

"I'll need to talk with you about some of your duties." Black brows lifted. "Duties?"

"Well, there's the best man's toast," she said, as she clicked points off on her fingers. "Traditionally the ring bearer carries the rings, but I think we're foregoing that given the circumstances, so you'll be in charge of Jillian's ring. And—"

"Who made you the gate keeper?"

Mia scowled. She hated being interrupted, but she didn't think Jake Ryan would care about a little thing like manners.

"Jillian and Gabe, when they hired me as the wedding planner."

"Wedding planner?"

"Yes, wedding planner." She regarded him as though he were a young child. "As in, she who plans weddings."

"I'm familiar with the term, thanks. *You're* a wedding planner?"

Mia nodded and drew her shoulders straight. "That's right." Jake's tipped his head back and let out a short bark of laughter. She frowned and controlled the urge to shove the beer bottle up his nose.

"Man, this just keeps getting better and better."

"Many people find the use of a wedding planner helpful," she replied primly.

"I'll have to take your word for it." Jake eyed her with curiosity. "Funny, you didn't strike me as a shyster."

"Excuse me?"

"A shyster. You know, as in, she who scams people for useless products and goods."

"I am *not* a shyster. I provide a valuable service for—"
"You're a con artist."

"A con artist?" Mia asked, incensed. "And what is it *you* do? Kick puppies?" There. Take that.

He smiled. With teeth. "I build hot rods."

"Of course, you do. I bet you're a hit with the beerswilling, redneck set."

"I haven't had any complaints."

Mia took two long swallows of her wine. She wanted a tranquilizer, but she'd settle for alcohol. Maybe he would hit her over the head with *Little Women* if she asked really nice.

"I can see you're going to be a peach to work with." She blew out a breath and gave him a saccharine smile. "How much will it take to convince you to keep your mouth shut for the next two weeks?"

Jake's eyes moved from her mouth and made a lazy perusal of her body, stopping to rest at her breasts. He stared at her chest for a few moments before lifting his gaze back to her eyes. "I'm sure we can work something out."

"Dream on, pal," Mia snapped and walked out.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Three

Jake watched Mia storm out of the library, enjoying the twitch of her hips and the sway of her round ass. A punch of desire burned through his blood, tightening his groin. Damned if that woman didn't fire all his cylinders. Maybe during his quest to prove the ridiculousness of this whole marriage idea, he'd be able to seduce the fiery Mia out of those tight green hot pants.

As soon as the thought hit, another struck him. Surely Jillian had a few nasty skeletons in her closet. And who knew Jillian better than her oldest and best friend?

He'd just stick to Mia like glue until he discovered what made Jillian tick. If his conscience twinged at the thought, well ... Gabe would thank him for it in the end. Better to find out she would destroy his heart before the wedding than later down the road. He would be doing his brother a favor.

Satisfied, he returned to the dining room where everyone had convened for supper. Mia stood at the buffet with Jillian, her back to him, that curly red hair still pulled up into one of those severe buns only librarians and spinsters wore. Those hot pants beckoned him, showcasing long, shapely legs and delicate ankles he imagined propped on his shoulders. The white blouse hugged her curves, accentuating the flare of hip, the dip in her waist. He already knew her breasts were full and high.

Ever since Becky Nelson had taken him to heaven on a backyard swing when he was fifteen, he had prided himself on

knowing exactly how to please a woman. It felt strange for him to experience such a powerful want for a woman so fast, but from the minute he'd looked up into those gypsy green eyes on the airplane, his body had rocketed into hormone overdrive.

Mia turned around and locked eyes on him a moment before scowling, then taking off toward her chair. He smirked, unruffled. He knew she felt the attraction, too. Miz Mia wasn't any good at playing her hand. He read every emotion on her pretty face. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

He moved to the buffet and piled his plate with meat, passing over the prissy-looking finger foods in favor of mashed potatoes and asparagus. When he turned, he saw the last remaining seat lay between Mia and Jillian's mother, who sat at the head of the table.

He smiled.

Mia stiffened as he approached and shifted her eyes to Jillian, who sat across from her. She took a sip of her wine. "Have you picked out a dress yet, Jilly?"

"Well..."

"Oh, you'll wear your grandmama's antique lace, of course," Mrs. Tyner said.

Jillian forked up a dainty bite of asparagus. "Actually, I'm thinking of something a little less formal."

"There's a fabulous sheath by Vera Wang," Mia said. "It's styled with a square neck and spaghetti straps. It would look great on you."

"But what about your grandmama's dress? It's what I wore when I married your father." The older woman's face reddened. "Naturally, I assumed you'd wear it, too."

"With all due respect, Mrs. Tyner, I think this decision is up to Jilly," Gabe said.

The tension mounted, and Jake hoped if Mia was as good a wedding planner as she'd claimed, she'd intervene before everyone clawed at each other with silver salad forks.

Mia ran a finger around the rim of her wine glass. "Well, if Jillian is set on picking her own dress, perhaps you two could compromise on the 'something borrowed'. A brooch or a handkerchief that's been in the family, maybe. There's also a lovely Jessica McClintock sheath that has embroidered netting, if you're sold on the lace."

Mrs. Tyner chewed on her suggestion while Jillian mouthed "Thank you," silently to Mia.

"Mia," Mrs. Tyner said, "tell me about your little wedding planning business."

Her smile pinched at the words "little wedding planning business," but she smoothed it over so fast, Jake wasn't sure he'd seen it. She was a slick one, he'd give her that. "I own *Weddings by Mia*. It's based in L.A. I started about two years ago." She took a sip of her wine. "I'm gradually building up a larger clientele, and I've dealt with pretty much every kind of wedding; from the informal and inexpensive to the grandiose."

Mrs. Tyner frowned. "I don't believe I've ever heard of it." She turned back to Jillian. "You're determined to have a planner?"

Jillian set her water glass down with a thunk and liquid sloshed over the sides onto the expensive tablecloth. "Mama."

Mrs. Tyner waved a hand. "No offense, Mia."

Mia matched the older woman's gaze head on. "None taken. A wedding is a family affair, so it's natural to feel like your toes are being stepped on when an outsider is brought in for the details."

"You are not an outsider," Jillian said.

"Mia is Jilly's best friend," Gabe interjected. "We both decided to bring her in to plan our wedding."

"But, I'm not family, either." Her green gaze locked on Mrs. Tyner again. "Jilly's your only child. I'm more than willing to include you in the preparations and details if you're interested."

Jake was impressed. Mia had defused the bomb that was Jillian's mother before the fuse was even lit. If he couldn't convince Gabe that marrying Jillian would be a mistake, his brother would have to spend the rest of his life with Sandra Tyner as a mother-in-law.

Jake suppressed a shiver.

Jillian's father, a robust man with thinning sandy hair, lifted a highball glass to his lips in a mock salute. "Well, now that we've gotten all that bullshit settled..."

Jillian groaned and shook her head. "Daddy..."

"Oh, settle down. I'm just kiddin', darlin'." He zeroed in on Gabe. "Tell me, what exactly is it you do? Jilly said something about computers."

Jake groaned inwardly. This was going to be a veritable minefield. A man with Gerald Tyner's societal trappings would

want a written guarantee his daughter would be well taken care of. As Jake eyed the older man, he thought, in blood.

"I'm a computer programmer by trade," Gabe answered.
"Right now I'm doing some freelance work."

"Freelance?" Gerald Tyner asked. "Isn't that code for 'unemployed'?"

"Daddy!"

Mia clapped her hands together. "I smell chocolate." She turned toward Jake and shot him a *help-me-now* smile. "Jake, don't you smell chocolate? I wonder what's for dessert."

Jake smothered a grin. Hell, this was going to be fun, after all.

Mia made the short trek through the lush gardens. The sky had turned a murky purple, with streaks of pink flashing against the horizon. She studied the changing leaves and drew in the salty scent of the sea. Dinner had been an eye-opening experience. It had certainly shown her what she stood up against. Walking along the crushed shell path leading to the front door of the cottage, Mia realized she needed to tread carefully with Sandra. Already she'd observed the strained relationship between Jillian and her mother. It would be difficult not to step on toes, but Mia had every confidence she'd pull it off. She did it on daily basis, after all.

When she opened the front door to the cottage, she stopped dead in her tracks.

Jake stood at one of the far windows, gazing out at the sea. At the intrusion, he turned around and lifted one black brow. "We just keep running into one another."

Mia frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"Enjoying the view."

Those hot blue eyes raked over her body, and Mia had the distinct feeling he wasn't talking about the ocean. There it was again, that hot, itchy feeling. Damn her hormones. Damn Jake Ryan.

Trying desperately to regain the upper hand, she said, "You've got a real problem with squatting, you know?"

"I could say the same about you."

Mia slapped her hands on her hips; the scene reminded her of their initial meeting. "I'm in the right place. It's you who's obviously lost."

Jake hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his worn Levis. "Looks like the wedding planner doesn't know all the details."

Mia's fingers curled into fists, and she reminded herself violence never accomplished anything, no matter how satisfying it might be to wipe the smirk off his face.

"Gabe and Jillian figured we could share the cottage."

"What!" The outrage of having to share the cottage with this ... this *cad* was *not* the way she wanted to end this taxing day. No matter how damn gorgeous he was.

"Since it's big enough for a family of six, they must have figured we could manage to co-exist for the next two weeks."

Mia would rather walk over hot coals than share living space with The Jerk, but admitting it was tantamount to letting the buffoon would win. At least now she knew why Jillian had been so evasive earlier.

You can do this, Mia. You've dealt with worse. Barely.

Pasting on a brilliant smile sure to crack her face, she said,

"I'm sure we can manage to stay out of each other's way."

Jake frowned. "That's it? No fight?"

Mia sighed and moved into the kitchen where she opened the white cupboards one by one until she found a ceramic mug. "What's the point?"

Jake stalked across the room and leaned against the breakfast bar. His eyes drilled into hers, and Mia had to fight not to look away. "I don't buy it."

Mia's temper spiked. "You obviously have trust issues." She pulled open more cupboards with force until she unearthed a box of herbal tea. "Look." She turned on the faucet and ran the water hot. "Jillian's my best friend. I like your brother; he seems really nice." Too bad the trait doesn't run in the family. "I want to see Jilly happy, and if Gabe is that person, then I'm going to do my best to see to it their wedding takes off without a hitch." She dipped the tea bag into the mug and glared at him. "Fighting with you doesn't accomplish my goal."

"Sure makes it interesting, though."

Mia shook her head. "You're insane."

"I've been told so a time or two. What makes you think Gabe and Jillian will be happy?"

She blinked at the change in subject. "They're in love." His laughter held no humor. "That's the biggest load of crapola I've ever heard."

She stared at him. "Somebody sure did a number on you, didn't they?"

Jake's blue eyes flashed a moment before they shuttered. "I'm a realist, honey. Love is nothing more than a chemical

reaction. As soon as the hormones calm down, the dust will settle and she'll be gone."

Mia shook her head. "So young, yet so cynical." She steeled her heart against the unwelcome wave of compassion that surged through her, and instead, latched onto the ire that fought with it. "And for the record, that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. I hope you're going to leave that little tidbit of wisdom out of your best man's toast."

Jake bared his teeth. "Sweetheart, if I have my way, there won't be a toast, 'cause there sure as hell ain't gonna be a wedding."

* * * *

The mid-morning sun cast a brilliant glare across the crushed shell path in the garden. The temperature was a balmy seventy-two and climbing. The roar of the ocean filled Mia's head as she mounted the curving staircase that led to the second-floor yeranda.

From here, the sea was a calm blue that stretched out onto the horizon, beckoning in its majesty. Mia hoped she would have time to visit the sandy beaches later today.

She walked through the grand house, taking in the lovely and very expensive décor, her footfalls silent on the plush carpet. Several pictures of the afro-puff poodle graced the walls. Since she hadn't seen the little dog scampering around, Mia assumed Sandra's dog had died. Honestly, she wouldn't be surprised to find a shrine to the poodle somewhere in the house.

Or the animal stuffed for preservation.

She heard voices inside the kitchen, and when she pushed open the swinging door, she found Jillian and Gabe sitting at the table in the breakfast nook, their heads close together and love shining in their eyes.

There. Right there. That's why I do this. Her romantic heart soared at the sight of her oldest friend and her love. It was bittersweet, of course, but she pushed away that persistent ache. Marriage may never come for her, but she could live vicariously through Jilly for now. It would have to do.

"Good morning," she announced.

"Hey, Mia," Gabe said. "Coffee?"

"If you've got it, I'll marry you myself," she said.

When Gabe stood, Esma moved in and shooed him back down. "Stay where you're at, boy. Guests don't get their own."

Gabe smiled. "Yes, ma'am."

"What do you take in it, honey?" the plump housekeeper asked.

"Sweet and light, please." At the housekeeper's raised brows, Mia laughed. "It has to taste like candy, otherwise I can't drink it."

"Rot your damn teeth out," Esma grumbled, but went to make the coffee as requested.

"Jilly," Mia said between clenched teeth, "you forgot to mention I'd be sharing quarters with Mr. Personality." She looked at Gabe and winced. "Sorry."

He laughed as Jillian turned a light shade of pink. "I was going to tell you, but you were in such a dither about the whole airplane thing, I didn't think it was the right time."

"That's alright. We've come to an understanding. Thanks, Esma," Mia said as the housekeeper set a cup of steaming coffee in front of her.

"Oh, really?" Gabe asked. "I didn't know my brother had the ability to compromise in his DNA."

She took a sip of coffee and very nearly moaned out loud at the taste of the decadent brew. "He stays out of my way and I won't kick his ass." She grinned wickedly around her mug.

"That's my girl," Jilly said, and took a drink of her herbal tea.

"What's the matter with you?" Mia asked. "Are you giving up coffee?"

Jillian shook her head. "My stomach is still all jittery; I didn't think I could manage coffee today."

Gabe's features etched in concern. "You okay, baby?"

She smiled in his direction. "I'm fine, sweetie. It's just nerves." But the smile didn't reach her eyes, and she looked away from her fiancé.

Interesting.

"Where *is* my future brother-in-law?" Jillian asked in a deft change of subject. Mia wasn't fooled, but she let it drop.

"Probably off kicking old ladies," she muttered.

"Good morning!" Sandra burst into the kitchen in a grand entrance, Chanel No. 5 enveloping her like a cloud as she bent down and air-kissed her daughter.

"Gabe, Mia."

Mia nodded, all the while wondering why Sandra had joined them. When she had made plans with Jillian and Gabe the night before, they hadn't included Jilly's mom.

Get a grip, Briscoe. Sandra wanted to be included—Mia had fairly dropped the invitation in her lap last night—and it wouldn't do at all to alienate her, especially when Mia needed the endorsement for her business. Weddings by Mia was barely scraping by, and the marriage of Jillian Tyner would be just the thing to help push her baby into the black.

It had, in fact, been the very thing that Jillian had used to lure her into the sudden wedding. Of course, Mia would have flown down for the wedding at any rate, but she'd had to do some fast shuffling to arrange the two weeks off for the event.

"Coffee, Mrs. T.?" Esma asked.

Sandra peered at Jillian's tea. "Actually, I think I'll have some of what Jillian's having, Esma." She smiled. "Tea's supposed to have a calming effect. It's very good for your body."

Mia opened her notebook and clicked the end of her pen. She wasn't touching that one. "Okay, guys. We're going to skim over everything today, so I can get an idea of what you want." She glanced down at her notes. "First off, have you decided on a venue?"

"The ceremony will be at our church," Sandra said.

Mia looked to Jillian and Gabe for confirmation. Jillian nodded hesitantly. "Is the church on the island?"

"Yes. It's in the heart of town," Sandra replied, nodding her thanks at Esma as she took her steaming mug of tea. "The best part is that it's two blocks down from The Wayfarer." At Mia's blank look, she explained. "The Wayfarer's a historic hotel here on the island. It was the first that Gerald bought. It has the loveliest ballroom you can imagine. Right out of the pages of history. You can almost see the grand ball gowns—"

"Mother."

Sandra flushed. "Well, anyway. It's where I was thinking we would have the reception."

Mia addressed Jillian and Gabe. "Was there a place you had in mind?"

So far, Sandra had done all of the planning. Jillian wasn't doing much to stop her mother; a side of her friend she'd never seen before. This was Jillian's wedding, and Mia had come here for her, not her mother. Definitely a shaky line to walk, but Mia was nothing if not dogged.

Jillian pursed her lips and glanced at Gabe, who squeezed her hand. "Actually," he said, "we were hoping to have the reception in the backyard here."

Sandra pulled a guppy, her mouth opening and closing twice. "Here?"

"You know, I had the same thought," Mia said. She leaned forward and looked directly at Sandra, going in for the kill. "Your gardens are just about the loveliest thing I've seen outside of a magazine. Did you do all the work yourself?"

One French-tipped hand fluttered about her hair. "Well, I've always had a green thumb," she said.

My ass, Mia thought. She'd bet her fifteen percent the Tyners had a whole slew of landscapers who kept the gardens beautiful. "Just think of how pretty those late-blooming flowers will look with the changing leaves. We could set up some tents for the dinner. String some lights all around. With the ocean in the background, it will be stunning."

Sandra nodded. "Yes. Yes, I do believe you're right, Mia." "Okay," she said, relieved.

One hurdle down, ten million to go.

* * * *

"Where the hell is the aspirin?"

Mia rummaged through her toiletry bag in the guest bathroom, destroying the neat organization of cosmetics, facial moisturizer and hand cream. It felt like someone had jammed ice picks in her temples. The hypnotic rhythm of the sea she had enjoyed mere hours ago now mocked her as her head throbbed in tune with the crashing waves.

Two hours of running interference. Two hours of arguing, nimble sidestepping and soothing hurt feelings.

It was easier when she planned a wedding for clients she didn't know.

Mia felt like she'd been hit by a truck. With a moan borne of frustration, she dumped the bag, spilling its contents into the sink with a clatter. Spying the clear bottle at the bottom, Mia grasped it with the fervor of a heroin addict, popped the lid and poured three into her palm.

"Is that you in here making all that racket?" Jake asked from the door.

Mia shrieked, and the bottle slipped from her fingers, spilling little white pills onto the bathroom floor.

"Jesus H.," he muttered, clapping his hands over his ears.
"What in the hell's the matter with you?"

Mia's patience snapped, and all of the frustration with Jillian and her mother and Jake's smart mouth came spewing out. "I have just about had it with you, pal," she said, drilling a finger into his chest. It was like hitting rock. "All I want is a freaking aspirin!"

He looked down pointedly at one hundred aspirin tablets scattered on the tile. Mia's temper threatened to self-destruct, and she poked him in the chest again. This time he grabbed her hand, closing his warmth around her wrist, and jerked her flush against him.

Up close, she could see the gold flecks in his blue eyes. His body threw off heat like a furnace, and she could feel the tough, hard contours of his chest and abdomen. And something harder, growing by the second.

Oh, boy.

That hot, itchy sensation was back, but this time it increased, and throbbing pressure built between her legs. This man is dangerous for my health.

His gaze, intense, hot and direct, raked over her face, honing in on her mouth. Neither said a word, but Mia's body screamed *yes!*, while her mind told her to run in the opposite direction.

"Rough day?" he asked, his voice husky. It flowed over her and managed to calm her frayed nerves.

Mia nodded, lust causing her to lose her sanity. "I'm sorry for being rude."

Why now? Why this man? Her nonexistent libido had decided to make a striking comeback with a guy she could barely stand.

His mere presence cast a dangerous impediment. Not only for her mental health but for her business. He wanted to break up Jillian and Gabe. She needed to remember that.

Wanting nothing more than to climb up that hard body, she drew on some well of unknown strength and untangled her body from his to scoop up the fallen aspirin.

He nudged her aside. "Here. Let me."

Stunned by the uncharacteristic act of kindness, Mia stood by the door and watched as he bend down and gathered the pills. She couldn't help but notice what a fine backside he had. His hard thighs clenched as he sat on his haunches. His powerfully built arms flexed as his fingers moved around, and Mia had to rein in the urge to fan herself.

He stood and handed her the bottle. "Here. Be careful next time." Jake walked out of the bathroom. Disappointment warred with relief, but his presence made her crazy. She figured she might as well get used to borderline insanity. Mia took a deep breath and used the distance to remind herself of all the reasons Jake Ryan should be avoided.

Their heated conversation last night floated back to her as she swallowed three aspirin and washed them down with cold tap water. Not only did the man think love and marriage were some kind of abomination, apparently he seemed determined to stop the very wedding she had been hired to plan.

Mia considered herself a good judge of character. She had to be, she thought, walking out of the bathroom and heading into her room. She went to the closet and pulled out a lightweight linen blouse.

Growing up the way she had, and later in her business, she'd found it necessary to come to a quick and accurate assessment of a person's nature. She had to know if the florist she used for one wedding could be counted on next time or if she'd be better off going with someone else.

She believed Gabe Ryan was a good man. She could see it in the way Jillian came alive in his presence, shining with love, and how he reacted in much the same way to Jillian. Definitely a good match for her friend. Jillian deserved happiness, and if Mia could help provide that by throwing her the wedding of her dreams, she would do everything in her power to accommodate that wish.

As she unbuttoned her blouse and shrugged it off, a thought struck her. If she could keep Jake occupied for the time being, he wouldn't have the time or the inclination to interfere.

Or, at least it would make it harder for him to try.

Maybe, she could show Jake that love and marriage worked, if not for him, then at least for others. Jillian and Gabe, specifically.

Mia smiled, slipping into the linen blouse. What an excellent idea. Of course, she'd have to figure out a way to get over this silly infatuation, but she figured she could handle that. On the flip side, she had a thousand and one

details to take care of and not a great deal of time to do it. An extra set of eyes and hands would help significantly.

She just had to keep her hands off of Gabe's very hot, very irritating brother.

No problem.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Four

When Mia emerged from the bedroom, Jake sat at the kitchen table, a bottle of imported beer sweating at his elbow and a sketchbook lain out before him.

She glanced at her watch. It wasn't even two and he was hitting the sauce? She opened her mouth to make a snarky comment, but closed it before her lips could form the words.

Be nice.

She reminded herself Jake's goal in life seemed to stomp out the dreams of happy couples everywhere. And her goal was to stop him.

Oh, man, this is going to be hard.

Mia opened the refrigerator and pulled out a beer. She twisted the top, and then frowned when it didn't budge.

"You need an opener," Jake said, without looking up.
"There's one in the drawer."

She pawed through the drawer and opened her beer. Bringing the bottle with her to the table, she sat down and peered at his sketchbook.

A set of charcoal pencils sat beside the pad. He held one in his left hand, deftly shading in one side of what appeared to be an old car. Content to watch, she sipped her beer.

After a few moments, he tossed the pencil on the table and blew out an exasperated breath. "Something I can do for you?"

He'd turned the ball cap backwards, and she had a clear view of his chiseled face.

"Nope." Obviously, the man didn't like to be bothered when he worked.

Tough.

"Whatcha drawing?"

"A '40 Mercury Coupe."

"A what?"

He picked up the pencil, bit the end it and examined his work. "A 1940 Mercury Coupe. It's a car," he added with a smirk.

"Yes, I'm familiar with the concept." She took a breath. Remember Gabe and Jillian. "You build them for a living?" "I restore them."

"Do you have your own shop? Like those Chopper guys?"

"Choppers are motorcycles, not cars, and yes, I have a shop."

"I have a Toyota Prius," she said. "You know, a hybrid." He scoffed as he grabbed an eraser and softened the darkened edges. "That's not a car."

Mia drew her brows together, and she took another drink of her beer. "It is, too. I know you think you're the expert on the subject, but the last time I checked, four tires and a motor constituted an automobile."

He looked up and drilled her with his blue gaze. "A hybrid isn't a real car, the same way a Chihuahua isn't a real dog."

Mia snorted. "You're a car snob."

"No, I just know quality."

"Hey. My car is full of quality. I paid good money for it, and it's better for the environment."

Jake dropped the eraser, leaned back in his chair and picked up his beer. "No, that just proves you're a chump."

"And you're an ass." The words popped out of her mouth before she could stop them. Damn it. But, really, how could he expect her to be nice when he insulted her by breathing?

"I'm not the one who forked over thirty-five grand for a glorified bumper car."

"People actually pay you for your services?" Mia scoffed as she stood. She'd tried. The pigheaded man made it impossible to hold a normal conversation. When he wasn't insulting her, he looked at her like he wanted to eat her alive. She'd never been one for human sacrifice, but some primal part of her waved its hands and shouted, *Me! Me! Me!*

Mia drained her beer and put the bottle in the sink trying to keep in mind he'd just offended her. "You must be one hell of a car builder—oh, excuse me, *restorer*—'cause I can tell you right now, your people skills suck."

She grabbed her briefcase off the counter and headed for the front door. Mia had more important things to do than sit here arguing with a bullheaded mechanic.

"Wait." He came up behind her.

She turned and narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "What?" The expression on his face said he'd rather get a root canal. "Do you need any help?" The question came out more as a command, but Mia didn't comment.

She patted his cheek, and had the satisfaction of seeing those blue eyes flash. "How good are you with a tape measure?"

"I think we'll go with two tents," Mia said, and examined the rolling lawn. One hand propped on her curvy hip and the other shaded her eyes against the late-afternoon sun.

"Why not one big tent?" Jake asked.

"Because we need separate areas for dining and dancing."

"If you got a big enough tent, you could separate the space inside."

Mia seemed to mull over his idea, surprising Jake again. All of his preconceived notions of her being a ball-busting career woman had crumbed away in the wake of their afternoon planning session.

He had thought she just needed a strong back and an extra set of hands as soon as she asked for his help, but she actually considered his suggestions for the reception. He hadn't wanted her to go out the door without some effort on his part to get closer, but it seemed the only thing they did well together was fight. When he thought about his reasons for offering assistance, his conscience pricked, but he ignored it.

She tapped her fingers against her lush lips. Man, she had a great mouth. Jake visualized it twisting in ecstasy, shouting his name as he gave her pleasure. He imagined those full, red lips wrapped around him. The images were so vivid, he had a semi within ten seconds.

"Yeah, we could do that," she murmured, snapping Jake out of his fantasy. "That would work even better, I think. It would leave more space for the gardens."

"Why don't Gabe and Jillian want the ceremony here?"

Mia picked up her notebook and penciled in something. "I think it's more a matter of where Sandra wants to have the ceremony." She glanced up. "Between you and me, I think the gardens would be a better spot."

Jake shrugged. He knew less about ceremonies than he did about wedding planning. Not exactly his bailiwick.

Mia closed her notebook and consulted her watch. "I need to head into town and see about renting a tent."

"I'll go with you."

Mia looked up at him, surprise clear on her face. "Okay."

He agreed to meet her in front of the house in ten minutes and went to fetch the car keys from Gabe. He found his brother stepping out of one of the bedrooms. "Hey."

"Oh, hey. What's up?" Gabe whispered.

"Why are you whispering?"

Gabe gestured behind him. "Jilly isn't feeling well. She's resting."

The woman had looked peaked since they'd arrived yesterday. Maybe she'd contracted food poisoning. More likely, he thought, a guilty conscience caused her problems.

"I need the keys to your rental. Mia and I are going into town for a bit."

Gabe lifted a brow. "Really. What for?"

Jake scowled. "I'm helping her with stuff."

"Really," he repeated, obviously enjoying himself. "And what 'stuff' would that be?"

"None of your goddamn business, little brother." He held out his hand. "Give me the keys. Now."

Gabe chuckled as he fished them out of his pocket. "Want me to come with? Protect you?"

"You're a barrel of laughs. See you."

Gabe's quiet laughter followed him out of the house. Mia stood by the SUV, her large briefcase slung over one shoulder and a purse big enough in which to hide a small child on the other.

He hit the key fob and unlocked the doors.

"Mother of God," Mia breathed as she slid inside. "It's hot in here."

"Nothing like a fall heat wave."

"Hurry up, hurry up," she commanded the air conditioner. Mia strapped her belt over her lap, and Jake had to fight not to stare at the pull of the fabric resting between her full breasts.

As he backed out of the large, circular drive, Jake tried to remember the last time he'd had sex. God, it had to have been months. Since his hot rod shop took up most of his free time, he didn't have time for dating. He had a few available women who knew the score: ladies who weren't looking for anything more than a quick slip between the sheets. Jake preferred it that way. Obviously, he needed to scratch that itch more often. But, it was difficult, because once he was on a project, things like food, water and sex moved from the forefront of his brain.

"Where in L.A. do you live?" Jake asked, trying for normalcy. Anything to take his mind off of peeling those tiny shorts off her.

"Westwood." She fanned herself with her hand.

Jake snorted. "Should've known."

Her brows drew together and formed that adorable line between her eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It seems like the kind of neighborhood you'd like."

"And just how do you know that? You don't even know me."

He glanced over at her and raked his gaze over her tanned legs and up along to her face. "I know your type."

"Oh, really?" Her voice had taken on the edge he was used to. "And what type is that?"

"The kind that drives a hybrid, drinks designer coffees and shops at Louis Vitton."

"It's Louis *Vuitton*, and I imagine it's a far cry from the bleached-blonde bimbos you're used to."

He grinned. "Well, they sure do know how to have a good time."

Mia reached into her bag and pulled out a pair of sunglasses. "Right," she said and looked out the window, ending the conversation.

Jake felt mildly ashamed. Which was ridiculous. He didn't owe this woman anything. If for a few hours he had enjoyed her company, well, this served as a reminder she interfered with his brother's happiness. Gabe may not realize it now, but he had headed down the road to hell and it was paved with women like Mia Briscoe and Jillian Tyner.

Gabe would thank him for it later.

Mia sat in her seat and simmered.

For a couple of hours, Jake had stopped being The Jerk and had turned into a nice guy. Well, that face and body

would forever bar him from The Nice Guy Club, but she'd welcomed change in personality. Of course, now, he had reverted to form, as if he had fulfilled some unknown quota of good deeds and could go back to being an ass.

She reached forward and pulled out her Blackberry, thankful the tiny spit of land had decent coverage. She looked up party planning and found no businesses such on the island.

Oh, just great.

It was her own fault. She had been so stunned by Jake's sudden change in behavior she had forgotten to ask Sandra about the accommodations on Majestic. Now, she and Jake would have to drive to Beaufort.

Mia located a couple of places and called to confirm their hours. Then she delivered the news to Mr. Personality.

"We'll be pushing it," he told her.

She glanced at her watch and nodded. It was already after five. "It's only a forty-five-minute drive to Beaufort." She peered at him over the top of her sunglasses. "You're a big shot race car guy. Don't tell me you're afraid of a little speed."

The look he shot her made Mia's toes curl. He pressed his foot down and the SUV shot forward. Mia let out a laugh as they sped down the two-lane highway.

* * * *

It took four cracks, but they managed to find a party rental store that would provide them with the right size tent for the wedding. The company wanted fifty percent down,

which was preposterous, but Mia didn't have the luxury of bargaining with the storeowner. She was from out of town and didn't have any contacts, and there was some kind of seafood festival planned for the same weekend. She didn't have any other options.

They arrived back at the cottage after ten, the main house dark and quiet, a few lights burning in the windows. Jake beat tracks into his bedroom, and left Mia standing in the foyer with a nasty case of lust, and nothing to do about it.

Her plan *seemed* simple. It wasn't inconceivable her sudden infatuation with The Jerk would disappear if she spent more time around the man. A little foolish, yes—now that she thought about it—but stranger things had happened.

Now, she knew Jake Ryan possessed a sense of humor similar to her own and could be charming when he put his mind to it. And it only made him more appealing.

Mia flopped down on the bed and moaned. What was she going to do? She had never been so turned on by the simple act of *looking* at a man before. Her hormones had taken over her motor skills. It didn't matter Jake was bad for her. Lots of things were bad for her, but she chose to do them anyway. Coffee, chocolate, driving too fast.

Mia booted up her laptop and tried to focus her attention on work. But, after she caught herself staring at the closed bedroom door, wondering if Jake lay naked on his bed, she shut the machine down with disgust.

Too keyed up to sleep, she thought about the moonlit beach. *Yes!* That's it. A walk on the beach was what she needed to calm both herself *and* her blasted hormones.

She changed out of her shorts and blouse and donned a navy blue baby tee with the words *I Didn't Escape the Psych Ward; They Let Me Out on a Day Pass* across the front. She pulled on a pair of loose, gray yoga pants, slid her feet into a pair of flip-flops, and then moved through the dark cottage.

No light spilled from under Jake's door. *He must have gone to sleep*. Mia wasn't surprised; being that cynical would exhaust anyone.

The surf thundered as she picked her way across the crushed shell path and over the bluffs. The moon, as full and ripe as a mother with child, shone brightly on the sand, turning it a glossy silver.

Her feet hit the soft sand that crested over the bluff, and the wind blew her hair around her face, and she wished she'd tied it behind her. But, that thought scattered as she stopped on the beach, taking in the magnificence of the sea, the gentle ripple of wave. Wisps of clouds flirted with the moon, casting a pale glow over the expansive sea. Mia breathed deep and tasted the salty and fresh air.

She slipped off her shoes and walked into the surf. Mia expected the cold waters of the Pacific, so she was shocked at the warmth of the water on her toes. She had forgotten how tepid the Southern Atlantic was.

It felt so good to soak her feet and walk along the water's edge she rolled up her pant legs before long. When she was knee deep, with the ocean water rushing past her, she looked around at the empty beach and considered the merits of skinny-dipping. Hell, she hadn't done it since high school, but why not now?

This privately owned section of shoreline extended for a mile in each direction. Everyone was asleep or retired for the evening. No one would have to know. Mia trudged back out of the water, and with another surreptitious glanced around, removed her clothes. She folded up her shirt and pants on the sand, leaving on her bra and lacy thong. Okay, so she wasn't completely skinny dipping, but she didn't want some random sea creature crawling on her most private assets.

Colder on her bare skin now she was nearly naked, it felt wonderful nonetheless. She ducked her head under the salty seawater and resurfaced, floating on her back. In the night, the stars made her think of little pinpricks in the sky.

Mia kept a careful eye on the pile of clothing she'd left ashore to ensure the tide and current didn't take her far. When she looked again, she jolted.

A dark figure stood on the beach next to her clothes.

Fear coursed through her, for the figure stared out at her. She submerged herself up to her neck, hoping the waves would obscure her body.

"How's the water?"

The breath she'd been holding left her lungs in a whoosh. Jake.

"You idiot! You scared the crap out of me!"

His rumbling laughter carried out to tickle her skin and warm her blood. "Didn't your mama teach you not go out without your clothes on?"

Mia closed her eyes over a wave of embarrassment. "Didn't yours teach you not to spy on naked women?" "Nope."

"Figures," she muttered.

Well, she couldn't very well get out now. Not with him standing there, though the idea held some appeal in her sex-starved mind. Before she had a chance to decide, Jake had stripped off his own shirt and shucked his jeans.

Uh-oh.

"What are you doing?" she squeaked, though it was fairly obvious.

The moonlight washed his skin with an ethereal glow, and Mia almost groaned out loud at the sight of his muscled chest gleaming in the night. She made out a light dusting of dark hair over his pecs, strong shoulders and muscular thighs before he dove into the water twenty feet from her.

She waited for him to surface, but as the seconds stretched out, she saw no sign of him. "Jake?"

He broke through the water behind her, and she swallowed a scream. He already thought she was big sissy with her hybrid; she didn't want to add to his erroneous opinion of her. Why do I care what he thinks? But, she did. For some strange reason, Mia cared very much what Jake Ryan thought about her.

He raked a hand through his black hair and water sluiced down his arms. "Good idea."

Mia found herself sinking down in the water, but then realized he would be seeing the same amount of skin had she donned a bikini. She doubted a bikini looked like her lacy underwear, but oh, well. Some part of her wanted him to suffer the same way she had.

She smiled when she saw his eyes focused in the general direction of the pink satin and scalloped lace of her demi-bra. Her breasts were full to the point of overflowing and the water only buoyed them further. "I thought you were sleeping."

His eyes flicked upward. "I was outside."

"You followed me?" she asked.

He nodded. "That's some tattoo you've got, Red."

Mia's cheeks heated. "Were you spying on me?"

"No. I just happened to be a few feet away and got a show." He smiled. With teeth.

On a drunken dare back in college, she'd had the words Bad to the Bone tattooed high on her left buttock. Above it, a skull and cross bones guarded her tush.

His laughter echoed across the space between them. He treaded water for a moment and then stretched out onto his back. Mia watched the water glide over his moon-kissed skin and thought about biting one muscled shoulder.

You have to stop this. The man is dangerous.

She trembled between action and indecision, her mind insisting she remain rooted in place while her hand moved out and brushed his foot. She couldn't stop it; she couldn't help herself when it came to this man.

Jake's feet slipped beneath the surface and he rose, moving in closer to her, swimming in circles around her until she was dizzy. He stopped his circling, and stayed a few scant inches away from her. His gaze was like a hundred wild touches as it scored down her wet body and over her breasts. The air was charged, edgy.

"Mia."

She watched his sensual lips form her name, her mouth suddenly dry. She swallowed. "Yes?" she whispered.

He was so close heat poured off of him, just like on the airplane, and earlier that afternoon in the bathroom of the cottage. Beneath the water, his hand made the barest of passes against her skin, so fleeting she wasn't sure he'd done it on purpose.

Regardless, she sucked in a breath at the light contact. Her nipples distended into tight buds, straining against the deliciously rough lace of her bra. Desire burned through her until she ached and throbbed.

He had barely touched her, and she felt like she might explode. She continued to watch his mouth, the lower lip full and lush, the laugh lines bracketing it.

The onshore wind kicked up, blowing a powerful breeze over them.

"Mia," he said again.

"Jake," she whispered.

"Storm's coming."

"What?" she asked, confused.

He hooked two fingers under her chin and tilted her head toward the sky. Those high, wispy clouds had thickened, covering the bright moon. The air felt heavy, thick and charged. Seconds later, a sharp, brilliant bolt of lightning struck the sky, illuminating the night.

Had he been trying to tell her that this whole time? Embarrassment burned her cheeks. She had been standing

there drooling, practically coming where she stood and the man hadn't even done anything. *I am such a fool.*

This was why she didn't do casual affairs. Jake Ryan was a bad boy, capitalized, italicized and underlined. He was bad for her health, her wellbeing and her soul.

But, damned if her body would listen.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Five

The thunderstorm that passed over Majestic left the island wet, and the mid-morning sun baked the grass, causing steam to rise from the rolling fairway. Jake pulled a putter out of the bag and carried it over to the green. He lined up his shot, sweat dripping between his shoulders and trailing down his back. With one eye closed, he tapped the ball and sent it into the hole.

"Nice," Gerald Tyner said.

Gabe stood next to the older man, his own putter resting on one shoulder. He kicked up a brow. "Didn't know you played, big brother."

"I take in a few rounds every once and a while," Jake said.

Actually, he'd started playing golf five years ago to schmooze clients, and found he liked the game. It helped take his mind off things for a few hours, his concentration focused on hitting the ball.

After seeing Mia all wet and breathy in the ocean with her pink lips and porn-star breasts, he needed a whole lot of distraction.

As Gabe moved onto the green to line up his own shot, Jake's mind reviewed the events of last night. He didn't think he'd ever been so turned on in his life, and he hadn't even touched her. Oh, he'd wanted to. He'd never wanted anything more than to slip off Mia's panties and slide inside her while her long red curls floated around her breasts in the water.

She'd looked like a mermaid, with her dancing green eyes and red hair. A wanton, sexy-as-hell mermaid, and he was pretty sure if he had reached out and taken what he wanted, she wouldn't have objected.

In the end, he'd turned it off. Well, tried to, at least. Christ, he'd been walking around with his cock half hard all morning. But, an image of his father destroying his life over one woman reeled him back.

Mia Briscoe was trouble. Worse, she was trouble who believed in love and happily ever after. If she had been some random woman he met on vacation, hell, he would have already given them both what they really needed. But, she was Jillian's best friend. And Jillian was trying to marry his brother.

Which, he reminded himself as he watched his brother knock the ball in the hole, was the reason he'd come here. To keep his brother from making the biggest mistake of his life.

They moved along the fairway to the clubhouse, making polite conversation that, quite honestly, bored the living shit out of him. Since his brother had invited him along, though, he tried to make an effort.

But, when Gerald inquired about Gabe's financial status, Jake's back went up.

"Gabe," Gerald said, knocking back two fingers of scotch inside the club bar, "we never got a chance to finish our little conversation the other night."

Gabe's brows drew together as he sipped his beer. "Which conversation is that?"

"Your employment status."

Gabe chuckled. "Right. Well, like I said, I do freelance computer programming."

Gerald sent Gabe a patronizing glance. "And I believe I said that was code for unemployed."

"I'm not unemployed. I have a steady source of income." "Want to talk a little shop?" Gerald asked.

Jake fought the urge to step in and save his brother. It appeared Jillian's father wanted to engage his future—no, possible—son-in law in a little pissing match.

Gabe shrugged, but Jake saw little nonchalance in the gesture. "Why not?"

"Define 'steady source of income'."

"I have a customer base of two hundred. Nearly all of them are successful businesses. They keep me on for consultations, new software upgrades, IT stuff and any problems that arise." He lifted a brow. "How's that?"

Jake watched the older man's fingers tighten around his glass. "If you don't mind my asking, how much does that provide?"

"Enough to pay my bills and then some."

"Jillian is accustomed to certain way of life."

Gabe smiled tightly. "I'm well aware of what Jilly is accustomed to."

"I want to be sure you realize Jillian isn't going to settle for some computer programmer who fancies himself the next Bill Gates."

"Now, wait just a goddamn minute," Jake said. He pointed at Gerald. "You're way out of line."

"Jake, be quiet." Gabe turned on Gerald. "I understand you think I'm unworthy of Jillian, sir. Hell, if I had a daughter like her, you can be damn sure I wouldn't want her around the likes of me. But, that's Jilly's decision to make. For some strange reason, she loves me and wants to make a life with me. Now, that makes me the luckiest sonofabitch alive and I'm going to take it where I can get it. And for the record, Gerald, I don't believe your daughter would appreciate you talking about her like she's a piece of property. She's a woman, and a hell of one at that."

Gerald had turned a deep shade of red with each sentence of Gabe's tirade. Jake sat back in shock, ready to clap his brother on the back in congratulations. He'd never seen the younger man step up this way, and he felt damned proud.

Gabe whirled on Jake and pointed a finger in his face. "And you. I'm sick and tired of you fighting my battles for me. I'm old enough to do it myself. So, back off!"

With that parting shot, he stalked off, leaving Jake and Gerald staring after him.

* * * *

"Mama, I don't want to have this conversation with you."

"Jilly darling, you're my daughter. I'm concerned about
your happiness."

Mia stood in the hallway outside the family parlor. She tried to feel guilty for eavesdropping, but instead clutched her notebook to her chest and moved closer to the door.

"Well, rest assured, Mother. My happiness is secure."
"How long have you known this boy?"

"I told you, five months."

"And that's long enough to know you want to spend the rest of your life with him?"

"Yes!"

Mia imagined her friend pacing back and forth, grabbing her head in exasperation.

"Are you sure he isn't just interested in your bank account?"

Dead silence followed, and Mia winced.

"Mother, I want you to listen to me. I love Gabriel. He loves me. If you do anything, and I mean *anything*, to sabotage this, you will never see me again."

"Jillian," Sandra said in a shocked whisper.

"That's it, Mama. End of discussion. Now, I'm going to lie down before my fiancé returns. I'll trust you not to bring this up again."

Mia ducked into one of the open rooms and poked her head out in time to see Jillian stalk out of the parlor and head up the stairs. Moments later, she watched Sandra emerge and head in the opposite direction.

Yikes.

At times like this, you needed a girlfriend. With that thought in mind, Mia headed up to Jillian's room and tapped on the door.

The door wrenched open. "Mama—" Jillian stopped when she saw Mia, her eyes red and flowing with tears.

Mia moved in the room and wrapped her arms around her friend. "I'm sorry, honey," she said, rubbing Jillian's back. "I overheard your conversation."

Jillian tucked her head on Mia's chest and let loose with a sob. "God, I don't understand why people won't let us be. We're in love. How hard is that to get?"

"I'm sure your mom is concerned, sweetie. After all, she's just met Gabe. You have to look at it from her point of view."

"No, damn it, I won't. This isn't the first time she's tried to control my life. Everything I've ever done; how I dress, where I went to school, the kind of career I wanted, has been dictated by Sandra and Gerald."

Jillian broke away and folded herself into a chair. She swiped at her eyes. For the first time, Mia realized that having money and both parents wasn't necessarily a blessing. Aunt Eva had allowed Mia to make and learn from her own choices.

At that moment, she missed her aunt fiercely, an ache that settled around her heart and squeezed. It had been nearly a year, but she still hadn't quite recovered from her aunt's death.

Another sadness for another day. She focused on Jillian.

"I'm sorry." Sometimes it helped to have someone listen and not justify everyone's actions.

Jillian waved a hand. "It's all right." She chuckled mirthlessly. "Besides, they may have their way, after all."

Everything in Mia stilled. "Why's that?"

Jillian looked up at her with tear-stained eyes. "I'm pregnant."

Like a lock clicking into place, Jillian's strange behavior made perfect sense. Her aversion to alcohol and caffeine, her fatigue, upset stomach, and mood swings.

"Congratulations?"

Jilly blew out a breath. "I don't think Gabe will see it that way."

Mia crouched down in front of Jillian. "He doesn't know?" Jillian shook her head as fresh tears filled her eyes. "I found out a month ago, but I couldn't tell him."

"Why not, hon?"

"It's all this family history bullshit."

"You've lost me. Your family?"

"No. I told you how Gabe's folks were in a loveless marriage and it really messed them up, right?"

Mia nodded.

"Well, they got married because Gabe's mom purposely got pregnant with Jake. I guess she was one of those floozies who hung around in ports waiting for Navy men to latch on to. Apparently, it's a pretty common occurrence." She ran a hand through her blonde hair and blew out another breath. "Well, she got pregnant and Gabe's dad, wanting to do the honorable thing, married her. He found out about how she planned it all, but only after Gabe was born. I guess that's what started all the bitterness."

"Gabe told you all this?" Mia asked.

She nodded. "I remember the way he said it, like his mother was horrible, and any woman who did that was ruthless."

Mia rubbed Jillian's knee. "But, you didn't do it on purpose."

Jillian laughed. "Of course not. It just happened. But, I was so afraid he would freak out I've let it go. Then, he proposed and I decided to wait until after the wedding."

"Maybe you should tell him beforehand. Then it won't be such a shock."

"I wanted to, but now it's this lie that's spiraled out of control. I'm afraid, Mia." Jillian's brown eyes were huge. "I'm so afraid he'll take one look at me and leave."

"Is that why you're waiting until after the wedding?"

Jillian nodded. "I love him so much. I couldn't handle him thinking I tricked him into marrying me."

"That's why you should tell him *before* the wedding, Jilly." Mia gathered her friend in her arms once again, soothing her and murmuring platitudes. All the while, her mind reeled. What would Gabe do? If he was anything like his brother, he would take off faster than you could say, "Go."

Oh, God. Jake.

If Jake found out about the pregnancy, no doubt he would use this to prove to Gabe the whole marriage was a sham.

"Jilly. You have to tell Gabe," she repeated, this time with panic.

But, Jillian didn't seem to notice. "I know I do. I realize the longer I wait, the worse it will be."

Mia leaned back and looked into her friend's eyes.

"Promise me. Promise me you'll tell him before the wedding." Jilly nodded. "I promise."

"Don't tell anyone else, okay? Not your mom, not your dad, and certainly not Jake."

"Jake?" she asked. "Why would I tell Jake?"

"Never mind." Mia patted Jillian's knee. "Leave Jake to me."

Jake was no dummy. If Mia had noticed Jillian's strange behavior, then it was only a matter of time before Jake and the others did, too. If Jake found out before Gabe, well, all hell would break loose. And Mia wouldn't let that happen.

She helped Jillian into bed and let herself out of the room, after agreeing to meet up with her and Sandra later to go gown shopping.

It looked like Mia was going to have to step things up a bit. If she wanted to keep Jake Ryan distracted enough to lay off Jillian, then she needed to find something more interesting than wedding plans to keep his attention.

As she walked down the stairs and onto the path leading to the cottage, she considered her options. Maybe she'd handled this all wrong. Jake had awakened something in her; a deep, sensual longing. No doubt about it. Her brain cautioned her against it, but her body and heart couldn't seem to listen. She needed a little island fling to get over this infatuation and start her life back on track. After all, it had been nearly two years since she'd been with a man. Which was a hell of a long time, come to think of it.

By distracting Jake, he wouldn't even remember Jillian's name.

Well, she hoped, anyway.

* * * *

Jake slammed the door of the cottage and stalked into the kitchen.

Gabe would goddamn well listen to him if he had to sit on his brother to get the words out. He didn't fight Gabe's

battles. Did he? No, he assured himself. He may clean up the messes from said battles, but only because Gabe was too immature to do it himself.

Besides, he thought, rummaging through the fridge for a beer, it's for his own good. If Gabe didn't have Jake looking after him, then where the hell would he be?

He found no beer left in the refrigerator, which only fueled his ire. He stalked toward Mia's bedroom.

"Mia!" He pounded his fist on the door. "Mia, open the goddamn door."

"What?" she snapped as she pulled open the door.

"Did you drink all my beer?"

"Did I ... what?"

"I just wanted a cold beer, but there's none left. That leaves you." He stared pointedly at her.

She slapped her hands on those fabulous hips. That he could want her even when he was spitting mad only made him want to strangle her, right after he shoved her up against the door and took that full mouth.

"You know, I worried you might have a problem, but this certainly confirms it."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"There are twelve-step programs for people like you, you know."

"I am not an alcoholic," he growled. "I just want my goddamn beer."

She quirked a brow. "Really. Well, you know, the first stage is denial."

"Oh, yeah? Well, here's something you can't deny." He moved forward, crushing her soft body against his, propelling her backwards until she hit the door. Her breasts pressed against his chest and just like that, he was hard as granite.

He looked at that pouty mouth; her lips parted in breathless surprise and did what he'd wanted to do since he laid eyes on her two days ago.

He took.

She stilled as he tested the softness of those lips, nibbling along the seam. She lifted her hand and placed it on his chest as though to push him away, but instead grabbed a fistful of his T-shirt and pulled him closer.

Then, she opened her mouth and let him invade her.

Oh, sweet God. He plunged his tongue into her mouth, driving in and then retreating, chasing her tongue and lips with his own. She moaned into his mouth and he got impossibly harder.

She released her hand on his shirt and snaked both hands around his waist and into the hard muscles of his back. He dropped his own hand onto her collarbone and let it slide down until he cupped one of her soft breasts.

Her breath hitched as his thumb found her already hardened nipple, and he rasped the pad across it. She moaned again and, with complete and utter abandon, wrapped her legs around his waist until his aching cock lined up against her soft, wet heat.

The movement undid Jake, so much so his head was full of Mia, only Mia. His heart thundered, his blood screamed for the hot woman opening herself for him.

"Jake," she murmured. "I need to—"

His mouth left hers as he moved his lips in a fiery trail down her throat, the only thought in his mind was getting Mia on that bed and himself inside her. Now.

"Don't worry, babe. I'm about to give you what you need."

The hands that moments ago had urged him on now pushed him away. Confused, he tried to clear his lust-hazed mind.

"I need you to stop, so I can go answer the door." She shoved away from him.

"Huh?"

"Someone's pounding at the door. God." She checked herself in the mirror and smoothed her hair and clothes, transforming in an instant back into the uptight woman he knew.

Irrationally angry she could be so unaffected, he pushed past her and hauled open the door. He nodded curtly at Sandra and Jillian before taking off along the path that led to the beach.

What the hell was wrong with him? How could something as innocent as a kiss have shaken him to his core? This was ridiculous. Of course, if he were honest, he could admit there had been nothing innocent about that kiss, or the woman who had shamelessly wrapped her legs around his waist as if she wanted to climb inside him.

As he took off in a jog along the hard-packed sand, he realized that mostly, he was pissed off at himself. He'd been mad from his argument with Gabe and he had taken it out on Mia.

But, that didn't erase the fact that from the moment he had touched her, all his control had simply fled. Never in his life, in all of the women he had been with, had he ever felt that out of control. And it scared the shit out of him.

Had his father felt this way? And there lie the crux of the problem. Because he was never going to allow any woman to have that kind of power over him.

Not even a fiery redhead with a body that made him want to beg. No, he was going to stay the hell away from Mia Briscoe and whatever spell she'd cast on him.

Jake stopped. He leaned down and rested his hands on his knees, his breath heaving from his lungs. He tilted his head up to look at the brilliant sky and lush waves of the Atlantic.

And he knew just how to do it.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Six

Jillian looked stunning. She stepped onto the platform outside of the fitting rooms and turned in a circle. The soft sheath she wore flowed gently to the ground, hugging her body with style and grace.

Sandra stood next to Mia and inspected the eighth dress with a critical eye. Up to this point, Sandra hadn't found one she liked. Still frazzled from her encounter with Jake, Mia fought the temptation to take one of those fancy bridal shoes and whack the mother-of-the-bride upside the head with it. Which wouldn't do at all.

"I think that's the one, Jilly," Mia said.

"Hmm," Sandra said. "I don't know."

"What do you think, Jilly?"

Jillian inspected herself in the trio of mirrors inside the upscale bridal boutique. "I like it."

The simple and elegant Vera Wang sheath bore a scoop neck and thin spaghetti straps, the supple satin clinging to Jillian's curves like a lover. The ivory color brought out her olive coloring and accentuated her wide brown eyes. Her cheeks were flushed from excitement and the glow of pregnancy, and she smiled into the mirror.

"If that's the one you want," Sandra said uncertainly.

"It is. I love it."

"Gabe's going to flip," Mia said. And he would. Provided he'd still stand at the altar after Jilly revealed the news of her pregnancy.

Mia had been warming up to the idea of seducing Jake when he'd stomped down the hall to her room. But, then he'd laid into her about his *beer* of all things. She wanted to be nice to him, she really did. But, when it came to Jake Ryan, she simply couldn't stop her mouth from issuing smart remarks. Especially since he seemed to goad her into it. He confused her. One minute he was accusing her of larceny, the next he'd had her pushed up against a wall.

He'd just ... attacked. Mia's blood warmed erotically at the memory of the hot assault of his mouth and hands.

The man could kiss.

So overcome by lust, she'd wanted to strip off her clothes by just *kissing* that man. Nothing was simple about the kiss. No, Jake Ryan kissed like she suspected he did everything; with the single-minded determination to do the job right. And he did. In spades.

While the seamstress helped Jillian out of her gown, Mia imagined how they might've ended up had they not been interrupted. She had no self-control when it came to Jake, so she had little doubt they'd have been on the soft bed in her room while they finished the tempestuous ride he'd initiated.

And the wild, reckless abandon he inspired frightened her. When she was with Jake, all her carefully laid plans skittered away like so much dust. She didn't trust herself around him.

Jillian's cell phone rang, and Sandra answered it. "Hello, Gabe. Yes, she's right here."

Jillian emerged from the fitting room and took the phone. "Hi, baby."

Mia left mother, daughter and seamstress in search of a salesclerk, but her mind was still on Jake and the feelings he evoked in her. Wild, out of control ... but, for the first time in her life ... free. Yes, he scared her, more than she cared to admit, but something about that fear had her craving more. Like an adrenaline junkie, she wanted to rush headfirst back into that freefall of lust and the unknown.

"Can I help you?" a young woman with light eyes and black hair asked. The tag on her blouse said Joanna.

"Yes. My friend is in the back trying on gowns, and she's decided on the one she wants. I need to see if you another in stock." Mia smiled. "The wedding is next Saturday."

"I'll run in the back and see. You said she's near the fitting rooms?"

She nodded. "Blonde hair, with an older woman. The only two out there."

"What size is she?"

"Six."

"Okay." She pulled a notepad from the rear pocket of her pants. "If you want to head up to the front counter, I'll go check and meet you back there."

Joanna headed off to the fitting rooms while Mia went to the front desk. Like a burr sticking to her heel, Jake continued to stick to her thoughts. For the last seventeen years, Mia had kept a tight leash on her emotions, on her world, maintaining its order. She'd had the rug ripped out from beneath her not once, but twice. Mia had first-hand knowledge that people, life, didn't come with guarantees. Yet, she had allowed the world to pass her by.

Mia approached the empty counter. Overcome, she suddenly felt dizzy, unsteady and breathless, as though she stood on the edge of a very high cliff.

With nowhere to go but down.

Damned if she'd bow out this time.

She smiled. She was going to sleep with Jake. And she'd enjoy every minute of it. Because, God knew if they ever did have a go at each other, there'd be little left but a couple of lifeless bodies.

But, man, what a ride.

* * * *

"What do you mean, they're gone?" Mia demanded.

"I really like this color." Jillian pointed to a rose in pale blue.

"Jilly!"

"What?" she asked absently.

"Where did Jake and Gabe go?"

"They're going out for a couple days on the water. A bachelor party-type thing."

"But, I thought you said they were doing that next Friday."

Jillian shrugged her slim shoulders and flipped another

glossy page. "Gabe said Jake changed his mind. He wanted to do it sooner."

He left because he kissed me. Apparently once was enough to send him running.

"All of a sudden he changed his mind?" Mia asked.

Jillian kept her eyes on the magazine. "I guess."

Mia's heart pinched painfully. Had he found her *that* repulsive? She wasn't blind; she knew she was an attractive woman. Granted, it had been a long while since she'd had sex—hell, even kissed a man—but she didn't think it necessary for Jake to run after one little kiss.

Stop it!

Mia put a stop to the self-doubt coursing through her and focused on lambasting Jake instead.

"Well, that's just stupid. Doesn't that pigheaded man know bachelor parties are traditionally held the night before the wedding?"

Jillian stopped flipping through the shiny pages filled with bridal bouquets to look at Mia. "I don't think Jake's up on the latest traditions. You know, being against marriage and all that."

Mia blew out a breath. She wanted to strangle him. If she got her hands on him ... "We have seven days until your wedding, Jilly. We need the groom here, not off gallivanting like some horny teenager."

"What's gotten in to you? They'll be back tomorrow night." She lifted a brow. "Why do you care, anyway? I would've thought you'd be thanking me that Jake's out of your hair."

Why do I care? Because the man kissed me like he was a chochoholic and I was a big 'ol Hershey bar.

Mia gave herself a mental shake. That was the last time she let her heart and hormones take control. What a mistake. To hell with her earlier proclamation.

Island fling, my ass.

He probably kissed every woman he met that way.

The scum-sucking bastard.

"You're right. I'm sorry." Mia cast a surreptitious glance around the florist's for Sandra. "Have you told Gabe yet?"

"No." Jilly returned to the bridal bouquets. "What do you think about this one?" She pointed to a dozen white lilies bound with red ribbon.

"I think it's nice. Very simple. Very elegant. Just your style." She tugged on her friend's arm. "Quit avoiding the issue."

Jillian turned and stared openly at Mia. "What *is* the issue here? Whether or not I told Gabe about the baby or why you're spitting mad because Jake left?"

Mia flushed. "Okay. Let's shelve it."

Sandra walked toward them, snapping her cell phone shut. "Your great aunt Francis is at the airport."

Jillian blinked. "What?"

Sandra sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "I'd hoped she might have drunk herself into a coma by now." She smiled wearily at Jillian. "No such luck."

"Mama. How did she find out?"

"I'll bet you anything Cousin Paula told the old biddy." Sandra pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. "Damned woman is still bitter about your great-grandmama's antique silver."

Mia looked at mother and daughter, realizing she had missed something vital. After Sandra's comment, she wasn't sure where to start. "I take it Great Aunt Francis isn't your favorite person?"

While Jillian stood there blanching, Sandra looked at Mia. "You don't know the half of it. Wait until you meet her." She gave her a sympathetic glance. "Mia, darlin', you're about to earn your fifteen percent."

* * * *

Great Aunt Francis was a tiny woman with a frizz of bright red hair shellacked into what could only be described as a collapsed beehive. She sailed past security wearing a day-glo green mini skirt, black stiletto heels, and a white tube top. With cheeks smeared garishly with rouge, eyelids frosted in electric blue and lips painted a vivid red, she reminded Mia of a geriatric working girl. The large, upturned—and obviously cosmetically enhanced—breasts straining against the tube top were the only things that hadn't succumbed to gravity.

She was eighty if she was a day.

She spotted Sandra, waved a hand, and stumbled a bit before forging ahead. Great Aunt Francis grabbed Sandra's shoulders and air-kissed her.

What is it with this family?

"Darling, it's wonderful to see you," Francis exclaimed in a raspy, smoker's voice. She eyed Sandra's conservative summer-weight peach suit and made a tsk sound. "Your age is catching up with you, dearie. Did you ever call that surgeon I recommended?"

Mia watched Sandra's eyes flash briefly before she pasted a bland smile on her face. "Why mess with nature?"

Aunt Francis's magenta-penciled eyebrows shot up, and the look she shot Sandra said nature had already done its

damage. She turned on Jillian, and did the air-kissing thing again.

If she tries to air-kiss me, I will punch-kiss her.

Aunt Francis held Jillian out at arm's length, her bright eyes honing in on her niece's face. "Something's different about you."

Jillian's eyes darted away, and she looked at Mia, who thrust out her hand at the older woman. "I'm Mia Briscoe."

Aunt Francis stared at her outstretched hand and lifted a brow. "Nice to meet you, dearie." She dismissed the polite gesture.

You are not a nice lady. I don't care if you were alive during the goddamn French Revolution.

"Sandra, fetch my bags at the carousel. I need a cigarette, and I have to go *outside* to do it." The old woman took off, digging through a macramé tote the size of Kansas, muttering about those "sonofabitchin' hippies trying to take over the world."

Mia watched her plow through the crowd—no small feat when she wore heels longer than Mia's fingers. "Wow."

"I need a drink," Sandra said.

* * * *

A warm breeze washed over the rented pontoon boat, tickling Jake's face as he cast a line off the stern. In the calm water of the Port Royal Sound, the waves gently rocked the boat in a rhythm that reminded him of sex.

Which, of course, reminded him of Mia. Goddamnit.

The sun slid below the horizon, bathing the sky in brilliant pinks, purples and reds. It *should* have been relaxing.

Beside him, Gabe leaned back in a cheap lawn chair, a ball cap tipped forward to shield his eyes from the lowering sun. A bottle of Beck's sat sweating on the deck beside him.

Renting the boat for a night hadn't been hard, just expensive. But, Jake figured if it helped Gabe see reason, then it was money well spent. He hadn't broached the subject of his brother's impending nuptials yet; at first since it hadn't seemed like the right moment, and then later because they were having so much fun.

Well, Gabe had been having a blast, anyway. Granted, Jake enjoyed spending this rare time with his brother, but his thoughts were full of Mia. Of her pink, pouty lips, and soft, heavy breasts. The way she'd felt in his arms. How she had dropped all pretense and unleashed all that passion. Who knew such an uptight woman could be so unabashedly wanton?

Jake wanted to watch those gypsy eyes as he brought her to orgasm, wanted to taste her, sample her until she writhed with need. He shuddered out a breath. His attempt at diversion had backfired and now he wanted Mia more. And he wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"Got any bites?" Gabe mumbled.

Jake tugged on his pole, but only felt the resistance of the current. "Nah."

"I'm surprised you haven't brought it up yet."

Jake glanced sideways at his brother. Gabe sat in the same position, looking as though he slept, his ball cap still tilted down.

"Why don't you ask me about her?"

"Who, Mia?" Jake asked.

Gabe used a finger to push back the bill of the hat and cracked open one eye. "No. Who said anything about Mia?"

"I sure as hell didn't."

Gabe hooted with laughter. "She's getting to you, big brother."

"Bullshit." Jake took a long pull on his beer to wipe the taste of the lie from his mouth. "How did you and Jillian meet?"

Gabe chuckled and reached for his beer. "Okay." He took a drink, scratched his head. "She works for my clients."

"What does she do?"

"She's an accountant. Good with numbers." He smiled. "I fell in love with her on the spot." He turned and pointed his beer at Jake. "No comments from the dick gallery. Anyway, the brass at her firm called me in to do a quick fix. There she was, sitting at her desk, scowling and cursing at her computer. I fixed her PC, and then I asked her out."

"She said yes? Just like that?"

Gabe laughed. "Jilly? Yeah, right. She told me to get lost. I persisted, kept finding things at her firm that needed fixing. I wore her down eventually." He grinned. "There isn't a woman 'round who can resist the Ryan charm."

Jake hadn't been the least bit charming since he'd met Mia. Pushing that thought away, he stared into his beer. "What makes her different from all the others?"

"Her honesty," Gabe said. "She doesn't bullshit you. I don't have to worry about games or secrets." He smiled wickedly.
"'Course, that ain't all, but I'm a gentleman."

Jake snorted. "Right. A gentleman."

"Hey, I don't kiss and tell."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Seven

"Got any liquor in here, Pearl?"

"I'll check, but Aunt Francis may have already cleaned me out."

"I'll take some tea if you've got it, please."

Mia dropped her head onto the kitchen counter with a thud. It was barely noon and she already had a pounding headache. This had turned from dream client to *get me the hell out of here* in a hurry. With the unexpected addition of Great Aunt Francis, Mia had not one, but two meddling crones with whom to contend. Although, the more time she spent in Francis' company, the more she liked Sandra.

By the end of dinner last night, Mia had seriously considered becoming an alcoholic.

She lifted her head when Pearl placed a steaming mug of chamomile in front of her. "Fortify yourself, girl."

Mia sipped the soothing brew and eyed the cook. "I've been meaning to talk to you about the food for the wedding."

Pearl looked up from the large cutting board where she chopped carrots and celery. "Figured you wanted to go with some fancy caterer."

Mia shook her head. "I've sampled your menu, Pearl and let me tell you, you could kick any fancy caterer's ass."

Pearl huffed, but her cheeks tinged pink. In her late sixties and pleasantly plump, she wore her gray hair in a bun. Her black slacks and white camp shirt were crisp beneath her

apron. "I'll make sure to tell my niece that." She smiled. "She's the fancy caterer on the island."

"Oops," Mia said with a sheepish grin. "Open mouth, insert foot." She took another sip of her tea. "Let me ask you a question. How many do you think you could cook for?"

Pearl sliced and diced with military precision. She stopped for a moment and locked eyes with Mia. "Honey, I've been with this family for thirty years. Mrs. T. puts on some mighty big dinner parties."

Yes, Mia imagined she did. "The guest list is expected to be somewhere around fifty, not including the family. It's an early afternoon wedding, and Jillian wants to feed them, but nothing too fancy. Is there anything you can think of that might go with that?"

Pearl finished chopping the vegetables and dumped them into a stock pot on the stove. "We could do finger foods, hors d'oeuvres, some pastries."

"That sounds perfect. Can you do those little finger sandwiches?" Mia made a poor imitation with her hands.

"Tea sandwiches? Sure. Though, we may want to stay away from too many desserts since there'll be cake. Jillian's already come to me on that." Pearl reached under the large granite counter and pulled out a glossy cut out from a magazine. She showed it to Mia.

"Oh, that's perfect. It's so Jilly." The wedding cake sat three-tiers high with butter yellow icing fashioned to resemble satin. White icing shaped into ribbon fluttered down from the top and layered each tier.

"I've been toying around with it some. Almost got the batter perfected, but I ain't no wedding cake baker." She looked at Mia. "Be interested in sampling some?"

"Sure. Got any handy?"

"Not at the moment, no," Pearl said. "But I'm planning on making some this afternoon. I can box it up for you and leave it at the cottage."

"That'll work." Mia finished her wine. "Thanks a million. Will you need any help with the cooking?"

"If it's all the same, I thought I'd bully my niece into it."
"That's perfect."

"What's that I smell? Pearl, you wicked woman." Jake breezed into the kitchen and headed straight for the stove.

"Get outta here, boy." Pearl snapped him with her towel.
"I'm makin' stew. You'll have to wait the same as everyone else."

He looked like pure sin wrapped in muscle, and Mia wanted to kick him for inspiring these unsteady feelings inside her. He wore olive green cargo shorts and a navy T-shirt. He looked so damn good it made her eyes water.

He barely glanced at her.

"Thanks again, Pearl," Mia said.

"Sure thing, honey pie."

Mia slid out of the kitchen from the service entrance that led to the veranda. She stopped to take a breath. Her heart pounded, and a queer tightness pressed on her chest like an anvil. Why had she allowed Jake to get to her this way?

So he'd left like he had the hounds of hell on his heels after kissing her? So he'd acted like she wasn't in the room moments ago? Big deal.

He really is a jerk.

Steadier, she walked down the steps.

"Where you going, Red?"

Mia gasped as she ran into a wall of hard muscle. "How in the hell did you get here before me?"

Jake had emerged from the back of the staircase, hidden in the shadows of the live oaks and magnolia trees. He grabbed her wrist and smiled wolfishly down at her. "I'm fast as lightning, sugar."

Mia tugged on her wrist, but he didn't let go. She fought between the urge to kick him in the balls and grab his face and kiss him senseless.

He looked around them and then pulled her around the corner of the house, stopping at the base of a huge, live oak. He pressed her against the rough bark and leaned down to sniff her neck.

She slapped at his hands. "Stop that."

"I wish I could."

"You can't just kiss me one minute and then act like nothing happened the next. I don't operate that way."

Way to play it cool, Mia.

His eyes intensified as they roamed her face. He lifted a finger and trailed it down her neck. "Miss me?"

"Don't flatter yourself. I hardly noticed you were gone."

"I think you're lying, Red." His finger moved from her collarbone down the valley between her breasts. Her breath

caught, and her insides turned to liquid with each pass of his hand over her flesh. "God knows I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about you."

He dipped his head and nibbled at the sensitive spot behind her ear. Mia gasped and wrapped her fingers around his thick wrist.

"I keep trying to put you out of my head, but the more I try, the more you just keep barging in." His hot touch belied his words. "I'm not going to fight it anymore, Red." His lips moved over her jaw and his tongue dashed out. When she moaned, she felt his mouth move into a smile. "You like that, don't you?"

His fingertips fluttered over the outsides of her breasts, just the barest of touches, but enough to set her body aflame. Still, she craved more. Her hands moved over the hard planes of his chest, and she reveled in the feel of all of that roping muscle, the strength, the toughness.

"I think about doing things to you," he whispered into her ear. "Things you've only imagined in your fantasies." He pierced her with his sapphire gaze. "You have any sexy fantasies tucked away in that efficient mind of yours?" He didn't wait for an answer, just brought his lips to her neck. "Yeah, I bet you do. I bet you've got some real dark and dirty secrets hidden behind those gypsy eyes." His mouth moved torturously slow from her throat back up to her ear. "I want to touch every inch of you." He smiled. "And not only with my hands."

He seduced her with his words, with the feather-light touch of his fingers. Every nerve ending flamed in aching pleasure.

Mia felt drunk on passion, on the sinuous torture he carried out on her body until she was mindless with it. She should have been ashamed of her behavior, but she couldn't get past the staggering need inside her.

"You make me ache, Mia." Jake's voice whispered over her, as his hand moved down to the button on her shorts. She felt the rigid length of his shaft against her abdomen. "Are you aching right now? Like I am?"

"Yes," she whispered back, and let her head fall back onto the hard bark of the tree.

"Good." Jake freed the button and pulled the zipper down. He traced his fingertips along the lace edge of her panties. "What have we got here?" His hand disappeared, and Mia moaned when his fingers touched her where she was slick and hot. "You're wet. Open your eyes."

She hadn't realized she'd closed them. Her focus blurred, but she saw Jake, his blue eyes almost hard, passion causing color to ride high on his strong cheekbones. He lowered his mouth to hers, coaxing, seducing with his lips and tongue.

"Do you want me to make you come, Mia?" he whispered against her lips.

She nodded and moaned into his mouth.

"Say it." He nudged her lightly with his cock, and the thought of all that hard heat made her want to climb inside him.

"I..."

He slipped one long finger inside, then another, stretching her, filling her. Another finger danced along the edge of her clitoris, close, so close, but not quite.

"Say it," he demanded again.

"I want you to make me come," she gasped.

At her admission, Jake thrust his tongue into her mouth, roughly, with no finesse, and it was clear he had reached the edge of his control. Those sly fingers shot home, and she came explosively. The orgasm hit her from nowhere. Delicate nerve endings erupted in pleasure, and she poured all of her passion into the kiss.

"Jake?" Gabe called. "Are you out here?"

Jake's hand halted, his fingers still inside her. He pulled his mouth from hers and covered her lips with his free hand.

"I'll be right there," he croaked.

"Oh, my God." Jake pulled out his hand and tried to help Mia with her shorts, but she swatted his hands away. "I cannot believe I let you do that!"

He sent her a purely licentious smile. "I can."

Buttoning her shorts and straightening her blouse, she caught up to Jake, who stood at the base of the veranda steps.

Gabe walked down the stairs, a grim expression on his face. "Have you seen Mia?" He stopped, his eyes moving from Jake to Mia and back to Jake.

Oh, shit. He knows.

"We've got a problem." Gabe looked at Mia. "Jillian needs you."

"What is it?"

"You better come with me. All hell's about to break loose." Mia thought about Jilly, the baby.

Oh, shit. He knows.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Eight

"Okay, explain this to me again."

Reverend Joseph Fitzgerald stood in the family parlor, his summer suit pressed, wingtips polished to a shine. In his hands he held an old fedora hat, the only thing out of place on the elderly pastor.

He looked at Mia. "I've chosen not to marry Jillian and her beau because, first of all, they haven't taken the mandatory premarital classes—"

"Reverend, we discussed this-"

He held up a hand. "I know we did, Mrs. Tyner. And after I had some time to mull it over, I've decided it's in the best interest of both Jillian and ... I'm sorry, what's your name again, young man?"

"Gabe."

"It's in the best interest of Jillian and Gabe to complete the six-week course before they wed. Also, Jillian hasn't been a part of our congregation for over ten years."

Sandra's face turned a light shade of crimson and a vein throbbed in her right temple. "That shouldn't make a difference!"

"Well, it's a matter of several issues coming together. I suspect the couple has also indulged in premarital ... uh ... sexual relations, which is ultimately the deciding factor."

Mia folded her arms across her chest and regarded the reverend. "Can you do that?"

He met her gaze. "I can and I will. I'm sorry if this upsets your plans, but I don't feel comfortable going against my religious beliefs." Reverend Fitzgerald looked at Sandra. "Not even for such a generous benefactor." He nodded at Jillian and Gabe and escaped out of the parlor.

Jillian's brown eyes filled, and she turned her head into Gabe's chest. "What are we going to do?"

"Don't you worry, Jilly," Mia said. "We'll figure out something. There's more than one church on the island, right?" Sandra nodded. "And if they're all booked out, we'll go to Beaufort. Hell, we'll go to Charleston if we have to."

Mia checked her watch, still shaken from her encounter with Jake. Her legs quaked from the intense orgasm he'd given her, and she knew a blush rode high on her cheeks. She felt overheated despite the cool air inside the house.

He stood in the corner, watching her with intensity.

"In fact, let's go now. The sooner we handle this, the better."

"I can go," Sandra offered.

"Actually, Sandra, I'd hoped you could look through the magazine I gave you for the guest favors."

Mia could see Sandra desperately wanted to join them, but in the end, she conceded. Mia figured the older woman's biggest desire for escape had to do with the eighty-year-old drunken fury upstairs, but she didn't have the patience to placate anyone but Jilly.

Gabe fished the keys out of his pocket. "Ready?" *God, I hope so.* If anything else went wrong, she'd hit the bottle herself.

* * * *

Two churches existed on Majestic Island and Reverend Fitzgerald headed up one of them. The second was of the snake-handling variety.

They didn't bother stopping.

Jillian still looked dazed and teary-eyed. Gabe passed the keys to Jake and got into the backseat with his bride. While the couple cuddled, Mia tried to focus on the road ahead and not on the sexual electricity crackling between her and Jake.

Her focus fled.

Jake's big, strong hands—hands that had been inside her less than an hour ago—grasped the steering wheel. Dark hair dusted his long, blunt-tipped fingers. Bronzed skin gleamed in the mid-afternoon sun that poured into the SUV. He pulled a fist off the wheel and rested it on his muscled thigh. Though Jake kept his gaze on the road, Mia had the uncanny feeling she occupied his thoughts, the same way she couldn't rid him from her own.

Especially after what happened.

She remembered the hard length of him pressed against her and fought a flush working up from her breasts. She turned the A/C on kill and positioned the vents toward her burning flesh.

God! What was she thinking? She'd let Jake perform carnal acts on her body in the backyard of her client's house, with the whole family a few yards away. What if they'd been caught? Hell, Gabe nearly had.

Somehow in the last week she'd gone crazy. That's the only explanation Mia could find to account for her behavior. She'd never allowed herself to let go the way she did with Jake. But, common sense fled the moment he put those hot lips against her ear.

Her body warmed. The way he made her feel as he whispered sexy words that brought her body to life. And she knew exactly who caused her temporary leap from sanity: Jake Ryan.

Mia snuck a glance at him and took in his face; the dark stubble scoring his strong jaw, full lips that had captured hers. His eyes cut over and locked on hers, his gaze scorching, intense.

I am in so much trouble.

In the end, she broke eye contact, and stared out her window. She watched the sway of grass on the side of the road, the towering live oaks, their moss hanging like tangled, dripping hair, and the murky swamps and salt marshes out in the distance.

Mia spent the remainder of the forty-five-minute drive to Beaufort on her Blackberry, calling churches and various officiates in the area. She lucked out and wrangled two meetings, within an hour of each other.

Jake dropped off the couple in front of a nondenominational church on the outskirts of town. She wanted desperately to get out of the car and tag along, but they didn't need her for this.

As Jake steered the SUV toward the center of town, Mia wondered why she considered having a sexual relationship with a man she'd known less than a week.

Because, with one look, he gets you hotter than the blazing desert sun.

Mia could count on one hand the number of men she'd slept with, and still have most of her fingers left. She had never been one for casual sex, and all of her former lovers were men she'd known and dated for quite some time. Hell, she'd lost her virginity at twenty-four.

Mia owed it to herself to have an island fling. If the man made love as well as he kissed, she may not even survive it. Which, when she thought about it, wouldn't be such a terrible way to go.

She turned in her seat to stare at the sexy-as-sin man sitting next to her.

"I want to have sex."

Jake's foot hit the brake and he brought the SUV to a halt. Ignoring the horn blast behind them, he turned and looked at Mia.

"Now?"

Mia threw her head back and let out a lusty laugh. Jake felt like he'd been poleaxed. Damn, but she was sexy.

She made a show of checking her watch, then the backseat. "We might have time."

He looked at the slender curve of her throat and lust punched his groin. He took his foot off the brake and maneuvered the vehicle to the side of the road. Then he turned to her. "Honey, I'd like nothing more than to fuck you

blind right now, but when it happens, I want to take my time."

He watched those gypsy eyes dilate and her soft lips part.

The no-nonsense Mia he knew never would've propositioned him, and that alone told him she'd sunk out of her depth. Jake knew women, and he sensed she hadn't had many lovers. Her inexperience turned him on all the more. Those full breasts rose and fell and his fingers itched. *Very soon.*

Mia took a breath and fumbled with her seat belt, confirming Jake's assumption. He wondered how long it took her to decide to make her offer. She opened the door, got out and leaned against it.

Jake turned off the ignition, but stayed put, using the time to collect himself. "Jesus."

He'd stepped into unknown territory too, and he didn't know if *he* would escape unscathed. Mia Briscoe did strange things to him, things he had never experienced. But like a moth to a flame, he couldn't seem to stay away.

"What in the hell am I going to do?" he wondered aloud.

He closed his eyes and brought to mind her face when he'd taken her over the edge earlier. Mia had been the picture of absolute rapture as she gave herself to him and her own pleasure, with no inhibitions whatsoever. He moaned in erotic pain by the simple thought of sinking himself into all of her wet heat. When he finally got inside her, he doubted he'd last more than two minutes. He'd never felt this consumed by the act of foreplay, of sex, of one woman.

And, yeah, it scared the shit out of him, but he couldn't help himself.

He looked at her as she leaned against the car. No, nothing stopped him when it came to Mia Briscoe. He got out of the SUV and walked over to where she stood. Her eyes closed, she lifted her face to the warm sun.

"You hungry?" he asked.

She opened her eyes. "I could eat."

He held out his hand, and she stared at it a moment before slipping her soft palm in his. Mia smiled up at him and his heart stuttered in his chest. Before he had a chance to analyze his reaction, Jake steered her toward a café on the corner. The chatty hostess ushered them to the second-floor balcony to a table overlooking the quaint street.

Jake ordered a beer and Mia asked for a glass of sweet tea. When the hostess walked away, Jake turned to Mia. "So, tell me about yourself, Miz Mia Briscoe."

She chuckled and pushed a curl behind her ear. She'd left her hair down today. It cascaded down her back like a waterfall of red silk.

"What do you want to know?" she asked.

A waitress returned with their drinks and they placed their food order. When she left, Jake took a long pull off his beer and considered the woman across from him. "How old are you?"

"I'll be thirty-one in December." She sipped her iced tea. "You?"

"I turned thirty-four in May. Have you always lived in L.A.?"

A shadow passed over her face. Jake wondered at the source of it and at the same time cursed himself for caring. But, something about her drew him in a way he'd never experienced. Something close to panic stirred inside, but he ignored it.

Jake considered himself curious by nature, so he found nothing wrong with wanting to know a little more about her. It didn't mean anything. *I'm in control*.

"No," she answered finally. "I'm from Eureka originally, but I grew up in Fresno."

"Hell, we're practically neighbors. Gabe and I are from Bakersfield."

She crossed her bare legs—legs he'd caressed not long ago. Jake fought not to stare and lost. "Small world."

"So, you're a wedding planner." He sat back. "I may have spoken too soon."

She lifted a brow. "How so?"

"I think I need to reevaluate my earlier statement about wedding planners. Or, at least of you." He took a drink of his beer, then gestured at her with it. "You're very good at what you do."

"Not quite good enough," she said with a rueful smile.

"Why's that?"

"I'm still struggling to keep afloat. And I've been in business two years."

"I would've thought there'd be quite a market for what you do."

"Oh, there is. But, there's also a lot of competition in L.A. And a lot of women are taking it all on themselves." She

looked out at the street. "Jillian's wedding is sort of the feather in my cap."

Jake shrugged, out of his element. "I guess a big name like hers would generate a lot of publicity."

"I would've done it if her parents worked in a packing plant. She's my best friend."

He thought of all the rigmarole she'd been through so far. "I think I'll stick with cars."

The waitress served their entrees. Jake took a healthy bite out of his bacon cheeseburger, while Mia twirled seafood fettuccine around her fork. She closed her eyes and moaned softly around the mouthful of pasta. Jake swallowed as lust shot through him, his mind back on Majestic, when his fingers had coaxed a similar moan from her lips.

She opened her eyes and blinked. "What?" She wiped at her chin. "Do I have sauce on my face?"

He shook his head. The woman made him crazy with lust, and she had no idea of her allure or the effect she had on him.

"Okay, you restore cars—hotrods. Is there a market for *that*?"

"As long as man keeps trying to push the limits of nature, there'll always be a market for them."

"Do you race them? The hot rods," she clarified.

"Yeah. I have a tubbed-out—uh, an old '43 Ford I've modified for drag racing. I take it down to the track most Friday nights."

She reached for her sweet tea. "How fast does it go?" "Nine flat in the quarter mile."

Mia held up a hand. "Okay, you've lost me. Nine what? Minutes?"

Jake laughed. "Nine seconds."

"Is that fast?"

Jake thought about the adrenaline that coursed through his veins when he launched off the starting line, the slippery punch of fear as he shot down the track. "Yeah. It's fast."

"I'd like to try it sometime."

Jake quirked a brow. "Most women think it's scary."

"I like to go fast." She sent him a seductive look from beneath her lashes. "Don't you remember?"

If she alluded to how fast she'd exploded against his fingers, then, hell yes, he remembered. Jake didn't think he'd forget that moment as long as he lived. "You're something, Red."

"You—" Her Blackberry rang. "This is Mia. Hey, Jilly ... oh, that's fantastic. We're just finishing up a late lunch. Okay, we'll be by in ten minutes."

Disappointment speared him, but he reined it in. He knew how stupid it would be to get attached to a woman he'd likely never see again.

Jake paid the bill and they walked back to the SUV. Mia grabbed the keys from his hand, her fingers soft on his forearm. "Let me drive."

"This from the lady who drives a hybrid? I don't think so."

"I knew it! You *are* a car snob." Her laughter trickled out like a song. He pulled her against him and she stilled, turning those eyes up to meet his own. Seeing his own lust mirrored there, he lowered his head and kissed her gently. She lifted a

hand to frame his face, the other wrapping around his waist. When she slipped her hot tongue in to tangle with his, he went hard as a rock and forgot he stood in the middle of a public sidewalk.

Then she disappeared, her laughter ringing out once again. She rounded the front of the car and dangled the keys like a prize.

The little vixen.

She was still laughing when they pulled in front of the church. Gabe and Jillian climbed into the backseat, both smiling and touching. It reminded him of how he'd felt moments ago with Mia, and little fingers of panic snaked up his spine.

Get a grip.

Gabe thought he was in love, so naturally anyone within ten feet of his brother and Jillian would score a contact high from the happiness that went with it. Jake had fallen in lust with a busty redhead with whom he had no future. There couldn't be a future with Mia. He didn't commit, plain and simple. He had no intentions of ever taking that particular plunge again.

Back in control, he slipped on his sunglasses and stared ahead. Mia handled the SUV with surprising ease. Jake didn't know why he'd expected any less of her. Oh, wait, now he remembered. *The hybrid*.

Ignoring the cheerful chatter of the other three, Jake stared out the window and thought about his father. Frank Ryan had been a bitter, angry man who spent his life pining after a woman who manipulated, and then abandoned him.

He assumed his father had loved his mother, but whatever they had soured into something filthy. And if that's what love was, then Jake wanted no part of it.

He listened to his brother and Jillian in the backseat. Had there been a time when his parents were ever happy? When they laughed and hugged? If he wracked his brain hard enough, he thought of a few rare memories of his parents *not* screaming at each other. But, never displays of affection between them. Hell, Jake couldn't think of a single time in his life his mother had laughed and hugged him *or* Gabe.

Then again, maybe her brand of affection came with a stinging hand and a bruising fist.

His parents' fights began right after Gabe's birth. Reaching into the dusty space in his mind where he kept the relics of his youth, Jake summoned the memory his parents' constant state of turmoil: yelling, their angry voices raised, accusation in their tones. Ten years later, his mom split, and their father lost his soul to alcohol, faceless women and resentment.

His folks' marriage had been one for the psych books, but even the best marriages crumbled. Gabe needed to understand that, for his own good. Should Mia consume Jake's thoughts, summoning his father's face would kill any notion of happily ever after.

"Mia," Gabe said, "do me a favor and turn on the radio. I heard a couple people in the church talking about a tropical storm."

His brother's announcement shook Jake from his bitter memories, and he glanced at Mia, whose lips tightened into a thin line.

When she reached out to fiddle with the dial, he touched her hand. "I'll do it. Keep your eyes on the road."

Jake scanned the stations until he found a local broadcast. They waited through a seemingly endless string of commercials until a DJ came on. "We're keeping an eye on a tropical depression one hundred miles south of Cuba. It appears to be gaining speed and is expected to hit the Cuban coast by Monday. It's on a northeasterly course, possibly hitting the South Carolina coast by Friday of next week. Stay tuned for any further developments."

"Shit," Jillian said.

"Hey, it's just a tropical storm, right? It might kiss Cuba and head back out to sea. You never know." Mia looked in the mirror at Jillian. "They don't usually come this far north, do they?"

Jillian shrugged. "A lot of times, yeah. We were hit pretty hard by Hugo and Andrew in the nineties. And other hurricanes did some pretty bad damage to places as far north as Virginia. Tropical storms can create just as many problems."

Jake looked up in time to see an ancient red pickup swerve into their lane. "Mia, watch out!"

She jerked the car hard to the right—too hard. The SUV hit the gravel shoulder and went into a skid.

"Turn into it, Mia," Jake ordered. "Feather the brake lightly. That's it, honey."

The SUV swung around in a circle, losing control as it slid through the gravel like a train on icy tracks. Mia pumped the brake, and the big car finally came to a shuddering stop. For

several moments, it was as silent as a hidden cave, broken only by the heavy breathing of the vehicle's occupants.

Jake tore off his seat belt and turned to Mia. "Are you hurt?"

Her face had lost most of its color, but she shook her head. Her big green eyes filled with tears. "I-I'm okay." She whipped her head around to the backseat. "Jilly? Jillian, are you okay?"

Mia's voice carried an edge of panic, and a warning bell went off in Jake's brain. Both Gabe and Jillian appeared mildly shaken, but they were fine.

"It's okay. We're okay. Just a scare, that's all," Jillian said.

Some unspoken agreement seemed to pass between the two women, and the warning bell became a screaming siren. Something is going on here.

"Are you okay, Mia?" Jillian asked.

Jake watched as she drew in rapid, shallow breaths. She didn't respond to Jillian's question. Her eyes filled with tears again as she began to shake. She ripped off the seatbelt with trembling fingers and shot out of the car.

"Her parents," Jillian said.

Jake had his hand on the door. He paused and looked back at Jillian. "What about them?"

"They were killed in a car accident when she was thirteen. Mia was the only survivor."

Shit.

"I better go to her," Jillian said.

"No, stay here."

Jake got out of the car and walked back to the embankment where Mia sat. He crouched in front of her and took her icy hands into his. "Mia. Look at me, baby."

Her lungs still heaved shallow breaths, her face pale. Tears stained her cheeks. He pried her knees open and guided her head gently between them. "You need to breathe, honey. You're hyperventilating. Take deep breaths. That's it. There you go."

He rubbed lazy circles on her quaking back, infusing his voice with gentleness. "You're okay. It's all right, Mia."

She let out a sob, but continued to breathe deeper.

"You're having a panic attack. I want you to focus on my voice."

Jake didn't know how long they sat there on that lonely stretch of highway. Mia with her head between her knees, trying to control her breathing, as tears slipped from her eyes to puddle in the sandy dirt at her feet. And Jake kneeling in front of her, while he coaxed her from the edge with a tenderness he hadn't known he possessed.

She lifted her head, her eyes like liquid emerald. "Thank you. I'm sorry."

"Hey." He slipped a finger under her chin and tipped up her face. "Nothing to be sorry about. When I was about nineteen, I had this low-rider pickup. Real cherry—fire engine red, booming stereo, the works. Anyway, I thought I was hot shit, cruising along the PCH near the Bay Area, up on this empty highway. I kept pushing speed, wouldn't let off, until my arrogance caught up with me. I lost it and hit the guardrail."

Mia wiped her eyes. "Were you hurt?"

"Broke my nose when I hit the steering wheel. Other than that, only my pride."

"My parents were killed in a car accident."

"I know," Jake said.

"They died because of me."

"How? Did you pull the wheel from your dad's hands?"

She shook her head. "I argued with them. I wanted to stop at the store to get a candy bar. I threw a fit." She smiled sadly. "I was a real brat back then. Anyway, I made a big fuss, and they told me to be quiet. A car, it crossed over into our lane, just like now."

"That doesn't make it your fault."

"If I hadn't argued with them, my dad would have paid more attention."

"Bullshit. It's not your fault—or his, for that matter—some nitwit didn't watch the road."

For a long time, she mulled over his words, and eventually nodded. "I suppose you're right. But, I've spent the last seventeen years blaming myself. It's hard to stop."

"Why? You do it. Easy."

"It's not that easy," she insisted, irritation rising in her voice. "I can't just turn it off."

"Well, if you want to feel sorry for yourself, that's one thing. But, don't play the martyr."

"Y-you asshole! I'm not feeling sorry for myself. I..." She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're good."

He stood, satisfied temper had put some color back into her cheeks. He held his hand out. "Baby, I'm the best." * * * *

Other than a couple of scratches on the bumper from the gravel, the SUV suffered little damage. Jake drove the rest of the way back to Majestic, with Mia in the front seat sending Jillian occasional worried glances.

"Don't tell my mother about this," Jillian said when they pulled in front of the house. "I don't want to worry her."

Sandra looked pathetically happy to see them as she ushered them into the parlor where she cornered Jillian for details on their expedition. Esma announced dinner, but Mia didn't feel up to it, especially with Great Aunt Francis in attendance. The old woman had likely been hitting the sauce since noon.

She opened the door to the cottage, exhausted and drained. A stack of four pastry boxes sat on the kitchen table with a note affixed to the top.

Here they are. Each box is a slightly different recipe. Tell me what you think. P.

Mia had tasted enough wedding cake in the last two years to become something of an aficionado. But the thought of food, even wedding cake, made her stomach roil. She dumped her bag on the counter and went into the kitchen for a glass of water. She'd just taken her first sip when the cottage door opened and Jake stepped inside.

"I thought you were at dinner."

He held up two Tupperware bowls. "I begged some off Pearl. It's here when you want it."

Touched, she looked at the gorgeous man standing before her. And realized her heart had already drifted out of its secure place and into Jake Ryan's palm.

Oh, God.

He put the stew in the refrigerator. "Hey, you bought me some beer."

Mia pushed past the lump in her throat and managed a chuckle. "Not that you deserved it, but yeah, I did."

"Want one?"

She shrugged and placed her empty water glass in the sink. "Sure."

He popped the tops and handed one to her. Jake leaned against the counter, his long legs crossed at the ankles, the picture of a relaxed male. "Is Jillian feeling all right?"

Mia narrowed her eyes. Too relaxed. She'd forgotten who she was dealing with. The devil that chopped Cupid up into tiny little pieces and then tap-danced on his remains.

"She's fine," Mia said nonchalantly and took a drink. "Why do you ask?"

"She's been complaining of not feeling well. She claims it's just jet lag, but I've never seen jet lag last a week." He tipped his beer in her direction. "And you were awfully worried about her after our little scare on the highway."

Crap.

Mia lifted her beer and downed it. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and looked at Jake. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

Desperate times called for desperate measures.

She flicked open the two top button of her blouse, exposing her lacy demi-bra. "Is it hot in here?" Jake's gaze drew to her breasts like a heat-seeking missile.

Mia smiled. Too easy.

He swallowed. "Now that you mention it, I'm a little warm."

Little tingles of pleasure zinged through her blood. Feeling a surge of power, she sauntered over to the table where the pastry boxes sat. She would bring this powerful man to his knees before the night was over.

After all, paybacks were a bitch.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Nine

Mia's heart beat a furious tattoo in her chest, but despite that, she felt a sense of calm, of *rightness*, come over her. Sometime between this morning and right now, she had decided to give herself to Jake Ryan. Oh, her actions told him as much already. But, she really hadn't *known* it. Not until he let go of the arrogance she suspected he used as a front, and eased her out of that panic attack.

Jake might pretend he didn't want to be involved, but that point had already passed. Dangerous thinking, she knew, but she couldn't stop herself. Her mind, body and heart were on a derailing train; she had no control, only the knowledge that tonight would change everything.

He looked at the stack of pastry boxes on the table. "What's that?"

"Wedding cake I promised I would taste-test for Pearl." She opened a box and dipped her finger inside, drawing a dollop of icing on the tip. She lifted her eyes to Jake's as she ran her tongue up one side of her finger and down the other. She brought the tip of it into her mouth and swirled her tongue around it, sucking off the sweetness, all the while keeping her eyes locked on Jake.

"Mmm. That's good. Want some?"

Jake straightened, a dangerous look in his eyes as he stalked over to her. His big body took up all the space in the room and like an animal, she could scent his arousal.

Her own arousal nearly buckled her knees. How could this one man create such a powerful passion within her? She throbbed deep inside and he hadn't even touched her.

Just before he reached her, he detoured to the left and walked to the door. With a flick of his wrist, the deadbolt snicked into place.

Mia swallowed.

What have I gotten myself into?

Jake moved slowly toward her, his blue eyes dark with passion, intensity clear on his face. Taking a breath, she dipped her finger back into the pastry box and swirled her finger around the icing. She held it up to his mouth.

"You're a dangerous woman, Mia Briscoe."

She flashed him a saucy smile. "Try it. I guarantee you'll like it."

His eyes flashed sapphire, and he opened his mouth a fraction, allowing Mia to slip her finger inside. She pushed past his warm lips and inside his wet, slick mouth. His soft tongue was sensuous and eager, sliding across her finger and eddying around in a carnal motion, flicking back and forth until he'd licked it clean. Meanwhile, his eyes bore into hers, the lust shining there so vibrant, so intense, her bones felt like they'd melt into a puddle on the floor.

He moaned his appreciation against her finger, a low, vibrating sound Mia felt to the tips of her toes. He stuck his hand inside the box and pulled out some frosting, placing it at her mouth.

"Your turn."

She darted her tongue out, just brushing the outside of his finger before slipping it back in her mouth. Those eyes flashed again and she smiled, reaching up to grasp his wrist and pull it back to her. Keeping her eyes on him, she performed the same motion she had earlier with her own finger, only she added a heartfelt moan to the mix.

He moved closer to her, blatant in his need for her. She felt the rigid length of him pressing against her belly, and brazenly, she pushed back. When she dropped her free hand to his erection, he stilled it with one of his own.

"Ah, ah, ah," he said teasingly. "I'm not done tasting you." Mia shuddered at his words.

Jake lifted his hand to the open vee of her blouse. His fingers deftly flicked open the remaining buttons and slid it down her arms, leaving her naked from the waist up. Dipping his finger through the icing once again, he smiled sinuously and trailed the sugary substance along the top swell of her breasts.

He bent his head and licked her, tasting her flesh covered by icing. He flicked his eyes at her. "That's even better." His tongue left a path of fire, and she arched against his mouth. His hand moved to her waist and back around to her derrière and he grabbed hold, pulling her against him.

Mia moaned.

"I haven't even gotten to the good part yet," he whispered.

"You're killing me," she said.

"Turnabout's fair play," he said with a wicked grin.

He brought his hand up to the center clasp of her bra and with a quick flick of his fingers, her breasts sprang free. They felt full and heavy, deliciously aching. Her nipples had become distended little points from Jake's erotic assault, and now they were eager for his hot hands and hotter mouth.

His hand disappeared and once again he returned with a fingertip of icing. With a little smile, he drew tiny circles over her right nipple, twirling it softly, drawing the point out between his thumb and forefinger.

Mia gasped. "Please..."

"Are you begging?" his voice little more than a smoky rasp.

"God, yes. Touch me, Jake. Please."

He moved his mouth to her nipple, and his tongue shot out to tease her for a moment of delicious agony. He looked up at her. "I'm going to do you one better, Mia. I'm going to make you scream."

She swore her eyes rolled back in her head when he finally took the throbbing nipple into his mouth. His tongue laved it, softly at first, but then with more pressure as she grabbed his head and pressed him to her, arching her back so he could take more.

With a groan of appreciation, he sucked her into his mouth, his cheeks hollowing out as his hot tongue circled around her sensitive flesh.

She protested when he moved away, but he smiled up at her. "So impatient. So demanding." He placed icing on her other nipple and performed the same tortuous treatment. Mia

felt the echoing draw deep in her womb, the need to be filled and stretched by this man.

But he was far from done.

Jake drew a lazy trail of frosting down her belly, and his mouth followed the path, his tongue hot and eager as he moved south. Nimble fingers slipped the button of her shorts free and he drew the fabric down her hips to pool at her feet.

He knelt before her, his big hands moving to her behind to squeeze and knead the flesh there, his lips and tongue nipping and biting her inner thighs. His fingers feathered across her rear and up to her hips as he slipped his hands under the lace, pulling the panties from her hips slowly, oh, so slowly, until they joined her discarded shorts.

He stood quickly, and nipped her at the waist, and sat her on the flat of the table. His arms moved from her waist up to her arms, where he dragged off her bra and tossed it on the floor.

"Lay back, Mia."

It seemed unfair she sat naked and he still wore his clothes. She started to say as much, but he placed a finger at her lips and eased her back against the cool wood.

She stared up at him through lust-hazed eyes, watching him watch her, and she felt at turns wanton and self-conscious. Mia wanted to cover herself while at the same time drawing his gaze to the body that screamed for him, and only him.

"God, you're pretty," he breathed.

Mia's heart stuttered, but she said nothing. He loomed before her, a rapturous expression on his face as he stared down at her face, her breasts, her naked body.

He ran his hands along the length of her thighs, spreading them wide. "Pretty face," he murmured, leaning down to nip at her throat. "Pretty breasts." He gently bit the side of one breast and then soothed it with his lips. His mouth moved down along her belly until it brushed the apex of her thighs. "Pretty..."

Mia breath caught. She knew what he wanted to do, but in her limited experience, she had never allowed a man to go down on her. Or rather, none of the men she had been with had ever desired to.

He must have seen the distress on her face. "Don't worry, baby. I'm going to make you feel really good."

"Promise?" she whispered.

He chuckled. He teased her with little bites along her thighs, his fingers tracing slow circles along her legs. He moved up and she felt his hot breath on the core of her. She tensed momentarily as he licked at her, quick, delicate thrusts of his tongue that teased and tantalized and left her breathless and begging for more.

He would get just close enough and then shy away, torturing her until she thought she would explode.

"For God's sake," she cried. "Do it!"

She felt his laughter against her. "You won't be praising God's name in a minute," he promised, and then he hit her sweet spot with that clever tongue and her body shot off the table.

"Do you like that?" he murmured, his mouth vibrating against her. She shifted restlessly against him as he got busy, his tongue making the most amazing swirling motion around her until she thought she would die from the pleasure.

"I think you do."

A beautiful pressure built inside her, little fingers of pleasure-tipped pain that reached up to grab her, threatening to pull her under. He sucked her into his mouth at the same time he entered one long finger inside and she exploded, screaming out his name.

She had nothing to grab onto, and her fingernails scratched the wood of the table as the orgasm ripped through her. She was vaguely aware of her thrashing arms sending the pastry boxes to the floor with a crash.

He moved away from her, unbuttoning his cargo shorts and shoving them down his hips. She sat up, eager to help him and get her hands on all that naked flesh. She pushed up his T-shirt, following with her mouth, loving the feel of his hard muscles under her lips and tongue.

Jake pulled off his T-shirt and reached down for his wallet. He extracted a foil packet, and Mia took it from his fingers and tore it open. His erection strained impressively against the white cotton of his briefs and her mouth watered. Curious, she ran her hand along the rigid length of him, feeling powerful when he closed his eyes and hissed out a breath.

"Put that thing on. Now."

Mia smiled. She pulled his briefs down and his penis sprang free, more than ready to join the fun. She lifted a

brow at him as she reached down and stroked his hard length. A pearl of moisture beaded at the top and she spread it over the tip with her thumb.

He groaned.

He took the condom from her fingers and sheathed himself quickly. "Baby, I promise you can have your way with me later. But, I have got to be inside you now."

Mia felt her insides heat back up at his words. He grabbed her hips and yanked her toward him. Leaning over her, he braced one hand beside her and probed her entrance.

When he pushed inside her, he met resistance. He stopped and looked at her, confusion on his face. "Your not...?"

Mia shook her head, tried to get impossibly closer. She bit her lip as he pushed a little further in. "But I might as well be for as long as it's been."

Jake bent to lick her neck. "Relax for me, Mia. That's it. Take me in. Take all of me." He whispered hot words of encouragement into her ear as he slid deeper and deeper inside her until, with one last thrust, he was buried to the hilt.

Jake hissed out a breath. "God, you're tight."

"Jake?"

"Hmm?"

"I really love it when you talk dirty to me, but do you think you could shut up and *move*? You're killing me here."

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. Laughed a little. "Yeah. I can do that."

He thrust back in again, and Mia rose up to meet his surging hips. He ran his hands along her legs and lifted her

ankles so they propped on his shoulders, giving him deeper access.

"God, yes," he hissed.

Mia felt the pressure building again, and she moved faster, feeling that heady rush come over her. Jake lengthened his strokes, and she knew he neared the edge, too.

The dam burst, the second orgasm more brilliant than the first, and she cried out at the force of it.

Jake squeezed his eyes shut and let out a loud moan as he found his own release. With a shudder he dropped down on her, resting his head between her breasts.

"Sweet baby Jesus," he breathed.

"Yeah, that about sums it up," Mia managed.

* * * *

Something warm and soft tucked up against him.

Jake cracked open an eye and peered down at Mia, who lay curled on her side, her soft, round behind pressed against his groin.

He smiled.

Mia was hot.

Beyond hot, she was on fire. Never in his wildest fantasies would he have guessed she had all of that passion stored inside. They'd taken each other countless times last night, moving from the table to the shower, to the bathroom counter and eventually to her bed. The woman was insatiable.

Jake didn't think he'd ever be able to look at cake the same way again.

Mia stirred quietly, arching against him, and his morning erection strained to be inside her hot, wet flesh. He pressed an open mouth kiss to her bare shoulder, intent on arousing her awake.

From the living room, he heard Lynard Skynard sing Sweet Home Alabama from his cell phone and cursed. Everyone knew he'd left town for a couple of weeks, but it might be important. Jake had left his shop in the capable hands of his foreman, Greg, but problems always cropped up, regardless.

With regret, he rose from the bed and padded naked out into the living room. He checked the display on his phone. "Hey, Greg." Jake looked at his watch. "Kinda early for you."

"Boss, some lady's been calling all week, won't leave us alone. She's looking for you and said she won't stop until she talks to you."

Dread and a fear he'd carried since boyhood curdled in his stomach. "What's her name?"

"Marla. She said you'd know who she was."

Jake cursed again. "You didn't tell her where I am, did you?"

"Nah, man. Do I look stupid? The first time she called, though, Reggie answered and said you were out of town at your brother's wedding. Let me tell you, this one sounds like a head case."

"You could say that. Thanks. If she calls again, tell her I'll get in touch with her later in the week."

"Sure thing, Boss."

Jake snapped the phone shut and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

Shit.

She needed more money, he thought. When Marla Ryan came screaming back into his life two years ago, a foolish part of him hoped she had changed. That she wasn't the mean-spirited woman who'd locked him in closets and forced him to...

What a joke. His mother didn't care about him or his brother any more than when she'd left them. She hadn't changed at all.

He was, however, bigger and stronger. And knew how to fight back.

Somehow, she found out Jake owned his own shop and assumed he had a ton of what she craved: cash. Granted, he did all right, but he wasn't rich by any stretch of the imagination.

The first time, she had tried charming him with her non-existent maternal instincts until he realized what she was really after. When he told her no, she threatened to find Gabe. The idea of their mother manipulating Gabe—which, let's face it, wasn't hard to do—had a punch of fury strangling him, but he pulled out his checkbook anyway. The money would hold her off for about six months before she'd come slinking back with her threats until he ponied up more cash.

It was money well spent. If Gabe knew about it he would be pissed, for sure. Jake didn't want his brother to find out their long-lost mother had reappeared only to blackmail him.

He moved into the kitchen and started the coffee. Jake had spent his early childhood provoking his mother to keep his little brother out of harm's way. No sense in dredging up what

Jake considered ancient history. But, things had changed. Now Marla knew about the wedding. Jillian Tyner's parents were relatively well known; it wouldn't take much for Marla to glean the information she needed and crash the wedding.

As he measured out grounds, Jake realized that sometime in the last two days, he had accepted Gabe would marry Jillian. She appeared head over heels for his brother, but Jake also had reason to know that any emotion could be played well if the person was a good enough actor.

Yet, he didn't think so. Jillian's behavior still made him suspicious, but it wasn't his call anymore. He suspected it had to do with the fiery redhead who slept in the bedroom.

As the coffee pot began spitting out its contents, a loud rap on the door rent the quiet cottage. Realizing he stood buck ass naked, he quickly located his shorts and pulled them on.

Jake let his brother in. "What's up?"

"We've got a problem," Gabe said.

Jake lifted a brow. "Another one?"

"This one might be worse." Gabe eyed the mess of pastry boxes and cake on the floor. "What the hell happened here? You and Mia get into a food fight?"

"Jake?"

Both men turned to see Mia, looking sleepy and sexy as hell, standing in the hall wearing nothing but a white sheet wrapped around her.

When she saw Gabe, Mia reddened, but remained where she stood. In fact, she lifted that adorable chin of hers and

walked gracefully into the kitchen where she pulled down three mugs.

"Coffee?" she asked.

Jake stared at Mia, Gabe stared at Jake and Mia stared at both of them.

"Uh, no thanks," Gabe said. "I'm glad you're up. This is something you need to hear, too."

"What is it?"

"Tropical Storm Katy just hit Cuba."

"But I thought she wasn't supposed to hit until tomorrow!"

"The bitch gained speed. She's headed straight for us, projected to hit the South Carolina barrier islands by the day after tomorrow."

"Shit, shit," Mia muttered, rummaging around the counter for her briefcase, the white sheet still wrapped around her naked body. "We've got guests coming in ... Thursday. Some showing up as early as tomorrow." The coffee forgotten, she rushed back toward the bedrooms.

Gabe continued to stare at Jake, who walked around the bar and filled two of the mugs with coffee. "Shut up."

His brother tilted his head back and roared with laughter. "Man, oh, man," he said, when he finally got a hold of himself. Jake didn't find the situation that funny.

"Not a word, you little shit."

"Oh, I'll say more than that. Listen to me, Jake. Mia isn't one of your flavors of the week, okay? She's a nice girl who's been hit pretty hard in her life."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, her folks were killed when she was just a kid, which you now. Her mom's sister took her in and raised her as her own, but she died earlier this year."

Jake winced. "How?"

"Cancer. Jillian doesn't think Mia's gotten over it." Gabe glanced toward the hall and lowered his voice. "She acts all tough and together, but Jilly says she's just not the same." He held out a hand. "Just be careful with her, okay? Don't break her heart."

Break her heart? Jake had no intention of doing any such thing, because there weren't any feelings involved. At least, he didn't think there were. Yeah, he liked her a lot, maybe even more than he'd ever allowed himself before, but it was just a fling. Just sex.

He hoped to God that Mia didn't have any notion that what they had here in South Carolina would ever extend into anything else. It couldn't. *He* couldn't.

Marla pushed her way into his mind, a solid reminder of why he couldn't get involved emotionally with a woman. It might be his brother's bailiwick, but Jake was *not* a man for the long haul.

And, he had more important issues to deal with at the moment. Right now, Marla Ryan may very well be on her way to South Carolina to ruin her youngest son's wedding.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Ten

For the next thirty-six hours, the people of Majestic Island moved steadily, driving to Beaufort and Savannah for supplies in anticipation of Tropical Storm Katy. On Sunday night, she hit the Florida Keys, pummeling the islands with high winds and flooding rain.

On Monday afternoon, a few scant hours before she was projected to hit the barrier islands, Jake stood on a ladder nailing sheets of plywood to the Tyner home. Below him, Gabe thwacked away with a hammer.

The air remained calm and quiet, but the temperature had dropped into the low seventies and the barometric pressure continued to rise.

Once it became clear Katy was headed straight for Majestic, Jillian and Gabe made an executive decision to warn the coming guests. Mia had suggested postponing the wedding, but the couple wouldn't hear of it. They wanted to get married, and they wanted it in five days as planned. Jake had watched Mia transform into a general, spitting out orders on the phone as she made it her personal mission to fulfill her promise to Jillian.

Personally, Jake thought they should hold off, maybe even set a new date later down the road, but his suggestion was met with hissing and spitting from both Jillian and the woman who shared his bed at night.

O-kay.

So, Jake focused on getting supplies to board up the property and kept his mouth shut.

"My, my, that sure is a fine sight," Jillian said from below them.

Gabe twisted to look down at his bride-to-be. "No ogling the help, ladies."

"But it's so much fun," Mia said, winking at Jake.

"Damnation, Jillian, you've sure got yourself a hunk of prime beef," Great Aunt Francis wheezed from next to the younger women.

Jake laughed while Gabe shook his head and muttered, "For crying out loud."

"Hey, you!" Aunt Francis hollered. "Brother of the groom. Move a little to the left so I can check out your caboose!" Now Gabe laughed.

The preparations took them well into the evening. Jake, Gabe and Gerald had the cottage boarded up by nine. Jake moved his and Mia's things to the main house and decided she would stay with him. None of this separate room bullshit.

Which she had a problem with, he came to find out.

She stood there in the middle of their newly appointed digs, hands slapped on her hips, outrage clear on her pretty face, green eyes snapping.

"And you never thought to ask me?"

Jake shrugged and lounged against the bed, a bed currently going to waste because the woman insisted on arguing.

"Figured since you would be in here anyway, it would make things easier."

"I'd at least like to have the pretense of decorum. I am working, you know."

Like everyone in the house didn't know they were already sleeping together. Jake had marked her as his from the moment he'd laid eyes on her. An action totally out of character for him. He'd never felt the need to possess a woman like he did with Mia, and the realization he had been doing exactly that for the last week left him unsettled.

"Nobody's saying you aren't doing your job," he said.

"But, it looks unprofessional! Don't you get it?" She let out a shriek of frustration and pulled at her hair. "I have an image to uphold and that doesn't include getting slinky with the groom's brother."

He stood and walked over to her, his arms folded over his chest. He sneered down at her. "A little late for that, isn't it, sweetheart?"

Mia colored slightly and took a step backwards. Jake didn't know why he let this get to him. It's not as if he hadn't gone into this mess thinking the exact same thing. "Fine," he said tightly. "Want your own room? Got it. No *problem*." He grabbed his bag from the floor and left the room, slamming the door hard enough to rattle a few pictures in the hall.

Goddamn women.

Mia grabbed the first thing she saw—a pillow—and hurled it at the closed door. Being soft, and lightweight, it didn't give her the satisfaction she sought, as it sailed to a stop three feet from the mark. With a groan borne of absolute frustration, she flopped backwards on the bed and rubbed her face.

Goddamn men.

Jake, the eternal bachelor and harbinger of doom and gloom to happy couples everywhere, stormed off in a snit because *she* didn't want to share a room with him. If she didn't feel like crying, she would've laughed.

She was trying to maintain a hold on a complicated situation. And failing miserably. Between the wedding plans that were unraveling faster than she could secure them, and her burgeoning feelings for Mr. Doom and Gloom, she felt her control slipping. Rapidly.

Hell. She *wanted* to share a room with Jake. Mia didn't know why she'd gone on the offensive in the first place. *Quit lying to yourself*. She knew, all right, and the truth terrified her.

She had fallen in love with The Jerk.

Mia, who believed in fairy tales and happy endings, had placed her heart in the hands of a man who thought love and marriage was for suckers. The Fates must be having a hearty laugh right about now.

If only he'd kept up with that arrogant front. She could have easily taken the sex he offered and left with her heart still intact.

Right, Mia.

Jake had held her hand and coaxed her from the edge with such tenderness that by the time they got back to the SUV, he'd walked away with her love. And he worshiped her body as if she were a goddess, touching her reverently, always ensuring her pleasure came first. Never in her life had she

ever felt so cherished. This wasn't just sex. Well, not for her anyway.

And therein lay the crux of the problem.

Jake didn't do happily-ever-afters. Mia might as well kiss her heart goodbye. She'd be lucky if she could sweep up the broken pieces after he left her, which he would, most assuredly.

And that was the hardest part to swallow.

* * * *

A fierce wind gust buffeted the windows of the downstairs entertainment room. Jake heard it whistle through the trees as he went behind the fully stocked bar and poured three fingers of Jack. Tossing it back, he welcomed the sizzling burn trailing like fire down his throat. An hour later and he still fumed. And he was horny, too, goddammit.

Whenever Mia got into one of her fits, he wanted to throw her on the most readily available surface and bury himself in her body. She caused the strangest reactions in him. He hadn't quite figured out what made her so different from other women. Besides the fact he couldn't stop thinking about her.

An antique grandfather clock chimed the hour. At nearly eleven, the storm raged beyond the windows of the main house. He poured himself another shot and carried it over to the large picture window to watch.

Jake caught the wild sway of palmettos shuddering in the intense wind. The lurking live oaks like silent shadows, their moss twisting violently in the onslaught. Rain pummeled the

ground in big, fat drops, and already he saw flooding in the gardens.

Gabe and Jillian might need to rethink their outdoor wedding, he thought.

Provided, of course, Marla didn't make a surprise appearance.

Thank God it wasn't a hurricane. They'd have been evacuated and the wedding called off. The possibility of evacuation had remained until this morning, when it appeared Katy was losing power.

"Oh, I didn't know anyone was down here."

Jake turned from the window. Jillian stood in the doorway, blonde hair pulled back, her face drawn and pale. She rested her hand on her belly.

"Where's Gabe?"

Jillian smiled and moved into the room. "Sleeping. I snuck out. Storms always spook me, and I couldn't sleep." She walked over to the bar and grabbed a bottle of water from the mini-fridge.

"Does the public know about your wedding?"

She placed the cold bottle against her cheek. "Mama put out an engagement notification. They probably did something in the Charleston paper. That's where Daddy's offices are headquartered."

"Then the papers mentioned Gabe's name."

She gave him a funny look. "Well, being the groom, yes, I would assume his name is in there somewhere." She unscrewed the cap took a sip of her water. "Why?"

Jake finished his whiskey. "Just curious."

"I know you're not excited about this whole thing." She met his eyes. "He told me about your mom and dad."

Jakes's wall went up automatically. "Ancient history."

"Mmm," she said noncommittally. "So, why are *you* down here? I thought you'd be keeping Mia warm."

He chuckled mirthlessly. "She kicked me out."

"Oh, don't mind her; she gets kind of weird during stressful times."

Jake eyed the water and the hand that kept drifting back to her belly. "How far along are you?"

"Two..." She stopped, and what little color she had drained from her face. "What?" she asked faintly.

"Does Gabe know?"

"I need to sit down."

Jillian walked to the black leather sectional and lowered herself gingerly onto the buttery cushions. "How did you know?" she asked at length.

Jake shrugged. "Just a hunch."

"Hell of a hunch."

"So?"

Jillian looked up him. "No. Gabe doesn't know. Not yet."

"Don't you think you oughta tell him?"

Jillian nodded. "That's what Mia said, too. And I agree, totally, but I'm so scared he's going to lose it."

Mia knew. Of course she did. Her concern for Jillian after their little skid on the highway had seemed over the top at the time, but now it made sense.

"Gabe told me everything about your mom."

Not everything. Gabe had never known about their mother's violent side, a secret Jake had gone to great lengths to hide. Nor did Gabe have any idea Marla had reappeared in his life. And he wouldn't, if Jake had anything to do with it.

"The sooner you tell him, the less angry he'll be."

"I'll tell him. Soon. Maybe tomorrow." She glanced up at him. "You and Mia are like two peas in a pod."

He lifted a brow. "How's that?"

"You both made the same argument about the baby." She sat back and smiled softly. "I knew you'd be perfect for each other." The smile transformed into a grin. "I love it when I'm right."

He stared at Jillian. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come on, Jake. You don't seriously think you ended up on that plane together by coincidence? When we bought the tickets, I made sure y'all were seated next to each other."

"So, what? This is some matchmaking scheme?" he asked, a little irritated to be used as a pawn.

"It worked, didn't it?"

"Mia and I don't have a relationship, Jillian."

She leaned forward, clutching the water bottle between her hands. "Next you'll tell me it's just sex."

Jake remained stoically silent. He didn't want to say the words out loud because he feared Jillian would see through the lie.

"Mia is my best friend. She's always taken care of me, has taken care of everyone she loves. When her aunt got sick last year, she dedicated her life to making her comfortable, loved." Jillian spread her hands. "It's what she does."

Jake scowled. "I don't need a keeper."

"Of course you don't. That's not what I meant." She smiled. "I've never seen Mia act like this around a man before. Frankly, it's rather amusing. I don't know you very well, Jake, but your brother thinks the sun sets on you. He's told me so many stories I felt like I already knew you by the time we first met. And that's how I realized you'd be perfect for Mia."

For a brief moment, Jake imagined a life with Mia off Majestic. In a deep corner of his heart, he pulled out his secret dreams and hopes—a wife, a house in the suburbs, babies, little league games and summer barbeques. God, he could see it so clearly. With Mia right there beside him. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"I know you haven't exactly had sterling examples of loving relationships, Jake. Your ex-wife—what's her name?"

His secret dream blew away, like sand in a fierce wind. "Caitlyn."

"Forgive my frankness, but she's a bitch who didn't know a good thing when she had it."

A ghost of a smile played at Jake's lips. Funny that the woman he'd set out to discredit had turned out to be his staunchest supporter. "That kind of life—a wife, house, babies—it isn't for me. I've accepted it."

Jillian looked at him, fierce determination in her brown eyes. "Well, accept this: I'm not giving up. You're stuck with me, pal."

He chuckled. "Thanks for the warning. Go on to bed, go see your fiancé."

She nodded and stood. "Don't let Mia push you out. She's scared, and when she's scared she shoves people away. She hasn't had much to have faith in, either."

Jake pondered her words as she left. The Jack gave him a nice buzz, but alcohol wouldn't cure what ailed him. It was essential he get Mia out of his head. Despite the determination of his soon-to-be sister-in-law, he knew a life with Mia wouldn't happen. He had vowed to never again put his faith in people. Inevitably, they let him down.

He wore the deep scars on his heart to prove it.

Inside, the large house lay in stillness, a contrast to the storm thundering outside. He assumed most everyone had tucked themselves into bed for the duration of Katy's onslaught. As another riotous wind shook the house, the lights flickered once, twice, and then plunged the room into darkness.

It suited his mood.

"Jake?"

Holding a flickering candle in one hand, he turned to find Mia's lush body outlined in shadow. She stepped into the doorway.

"What?"

She walked over to where he stood near the window. The candlelight bathed her striking features in a soft glow, and he cursed the punch of lust warring with tenderness inside him.

"Power's out," he said unnecessarily.

She remained quiet and stared out into the stormy night. After a moment, she said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"I am. I ... I'm not used to this. I've never done this before, and I'm still feeling my way."

She took his glass, her soft fingers brushing his own. He wanted to place his lips on her bare neck and lick every inch of her. His body responded to her scent, her presence, the very essence of Mia. And he feared it would take one hell of an exorcism to get her out of his mind and body. If he did at all.

She peered into the glass. "All gone. Bummer."

"There's a bar over there." He pointed.

Jake squeezed his eyes shut as she left his side, taking her warmth with her. Listening to the clinking of glass as she rummaged through the bar, he wanted nothing more than to go to her, but his feet remained glued to the floor.

"Jake."

He turned from the window. She stood in the shimmering candlelight wearing nothing but a pair of lacy thong panties and a smile.

"Aren't you worried about decorum?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

"Guess we'll just have to be quiet, then." She smiled seductively. "Think you can do that?"

No.

"Come here," she demanded.

Part of him, the part still angry with her, wanted to stay put. But, he couldn't deny her anymore than he could stop breathing.

Jake stalked over to her, taking his time. He stopped an inch from her luscious body, darkly satisfied when her breath caught.

"Someone might walk in," he said softly.

She stared up at him, defiance bright in her green eyes. "So?"

He lifted a hand, but she shook her head. "Uh-uh. I want you to keep your hands still. I'm taking *my* time."

Though they itched—burned—to touch her, he lowered them to his sides.

"Good boy." She ran her hands down his chest and clucked her tongue. "You've got on way too much clothing." Her fingers trailed down his belly, and she pushed up the bottom of his T-shirt, her mouth following its path.

He closed his eyes. She'd barely touched him, and yet he felt the fierce desire surge through him so strong, it was a wonder he didn't explode right there. Jake lifted his arms, and Mia drew the shirt off of him and tossed it on the floor. She smiled at his naked skin. "Better, but still not quite right."

Her nails raked lightly over his chest and down his belly, and his dick jerked in response. She placed open-mouthed kisses on his pecs, licking his nipples, swirling her tongue around the flat, brown discs, and bit down gently.

He hissed out a breath.

"What's the matter, honey? Am I being too soft?"

He grabbed her hand and dragged it to the front of his shorts. Her fingers rubbed sensuously against his throbbing shaft. "Does that feel soft to you?"

Her eyes glittered. "Keep your hands to yourself, Jake." She smiled. "Or, I'll have to punish you."

God, yes. Please, please punish me.

But, he did as she asked. Her mouth moved along his chest in reward, her tongue leaving a sizzling trail as she went down his body. She knelt on the floor and looked at the erection straining through his shorts.

And smiled.

Sweet baby Jesus.

Her fingers trembled lightly as she slipped the buttons of his fly free. As she pulled his shorts down over his hips, she ran her hands along the backs of his thighs. When she pressed her mouth against his erection through the cotton of his underwear, he almost came then and there.

"What do we have here, Mr. Ryan?"

He looked down at her. "A really big snake."

She laughed quietly. "Good thing I'm not afraid of them." Mia dipped her fingers under the top of the elastic and removed his underwear with the same agonizing slowness she had bestowed upon his shorts.

His cock sprang free. She wrapped her soft hand around him and met his eyes.

The passion he saw there undid him. She looked like a sexy witch, casting a spell on his body and soul. She kissed the head of his penis and his hands fisted. When she took the length of him into her hot, wet mouth, he wanted to howl.

She tested the weight of his testicles in her hand, her nails trailing lightly against the soft skin while her clever mouth moved wildly over his shaft. His hands moved to her head as

though they had a mind of their own, and he captured the silky strands in his fists while she worked him over with her amazing lips and tongue.

He couldn't take this any more. He loved oral sex, but right now, he loved the idea of being inside Mia more. Grasping her shoulders, he drew her up and crushed his mouth to hers pouring all of the passion and words he'd never say into the kiss.

Her tongue tangled hotly with his, chasing, sucking until he knew she was as mindless as he. He ran his hand down her belly, shoved aside the crotch of her panties and plunged his fingers inside her drenched heat.

Mia cried out. She reached behind her until she came back with a condom. With a wicked smile, she ripped it open with her teeth.

She rolled it oh, so slowly over his throbbing shaft. "You came prepared." His voice was little more than a hoarse rasp.

She kissed him, darting her masterful tongue inside his mouth to chase his own, then retreated. "I know what I want."

Jake couldn't take her erotic torture any longer. Turning her away from him, he placed her hands on the waist-high bar. She pressed her soft ass against his erection and he groaned. A beast licked at his heels, taking him over. With single-minded intensity, he ripped away the scrap of lace from her and plunged into her slick sheath.

She cried out again, her head falling back on his shoulder. Moaning as his finger found her hot center, he pumped into her from behind. Her hands reached up to rub across her

breasts, wringing a shudder from Jake. He placed one hand over hers and rolled one nipple between his thumb and forefinger while he circled her clitoris with the other.

"Jake ... Oh, God. I'm close. You feel..."

He increased the pressure down below and lowered his mouth to her shoulder. He bit down gently, and she murmured his name on a long moan. His own release was on the heels of hers, her tight body milking his shaft with her contractions, and he plunged one last time. He came hard, so hard he thought he saw stars. He sucked on her neck as the aftershocks gripped him, then groaned when he felt her convulse around him on a second orgasm.

Jake laid his head on her shoulder and shuddered out a breath. He was in deep; plunging into an abyss without a rope to grab onto and nothing to keep him from falling into a great, black unknown.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Eleven

Upstairs, tucked away in their room, Jake drew lazy circles along Mia's belly. His head rested between her breasts and she ran her fingers through his silky black hair. They had sneaked upstairs while the storm raged on outside the house. Barely making it inside, Jake had tossed her on the bed and taken her back to heaven once again.

Now that they weren't fighting, Mia no longer felt adrift. She felt calm, complete and happy. Instinctively, she knew it wouldn't last, but she wanted to grab onto her newfound joy and bottle it.

"Tell me about your parents," Jake murmured against her skin.

Surprise caused her fingers to still. "My parents?"

He looked up at her, his blue eyes intense and direct.
"Yeah."

Mia felt the familiar wave of grief and longing wash over her. She'd never completely get over the loss of her parents, but over the years, the pain had lessened into a steady ache.

"They were wonderful. They had me kind of late in life; they were both in their fifties when they died." She looked across the room, firelight from the candle flickering on the walls, dressing them in shadows.

"Jillian said you were with them when it happened."

Mia nodded. "Like I told you, we were on the highway, coming home from my aunt's house. I'd been cranky and feeling petulant." She closed her eyes as the guilt crashed

inside her. Despite what Jake told her, it *wasn't* easy to stop blaming herself, but now she knew she hadn't caused the accident. She only wished her last words with her parents had been happier.

"My dad wasn't paying attention." In a mechanical, detached voice, she let the words come, flowing out of her as she described the day her life as she'd known it had ended. "A drunk driver crossed over the center lane. My dad was killed instantly." Mia took a breath. "My mom died a few days later in the hospital."

"And the driver?"

She twisted her mouth in a parody of a smile. "Walked away without a scratch, of course. Isn't that the way it always works?"

"What about vou?"

"I had a concussion, a broken leg and a ruptured spleen. When I woke up, Daddy was gone and Mama ... well."

Jake lifted his head and pressed his lips to hers in a soft, tender kiss. She didn't know the tears had fallen until he wiped them away gently with his thumbs. Her heart swelled with love for this contradictory man. How could she protect her heart when he did these things? Mia suspected she was seeing a side of him no one had seen before. And it warmed her.

He lay his head back down and resumed drawing on her skin. "What happened after?"

She leaned back into the goose down pillows and sighed. "I went to live with my Aunt Eva. A rough couple of years at first. My brattiness took on new dimensions. I started hanging

out with a bad crowd, smoking pot and drinking, skipping school." She shrugged. "You know, the usual teenage rebellion."

"Sounds like you had a lot to rebel against."

She smiled. "Aunt Eva was a stubborn woman. She refused to give up on me." *And for that reason alone, she won my love and respect.* "Eventually, I came around, realized I wanted to live life, not throw it away. I started going to school again, ended up getting a scholarship to Emory."

"When did the doctors diagnose your aunt?"

Mia sighed. If it had been anyone but Jake, she would've lambasted her nosy best friend for revealing her past. But, for some reason, she wanted Jake to know. She loved him, and the need to share everything with him took her by surprise. "About eighteen months ago. Breast cancer. It started out as a lump she ignored. When she started losing weight and feeling ill, I bullied her into seeing a doctor." She closed her eyes briefly. "By that time, the cancer had spread to her stomach and liver. They gave her a year. Even with all of the chemo, she only made it five months."

"She died a year ago?"

"It'll be a year in January."

"It's no wonder you've had trouble staying afloat with all of that going on," Jake commented.

"I started up my business six months or so before the diagnosis. Aunt Eva had taken me in when she didn't have to, and she had no one but me. Lord knows where I'd be now if she hadn't believed in me." Her mind drifted back to the difficult times of her adolescence. "I had to take care of her."

She frowned. "I didn't *have* to, or rather, I didn't feel like I owed it to her, but I *needed* to. Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense," he whispered.

The tears threatened again. Under normal circumstances, Mia rarely cried. She kept her emotions under firm lock and key. But, Jake made her feel things in every way—including feelings she wanted kept buried.

"I see you must've spoken to Jillian, the motor-mouth," Mia said, needing to move on to another topic before she did something stupid, like burst into tears. *Again*.

His soft laughter tickled her belly, but Mia sensed he wasn't fooled. "She likes to meddle." He looked up at her, amusement shining in his beautiful eyes. "Did you know she sat us together on the plane on purpose?"

"Are you joking?"

He shook his head. "She thought we'd hit it off."

Mia laughed. "Little did they know ... Well, I guess that explains the cottage."

He placed soft, open-mouthed kisses along her skin and her insides turned to hot liquid. "I know about the baby."

Everything in Mia stilled. "What?"

"I asked her and she admitted it."

Mia felt that warm, happy glow scatter like leaves in the fall. "Well. That's it, then. You win."

He lifted his head again. This time, he pulled his body upright and stared into her eyes. "I'm not going to tell Gabe."

She stared at him. "Why not? This is what you wanted."

He scowled. "You make it sound like I'm out to ruin my brother's life."

She lifted a brow. "Aren't you?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "No. Hell, no. I just didn't want him to make a mistake. But, I think Jillian's a good woman. She'll make Gabe happy."

Mia took Jake's face in her hands, his cheeks rough with stubble. "Who are you and what have you done with Jake?" "Very funny," he grumbled.

"So, what? Now you believe in marriage?" Mia held her breath. His answer was very, very important.

"I'm not saying that," he replied, and Mia's heart sank.

"Maybe it works for some people, but not for me."

"Why are you so cynical?"

He pulled away from her, physically and emotionally. Mia felt his withdrawal like a slap.

"I've got a good reason to be." He ran a hand through his hair again and rose from the bed. He walked to the window and stared out into the stormy night beyond. "I was married before."

Mia couldn't stop her little gasp of surprise. "You were?"

"Her name is Caitlyn. She was the daughter of my mentor. We hit it off, had great sex. I put a big diamond on her finger, went to Vegas for quickie wedding, blah blah blah. Two months into it, she decided she wanted to screw other men." He glanced over at Mia, his face a mask of hard granite in the flickering light. Though the window lay a few scant feet away, to Mia it felt like miles.

"Let's just say it didn't go over well," he said, his voice tinged with bitterness.

"How could it?" Mia asked. She'd never had the misfortune to experience a cheating lover, let alone spouse, but the idea of it left a bad taste in her mouth. "She's an idiot."

How could a woman be married to Jake and want to see other men? After spending a few nights in his bed, Mia couldn't imagine her life without him. But, she'd have to.

"Ancient history," he murmured, still facing the window.

Obviously not. Had he loved his ex-wife? Mia wondered. A hot spear of jealousy cut through her, vicious and fierce. She didn't want to think of him with other women. "You've got a reason to be wary. But, Jake, not all women are like your exwife."

He stalked toward her, intent clear in his eyes. "There aren't any happily-ever-afters in store for me." He knelt down on the bed and crawled toward her. Lowering his body to hers, he captured her lips in a bone-melting kiss. "Is that what you're looking for?" he whispered against her mouth. "Happily ever after?"

She felt the powerful length of him against her, his body primed, ready for hers. Desire spun around and pooled between her legs. "I don't know what I'm looking for," she answered, settling for half-truths.

"I can't give you that, you know. I don't have it in me." He kissed her again, long, passionately, his actions belying his words.

Yes, you can, she thought, running her hands over his face. As he slipped inside her, she rose to meet his thrusts and determination broke free to couple with love. She'd show

Jake he had the capacity for love, that he deserved a happy ending.

They both did.

* * * *

From the early reports filtering in, it appeared Tropical Storm Katy had lost her power, only kissing the barrier islands and coastal areas before changing direction abruptly and heading back out to sea.

Mia would've hated to see Katy in full force.

Surprisingly, the damage was minimal on Majestic considering the heavy rains and strong winds. Sandra's gardens sustained some flooding from the rising seas, but in the rapidly warming afternoon, the waters receded.

After speaking with Sandra and Gerald, they decided to pull out all the stops and get a landscaping crew in ASAP to restore the gardens and backyard to their former glory. Mia hoped she wouldn't be met with resistance, since only a day had passed since the storm.

The weather reports showed clear, balmy weather for the next seven days. Mia sent up a silent prayer to the gods. At this point, they needed all the help they could get.

The guests who'd been informed of the impending storm had been called and would be arriving on Thursday. They'd enjoy a free stay at the Wayfarer until the ceremony.

Three days to D-Day.

Mia spent the next two taking care of all the last minute details. The power had been restored the day after the storm, and all of the island businesses were up and running

smoothly. She confirmed with the event planning company providing the tent, tables and chairs, ensured the flower arrangements would be delivered first thing Saturday morning and secured a local wedding band that'd had a last minute cancellation.

By the time the first guest arrived on Thursday afternoon, Mia rode on the high of having all her ducks neatly in a row.

Standing in the open doorway of the cottage, she watched the landscaping crew complete the finishing touches on the garden. Thankfully, they'd had little problem securing a company. Of course, when someone as rich and well known as the Tyners made the request, it would bode well for them to take the job.

Inside the cottage, Jake worked on another of his sketches.

She turned away from the door and walked to the kitchen table. Ran a hand across it with a smile. Mia wanted it bronzed.

"I think we might actually pull this off."

Jake sat hunched over his sketchpad, charcoal pencils arranged neatly at his elbow. He'd turned his black ball cap backwards on his head revealing his handsome face drawn in concentration.

Damn, he's sexy.

"Jake?"

He glanced up. "Huh? Did you say something?"

Mia chuckled. "I said I think we may actually pull this off."

His brows drew together in confusion. "What are you talking about? Pull what together?"

Mia laughed and walked to her lover. She pulled off his hat and secured it on her head, running her fingers through his silky hair. "The wedding. You know, my best friend and your brother. The whole reason we're here in the first place. Remember?"

He wrapped his strong arms around her waist and nuzzled her neck. "Very funny, Red."

"Are you usually like this when you're working?"

He looked up at her and shrugged. "Pretty much. I kind of tune everything else out."

"You must be good at what you do."

He flashed a cocky smile. "Oh, I'm very talented."

She leaned down and touched her lips to his. "I don't know, Mr. Ryan," she teased. "I think you'd better prove it."

His eyes flashed dangerously, desire turning them a brilliant sapphire. He crushed his mouth to hers, his tongue immediately demanding entrance. Hot and carnal, the kiss quickly spiraled out of control. His hands closed over her breasts at the same time his cell phone sang *Sweet Home Alabama*.

"Let it ring," she murmured against his lips, her fingers busy on his belt buckle.

He hissed out a breath. "It might be the shop. I have to take it." He rested his brow against hers. "Although, I'm pretty sure I may die as a result."

She pouted for show. "And here I thought that was just a line."

He lifted his fingers in a salute. "It's the God's honest truth, ma'am."

"You're so full of it." She nodded to his cell phone. "Better answer that, car boy."

He smiled when he flipped open the phone. "Jake Ryan."

The smile died on his lips. Mia couldn't understand what the person said, but she was close enough to tell the caller had ovaries. She tried to ignore the sweep of jealousy passing through her. "Try" being the operative word, since she currently wanted to rip the woman through the phone by her ears.

"Yeah. Fine," he said in a clipped voice. He snapped the phone shut and stood. Unfortunately, Mia still sat in his lap and ended up flat on her ass.

"Sorry," he said, and held out a hand.

"Problem?" she asked, hoping she didn't sound as pathetic as she felt.

"I have to go out for a few hours."

"Okay. Want me to come with?" *Lame, Mia. Very lame and very needy.* "You know what, scratch that. I'm up to my eyeballs." She looked at him. "Everything okay?"

"Jesus, Mia. Give me some space, would you?"

Mia felt as though she'd been slapped. "Hey, no problem," she said evenly, amazingly enough, since she really wanted to level him in the gut with one punch. "You're a big boy. Have fun."

Feigning nonchalance, Mia sashayed out the front door. But, instead of walking up to the main house, she cut to the right and walked toward the beach.

Where she intended to give herself a stern talking to about falling in love with emotionally unavailable jerks.

* * * *

Jake stepped into the dimly lit bar inside The Southern Comfort Inn, his eyes scanning the dark wood tables, discreetly tucked booths and long, U-shaped bar.

There.

Eyes narrowed, he traversed the short distance to one of the back booths and slid in across from his mother.

Her blue eyes lit up when she saw him, but he knew it was just part of the act. She'd dyed her hair a platinum blonde—it had been bright red last time—and it rested softly against her face in an understated style. Jake immediately went on alert. Nothing soft and demure existed inside Marla Ryan.

"Well, hey, there, honey." She wiggled fingertips painted a soft pink in his direction. "How lovely to see you!"

"Save it," he said shortly.

Marla pouted. "Now, is that any way to talk to your mama?"

"What do you want?"

She picked up a highball glass filled with amber liquid and took a delicate sip. *Whiskey*. Marla had always loved her alcohol; the harder, the better. Disgust curled in his belly.

"Imagine my surprise when I called to speak with you and discovered my youngest baby is getting married. I want you to know how badly it hurts me, Jacob, that I wasn't invited."

"You haven't been in our lives for twenty years and now you want Mother of the Year? Gabe doesn't want anything to do with you. And neither do I."

Cunning sparkled in the blue eyes identical to his own.

"But, Gabe doesn't know I'm back, does he? How do you think he'd feel if he found out his long-lost mama had been trying to make contact, but you denied him?" She swirled the ice in her glass and slanted him a look from beneath her lashes. "I think he'd be upset, don't you?"

Jake clenched his jaw. Every one of their meetings went the same way: she would play the love card, then toss in some guilt, ending with threats until he forked out the cash. He was getting goddamn tired of it—hell, he'd been tired of it the first time, but he had to make sure she beat tracks this time. Especially with Jillian pregnant.

"How much this time, Marla?" he asked wearily. "A thousand?"

"Well, now, I don't know, Jacob. This family your baby brother's marryin' into is *very* highbrow. I think his new bride—Jillian, isn't it?—might be interested in meeting me. After all, I'm Gabe's mama."

Jake grabbed Marla's wrist, fury tightening his features. "You may share our blood, but you stopped being our mother years ago. Why don't you lay off the wounded act and get to the goddamn point."

Like a flash, Marla's expression changed, her mouth tightening, her eyes becoming hard, transforming into the woman he remembered. The selfish, vindictive woman he knew. "Five thousand."

Jake schooled his features to remain impassive, but inside he sweated. He could pull it off. He had over twice that in

savings. But, his little nest egg had rapidly dwindled since Marla returned.

Shit.

"Five grand and you're gone."

She stared hard at him for a few seconds. Then nodded. "Done."

Five thousand dollars was a shitload of money, but if it kept Marla away from his brother, then so be it.

Yet, as Jake pulled out his checkbook, he couldn't help feeling like each time he paid her off, he sold a piece of his soul.

* * * *

Mia rolled over and looked at the bedside clock as the front door slammed. Half-past midnight. Jake had been gone nearly twelve hours. Spending them, Mia assumed, with the woman who'd called him earlier.

Who was she? And what did she mean to him?

Whoever she was, Jake hadn't seemed thrilled at the prospect of meeting with her, but that didn't stop the piercing jealousy that pinched her heart.

From the kitchen, Mia heard Jake rummaging around; slamming drawers, cabinets shutting smartly, water running. Several seconds of silence followed the noise, and she wondered what he was doing out there. Wondering if she lay awake in her bed? Contemplating an apology, perhaps?

Good grief, Briscoe. When did you become such a lovesick fool?

The moment she'd clapped eyes on a custom hot-rod builder with a body made for sin and a battered soul.

After the way he'd treated her, Mia had locked her bedroom door for good measure. *No one* talked to her like that, and if he thought he would get a little midnight nookie after taking off to meet another woman, the locked door would quickly disabuse him of *that* notion.

She heard his footfalls coming closer; the steady, surefooted steps of a man who knew exactly where he wanted to go. No hesitation whatsoever as he walked straight to his bedroom, opened and then shut the door.

Mia sat up in bed, furious. The gall of him! True, she had planned on making him grovel a little for his earlier behavior, but ... he just walked on by.

Uninterested.

Had he found his release elsewhere? In the company of the woman with whom he'd met?

Mia flopped back down on the pillow and stared blindly at the ceiling. This was ridiculous. He wasn't hers. They were enjoying each other's bodies and company while on vacation. She had no claim on him.

The hell she didn't.

Part of her wanted to stomp over to his room and give him a piece of her mind, but she suddenly felt so weak, so tired, so *through* with the mess her life had become.

A quick sob escaped her lips and she covered her mouth. She thought of her parents, of her blessed Aunt Eva, for whom she'd truly yet to mourn.

Mia turned her face into the pillow and let the tears come. She cried for the life she'd lost, but most of all she grieved for the woman who'd taken in her in and treated her like her own daughter.

For the first time in nearly a year, Mia allowed herself to grieve for the woman she had loved more than the sun. Gripping the pillow, she wept into it, letting the tide of repressed anguish pull her under until she drifted off into a fitful sleep.

* * * *

After what'd happened with Jake, coupled with her allnight crying marathon, she wasn't certain she wouldn't burst into tears at the least provocation.

Mia hadn't wanted to run the risk of seeing Jake, not when still she felt so raw. She couldn't deal with him right now.

I must be some kind of masochist, she thought. Because her thoughts kept drifting to the man who shared the guest cottage and had stolen her heart.

Mia kicked at the grass as she walked. This was insane. She'd known the man barely two weeks, and the thought of parting ways left her feeling bereft, hollow. She found it painfully obvious that to him she was just some vacation fling. It's not as if she hadn't been warned. After all, he had stated from the beginning his lack of faith in love.

And like a fool, she had thought she could change his mind.

This was why she'd never let herself fall in love. She'd always been the first one to break things off in a relationship.

She'd attributed it to boredom, but the truth had hit her sometime in the middle of the night.

She left out of fear. All this time, she thought she'd been searching for love, marriage, the whole package. When in reality, she was no worse than Jake. At least Jake was honest. She'd been lying to herself for years. Seventeen to be exact.

The hard truth had bombarded her during her nocturnal grief session. She hadn't dated at all since Aunt Eva fell sick. She had wanted to be there for the woman who'd been like a mother to her. To care for her the way she had Mia. And while at least partly true, it only meshed with more lies.

Mia turned from the salt marshes and walked along a narrow path in the forest. She felt the prick of tears behind her lids and sighed. She saw the main house just beyond the canopy of cypress, pine trees and live oaks. She watched as Gabe and Jake supervised the setup of the large tent.

Mia stopped at the edge of the forest and tried to collect herself.

When Eva died, Mia had shut off. In a daze, she handled the funeral arrangements, her aunt's estate, and boxed up the home where she'd spent her youth. She went back to work with more determination and drive than she'd felt in years. She put all of the tears and grief away and focused on her fledgling business.

Until now. Until Jake.

Somehow, this man who believed love didn't exist, had managed to do in two weeks what she hadn't been able to pull off in seventeen years.

Mia wiped her tears away with the hem of her linen blouse. She heard Jake's laugh echo across the yard and it gripped her heart. No, she hadn't been able to talk herself out of loving Jake. She felt as if she had been walking around for years just waiting for her heart to recognize his.

And now that it had, she couldn't go back.

She waved a hand in front of her face, hoping that her eyes were clear. She didn't want Jake to think she'd been crying over him. She couldn't take the pity, or worse, the panic she'd see in his eyes.

She checked her watch as she emerged. In an hour, Jillian had her final fitting and they would bring her dress home.

"Hey, stranger!" Gabe called, shielding his eyes with his hand. "Did you get lost?"

"No," she replied, her voice scratchy from her crying jag.

She *really* didn't want to see Jake. Not when she was already sore. But, there didn't seem any way out of it. And Mia Briscoe cowed down to no one.

Well, at least she'd thought so until last night.

She approached the men. Jake looked magnificent. He stood in the warm sun dressed in those olive-drab cargo shorts she loved, and a white ribbed tank top that displayed his muscular chest and washboard abs. *Pull your tongue back in your mouth, Mia,* she ordered.

His intense gaze raked over her. She looked at Gabe instead. "Just taking a walk. Have you seen Jilly? We're supposed to leave for her fitting soon."

"She's in the house looking at hair books or something." Gabe shrugged.

Mia felt Jake's eyes on her, but she refused to take the bait. She didn't have the stamina for another battle. "Thanks. See you guys."

She took off at a clipped pace, hoping Jake would get the hint and stay with his brother. Of course, the man never did anything like a normal person.

He called her name when she reached the stairs. She stopped and turned. "Yes?"

"You okay?" he asked, jogging to catch up.

She turned on a bright smile that made her face feel like it would crack. "I'm great. Super. Listen, I have to go, okay? I'll catch you later."

She turned and put one foot on the step, but sighed when Jake grabbed her arm.

"Damn it, Mia. Look at me, will you?"

She lifted her eyes to his. "What?"

He reached out and rubbed his thumb under her eye.

"Have you been crying?"

"What? No. Allergies. The, uh, palmettos."

"Uh-huh."

She sighed. "I'm dandy, okay? I've just been thinking about my aunt lately. It wasn't you," she assured him.

"Hey, I'm sorry about yesterday."

Stop it. Quit being nice; you're making this harder. "No sweat." She made a show out of checking her watch. "I really gotta jet, okay?"

This time he let her go, and she ran up the stairs like a swarm of angry bees chased her. When she got to the top, she leaned against the wall and let out a ragged breath.

Her perfectly ordered life had just become a perfect hell.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Twelve

"I'm so excited, I could just scream," Jilly said, her eyes on the road ahead of them.

Mia slipped on the pair of Gucci sunglasses she'd saved for months to buy. "Two weeks went by fast. Just think, by this time tomorrow, you'll be a married woman."

Jillian squealed. Mia didn't want to spoil her friend's happiness by asking if she'd told Gabe about the baby. She supposed it didn't matter. She knew the answer anyway.

They drove past a few downed trees along the road as they headed into Beaufort. Katy's winds had peaked the dunes sharply and scattered debris along the highway. Jilly kept driving, oblivious to it all.

Mia secretly wondered what it would be like to be that damn happy. For a few brief moments—okay, several since she'd been spending so much time in Jake's bed—she would fantasize about a life with Jake. It was so vivid, so *real* in her mind; a little house in the 'burbs, babies, Sunday dinners with Gabe and Jilly, PTA meetings, plays, love and happiness. She longed for it like she had longed for nothing else. After the night Katy hit, the possibility they might have a chance at *something* after the wedding, had seemed almost plausible. But, she realized, the fantasy had been nothing but a pipe dream, leaving her with a piercing ache that refused to leave her heart.

Don't go there, girl. Not now. Not today. Just get through this wedding and you can brood to your heart's content. Lord knows you'll have the time.

Jillian chattered on excitedly the entire forty-five-minute drive to the bridal shop. She talked about their honeymoon trip to Jamaica. She rattled on about the house they were eyeing in San Diego.

Mia sat back in her seat and listened. She feared her friend's happiness would be shattered if she didn't reveal the truth soon, but she kept her mouth shut. For now.

There were a few patrons inside the bridal shop when they arrived. Jillian was whisked to the back by the seamstress leaving Mia to stand near the platform flanked by mirrors.

The men had been in the day after the storm to get their tuxes. From experience, Mia knew it was a lot easier to dress the groom than the bride. Mia's bridesmaid dress was a sheath like Jillian's, in a rich burgundy and sitting on a hanger in the cottage.

An older woman standing in front of a rack of mother-ofthe-bride dresses turned to Mia. "What do you think of this one, honey?" the woman asked in a smoke-roughened voice.

Mia examined the creamy white shift with pearl buttons down the front. "It's a lovely style, but you might want to go with a different color. Traditionally, it's only the bride who wears white."

"I guess that makes sense," the woman said. She placed the dress back on the rack and turned to Mia. "I don't know much about weddings."

She smiled sympathetically. "Don't worry. The only reason I know is because I've devoted my life to them." She moved forward and held out her hand. "Mia Briscoe. I'm a wedding planner."

"Marlene Hastings."

"It's nice to meet you. When's the big day?"

"In a few days. My son's getting hitched and I haven't a clue as to what to wear."

She found it strange that Marlene Hastings had waited until the last minute to buy her attire, but she wisely kept her opinions to herself. After all, Mia had only had two weeks to plan Jillian's wedding.

"You must be very excited. Where is the wedding?"

"On one of the barrier islands," Marlene said, which could have been anywhere. The South Carolina coast was lousy with them.

"It's a lovely spot," Mia said neutrally.

"Mia!" Jilly's alarmed voice rang out from the dressing room. "We have a problem!"

"Excuse me, I—" Mia broke off when Jillian came rushing onto the platform, the back of her gown flapping behind her. The harried seamstress followed behind, a tape measure draped around her neck.

"The dress doesn't fit."

"What?"

Jillian turned. "Look! I can't get it zipped!"

"Let me try," Mia said. "Stand up straight."

"I'm standing straight as board!" Her sigh bordered precariously on a sob. "Oh, God, Mia, what am I going to do?"

"Everything is fixable, Jilly. I need you to be calm right now, okay? Let's have a look." Mia yanked gently on the open back and pulled up the zipper. She huffed out a breath of frustration when the zipper stopped halfway. "Crap."

Jillian turned around, and the reason for the misfit was glaringly obvious.

"Holy shit, Jilly. Where the hell did *that* come from?"

Jillian looked down at her rounded tummy. "It wasn't there last week! I swear to God." She moaned and put her head in her hands.

"How in the world has Gabe missed *this*?" Mia motioned to her belly.

"I wanted to wait until after the wedding before we, you know..."

Mia tucked her tongue in her cheek. "Isn't it a little late for that?"

Jilly glared at Mia. "Shut up."

Marlene Hastings stepped forward and patted Jillian's shoulder. "It's all right, honey. It's perfectly normal to gain a little weight. Nerves will do that to you."

"I'm pregnant," she moaned, leaning on the woman. "Oh, God," she said again.

Apparently, Jillian expected God to fix this problem. Well, from this moment until the wedding, Mia was God.

"Well, hey, that's a good thing, right?" Marlene asked.

"Not if my dress doesn't fit. The wedding's tomorrow." She sniffed and looked at Marlene. "I'm sorry. Who are you?"

"Just shopping, honey. I was chatting with your friend here, and you just looked so sad." She smiled, but Mia sensed

something false in the gesture. She immediately felt bad; the woman was only trying to help. "I'm sure everything will be fine."

Mia turned to the seamstress. "Can we get this fixed before the wedding?"

The woman nodded. "We can take it out a few inches and have it ready for you first thing tomorrow."

"Fantastic," Mia said. "See, Jilly? Everything's going to be fine."

Jillian wiped tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry I lost it there. Hormones."

Mia wrapped an arm around her friend. "Sweetie, you don't have to apologize. I've seen a hell of a lot worse from brides who didn't have the baby batter excuse."

Jillian laughed weakly and laid her head on Mia's shoulder. "What would I do without you?"

"I don't know. It's amazing you've lasted this long." Mia smiled to soften the joke. "Let's get this all squared away and head back to Majestic." She checked her watch. "We've got a rehearsal in an hour and a half."

While Jillian left with the seamstress to undress, Mia turned to thank Marlene for her help. But, the woman had disappeared.

* * * *

"That's weird."

Mia looked up from her Blackberry. "What?"

"That's the same car I saw behind us on the way to Beaufort."

Mia twisted around and looked out the back window of the SUV. "The Pontiac?" She wondered if Jake would be proud that she'd recognized the make. Cars were all pretty much the same to her. Except, of course, for her *sissy* hybrid.

Jillian nodded. "It was behind us on our way in."

"That's a pretty common make. Are you sure it's the same car?"

"You're probably right. I don't know why I'm so jumpy."

"Yeah," Mia said wryly, "there's nothing going on in your life right now that's cause for stress." She began ticking off points on her fingers. "Unless you count a whirlwind courtship, a quickie wedding and an unexpected baby that the father *still* doesn't know about."

"Wow, thanks Captain Obvious!"

"By the way, when *are* you going to tell Gabe he's a daddy?"

Jillian's fingers flexed on the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white. "Soon."

"Babe, you're running out of time."

"Shut up, Mia."

"Okay. How's this instead?" She socked Jillian lightly in the shoulder. "What were you thinking, playing matchmaker with me and Jake?"

Jillian grinned. "Hell, you two did most of the work for me. Have you seen the fireworks you two create?" She hazarded a smirk. "Jeez, I practically got a contact high from being in the same room."

"Can everybody see what's going on between us?" she asked, mortified.

"Just me and Gabe, but that's only because we know you. My parents are too self-involved to notice anything but the junior league and golf scores." She glanced at Mia again. "Tell me, is he as totally yummy as I think?" She slapped the dash. "Come on, dish! I haven't had sex in three weeks."

"Well, God, after three weeks, it's a wonder your hoohaw hasn't atrophied from lack of use."

"Hey," Jillian said. "Gabe has a *very* voracious appetite in bed. And in his car. And in the kitchen. And—"

"O-kay. I get it." Mia smiled. "And to answer your question, yes, he is. There aren't enough adjectives in the English language to describe how *scorching* Jake is in the sack."

"Have you guys talked about what happens after the wedding?"

All of her doubts came crashing back with that one simple question. For a couple hours, she had managed to push Jake and the feelings he stirred to the back of her mind.

"What's to talk about? I believe in fairy tales and he thinks married people have a screw loose."

"For what it's worth, Gabe says he's never seen Jake act this way around a woman before."

Curious, she turned to her friend. "What way?"

"I believe the words he used were 'possessed' and 'captivated'."

Well, that was something, Mia supposed. Of course, it still didn't explain the woman Jake had rushed off to meet yesterday. And why he had been as distant as the ocean ever since.

"Oh, I bet that's the reverend's car," Jillian said, pulling the SUV into the driveway behind a late-model Town Car.

"Remember," Mia said as they got out of the rig, "we've got your bachelorette party planned after the rehearsal dinner. Such as it," she muttered.

"Hey, it'll be fun. I'm sure Aunt Francis will provide us with endless entertainment."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Mia shuddered when she thought of bringing the little old woman in public. Because she'd be half-crocked before they left the house. And it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that the Drunken Fury would be dancing half-naked on the tables before the night was over. And a blotto, eighty-year-old woman with a broken hip was not on her list of "Things to Take Care of Before the Wedding."

The reverend had, indeed, arrived, and was sitting in the family parlor in a Queen Anne chair finishing the remains of a large glass of wine. He wobbled slightly when he stood to greet them, leading Mia to believe that he'd been hitting the sauce for the better part of the afternoon.

Splendid.

At this point, nothing short of an asteroid landing in the backyard would surprise her after the way things had been going. Sandra hadn't been kidding when she'd told her she'd really be earning her fifteen percent.

"Lovely to see you again, Jennifer," the Reverend said.

"It's Jillian, Reverend Boyer."

"Right, sorry." On the high side of sixty, with wiry, gray hair framing a wizened face the color of dark Columbian

coffee, Reverend Chuck Boyer looked less like a man of the cloth and more like an aging Rastafarian. His gray hair was tamed back into one long dreadlock, beads and crystals interspersed inside the burgeoning mass.

Reverend of what, exactly?

While the bride and groom made the introductions, Mia looked around for Jake. She told herself she searched for him because, as the best man, he needed to be present. *Not* because she had lost her fricking mind and fallen in love with him.

Right. Keep on lying to yourself, Briscoe.

"Reverend Boyer," Gabe said, gesturing to Mia, "this is Mia Briscoe, the maid of honor and our wedding planner."

The reverend had a surprisingly firm handshake, and Mia had to give him points for looking her directly in the eye, even if those eyes were red-rimmed and wandering from the drink.

And she had to give Sandra credit; although the motherof-the-bride looked a little shell-shocked by the officiate's presence, she held it together and didn't call the Junior League to cast him from the house.

"Shall we begin?" Mia asked.

Jillian's parents preceded them down into the gardens, which, after the hard work of the landscaping crew, had been restored to their pre-Katy glory. Aunt Francis, who'd been lazing on a chaise on the veranda, followed them down.

There was one uncomfortable moment when Francis looked at Reverend Boyer and exclaimed, "Jillian, way to go, girlie! You booked George Clinton for the wedding!" It was a

toss-up as to which was more shocking: the fact that Aunt Francis knew of the funk master or that she appeared stone sober.

While Jillian gave the reverend an abbreviated tour of the gardens, Mia checked her notebook to make sure she had everything.

"Holy shit," Jake whispered in her ear, his hot breath tickling the back of her neck like a hundred wild caresses. "Bob Marley's back from the dead."

She turned, her lips twitching. "Can't anyone come up with anything original?"

Jake faked a pout. "Damn, someone already jumped me on this? I've been planning it for the last hour."

"Aunt Francis, if you can believe that. But, she thought he was George Clinton."

Mia searched his face. No trace of the anger lingered. He no longer looked like a rabbit ready to bolt. She desperately wanted to ask him what had caused the baffling rift between them, but kept quiet out of fear of resurrecting that wall around his heart. She felt like she'd been slowly chipping away at the stone over the last two weeks and to confront him would only ruin her hard work.

Since when have you been afraid to speak what's on your mind? She ignored the niggling little voice in her head and continued with the preparations.

Fifty-five white wooden chairs were lined neatly in the grass facing the elaborate arbor, where the couple would be married. Fall color ran riot over the garden: white, purple and red orchids, creamy calla lilies, vividly blue hydrangeas.

Climbing over the arbor, bougainvillea trailed down the sides and curved along the ground like tendrils of hair.

All in all, Mia was pleased. Despite the headaches—and there had been many—things were finally starting to look up.

Aunt Francis teetered on her five-inch stilettos to the front row of chairs and plopped down. Mia convened the wedding party at the foot of the aisle and assigned places.

Because she was both maid of honor *and* the wedding planner, she felt a little like the proverbial chicken, but through it all lay a sense of significance; that she stood here doing what she'd been born to do.

Gabe and Reverend Boyer took their places under the wide expanse of the arbor. Jake walked Sandra down the aisle where she took a seat next to Great Aunt Francis.

Jake returned and they proceeded to make their own trip down the aisle. As she took his arm, Mia couldn't stop the natural progression of thought as they walked to the arbor. She imagined herself in white satin with a long, trailing veil, a bouquet of hand-tied calla lilies carried in the crook of her arm as she made her way toward the man she loved. She could see it so clearly in fact that she had to remind herself who the bride and groom actually were. Not Mia. And certainly not Jake.

Jillian took her father's arm and together they walked down the aisle. She smiled up at her father and he returned the adoring gaze. Mia felt the punch of grief and longing hit her and then softly subside. When she turned to look at Jake, his eyes were on her, and she knew that he was thinking of

her parents, too. He gave her a private smile and Mia had to blink back the sudden threat of tears.

I love this man so much.

When Jillian and her father arrived at the arbor, Reverend Boyer said, "Who gives this bride away?"

Gerald nodded. "I do."

He kissed Jillian's cheek, and then handed her off to Gabe before taking a seat next to Sandra. Reverend Boyer spoke in surprisingly confident and unwavering tones, explaining the vows they would repeat while Gabe and Jillian listened intently.

Mia looked across the expanse of green grass and saw a familiar figure walking toward them.

"Isn't that...?" Mia said to herself.

Jake glanced up, his eyes zeroing in on the woman who stopped just feet from the arbor. "Oh, shit."

"Marlene?" Mia said.

Marlene Hastings ignored her, instead staring directly at Gabe and Jillian. Gabe lifted his eyes. He stared blankly at her for a few moments before his eyes widened.

No one said anything. Jake was poised for a fight, Gabe blinked in confusion, Jillian looked bewildered and Mia wanted to scream. She had the sudden, gut-wrenching knowledge that whatever happened next was going to be very, very bad.

"What the *hell* are you doing here?" Jake said between clenched teeth.

Marlene Hastings smirked at Jake. Mia felt like she was seeing things from underwater, reality murky and disconnected.

"Now, honey, you really didn't think I was going to miss this, did you?"

Sandra rose, a polite, but strained smile on her face. "Can I help you with something? If you're here for the wedding, it isn't until tomorrow afternoon."

Marlene turned to Sandra, and there was something wolfish in her expression as she appraised Jillian's mother. "Are you Sandra Tyner?"

Sandra nodded. "That's right."

"Oh, well, it's so good to meet you, at last! I was worried that I wouldn't make it to the wedding, but it looks like I arrived just in time." She raked a fierce blue gaze over Jake, who stood unmoving, his lips compressed into a hard line.

Mia couldn't take it anymore. "Ms. Hastings, why are you here?"

"Oh, look at me! I've completely forgotten my manners, haven't I?" She smiled coldly. "Marla Hastings Ryan. So pleased to make your acquaintance."

"You told me your name was Marlene."

Jake looked at Mia sharply. "You know her?"

"She was at the bridal salon when we were there for Jillian's fitting."

Gabe, who up until that point, had stood staring, finally spoke up. "Mama?"

Marla cocked her head and regarded Gabe. "That's right, sweetie. It's your mama. Your brother tried to keep me away, but I just couldn't. Not with my youngest boy getting married and about to be a daddy."

A shocked silence fell over the garden. Mia closed her eyes and tried her damnedest to turn back time. No such luck.

"What are you talking about?" Gabe asked, pale-faced.

Marla lifted a hand and pointed at Jillian's abdomen. "I'm that baby's grandmama."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Thirteen

"Baby?" Gabe echoed weakly.

Marla clucked her tongue. "Oh, my. You don't know?" She looked at Jillian, who stood pale and shaking next to Gabe. "I didn't mean to spoil your surprise, sweetie."

He looked at Jillian. "Is it true?" he asked hoarsely. "You're pregnant?"

Jillian nodded slowly. "I was going to tell you, Gabe. I wanted—"

"What about what *I* wanted, Jillian?" He raked a hand through his hair. "I don't even want kids!"

"What?" Jillian asked in a shocked whispered.

"Goddammit! When were you going to tell me?"

"A-after the wedding."

He stared hard at Jillian for several tense moments. Mia knew he was thinking about his own parents. She wished her friend had lied instead. "It's a good thing I found out now, isn't it?"

"What are you talking about?" Jillian put her hand on Gabe's arm, but he shrugged her off. "Can we discuss this in private?"

"I've said all I have to say."

"Everything will be fine," she said, half to herself it seemed. "We'll deal with it. After the wedding—"

"Don't you get it, Jilly? There's not going to be a wedding."

"Now, son—" Gerald broke in.

"Why are you here?" Gabe asked his mother.

"I told you, Gabe, honey. I wanted to be here for the wedding."

"How did you know?"

A self-satisfied smile broke over Marla's face. "Your brother thought—"

Gabe whirled on Jake. "You *knew* about this? About her?" Mia expected Jake to defend himself, but he only nodded.

"Why didn't you want her here?" Gabe asked. "That's what I'm getting, right? That you don't want our mother here."

Jake nodded again. "She's poison, Gabe."

"Hey!" Marla's face reddened. She slapped her hands on her hips, and then glared at her oldest son. "That is no way to talk about your mother, Jacob."

Jake turned to Marla and pointed his finger at her. "Shut your mouth." He looked back at Gabe. "She reappeared about two years ago. She's been tapping me for cash ever since."

Marla placed a hand on her chest and worked up a sheen of tears, her lower lip trembling. Mia didn't believe it for a second. She had known there was something deceptive about the woman the moment she laid eyes on her in Beaufort.

"I was in a bad spot, Gabe. I needed some help." A tear slipped past her eye and trailed down her cheek. "If I'd have known your brother would use it against me, I never would have asked him in the first place."

"Lady, save the theatrics," Aunt Francis piped up from her seat. "Anyone with half a brain can see you're up to no good."

Marla glared at the old woman. Gabe looked at his mother. "Why *are* you here all of a sudden, Mama? You took off twenty years ago and I haven't heard a word from you.

Suddenly, I'm getting married to a woman of known wealth and you're here to play the devoted mother? I don't think so."

Mia wanted to high-five Gabe for seeing through his mother's high drama, but she figured it wasn't the right time or place. Maybe not so appropriate, either.

Stripped of pretense, Marla's features hardened, aging her fifteen years in a matter of seconds. "I *could* be persuaded to leave." Her eyes took on a hungry gleam as she looked at Sandra and Gerald.

"You've got to be out of your mind!" Mia exclaimed.

"Mia," Jake warned. "What happened to the five grand?" he asked his mother.

Oh, Jake, Mia thought. She tried to imagine how he felt when Marla reappeared in his life. Probably elated at first, she supposed, because surely she didn't just show up on his doorstep demanding money. No, she probably played the mother role to the hilt before finally getting down to what she really wanted, what really mattered: money, not her sons. Mia's heart wept for him.

"Get out," Gabe said.

"What?" Marla asked. Clearly, things were not going according to plan. "But—"

"You heard the boy," Gerald Tyner said.

Marla Ryan looked around from one impassive face to the next. Obviously, she knew when a con job had gone bad. "Don't think this is it," she promised, shaking a finger at Jake.

"You better get your ass off my property," Sandra said, shocking everyone with her chutzpah and her language, "or I'll kick it off myself."

Marla stared at Sandra, and for a moment, Mia was afraid she'd have a middle-aged, crone brawl on her hands. But, with a regal toss of her hair, she turned on her heel and strode down the aisle. No one said anything until she disappeared around the front of the house.

"I'm going to make sure she leaves," Gerald said and turned to follow.

"I'll go with you."

Sandra turned and looked at Great Aunt Francis. "I don't think so."

"Screw that!" the old woman said. "Things are just getting interesting."

Apparently, Sandra had tossed her breeding out the window, for she reached down and grabbed Aunt Francis by the arm, dragging her bodily back to the main house.

The reverend cleared his throat delicately. "I think I'll excuse myself for a moment so y'all can get your ... issues worked out."

The four of them stood at the makeshift altar, the bright color of the bougainvillea trailing down like bejeweled fingers. Tension rent the otherwise peaceful air; tight, vivid and crackling. Jilly stood across from Gabe, tears streaming down her devastated face. Her fiancé glared at her, his face hard as granite, and in that moment, he reminded Mia of Jake.

Mia snuck a look at Jake, whose face was as impassive as his brother's. Making eye contact, she tipped her head, indicating they should give the couple some privacy. Jake took Mia's arm and led her to the foot of the aisle and surreptitiously watched Gabe and Jillian.

"Jake—"

"Don't. Mia ... just don't."

She shut her mouth.

She had thought that thirty feet would be enough room to give the couple the quiet they needed, but Gabe's voice was clear as a sharp, insistent bell as he threw accusations at Jilly. "I can't believe you did this," he said.

"Gabe. It wasn't on purpose. It was an accident." She shook her head. "No, not an accident. A surprise is all." She reached out and grabbed his hand, which he angrily shook off, folding his arms across his chest. "Gabe, we can get past this. It's a baby. A baby. A life we created in love."

"You knew how I felt about kids."

Jillian shook her head emphatically. "No. No, I didn't. We never discussed it. I knew about your parents, but I had no idea that you didn't want a child. Why do you think I waited so long to tell you?"

Mia winced as Gabe stilled, the air around them charged. "How long?" he said dangerously.

Jillian's lips compressed into a thin line. In a small voice she said, "I've known for a month."

"A month!" Gabe exploded. "You've been carrying *it* inside you for a fucking month and you never said a word." He looked at her with blatant disgust. "Tell me, *Jillian*, were you even going to tell me?"

"Are you serious? Do you think this is something I could hide?"

"Well, you've done a fine job until now, don't you think?"

Fresh tears were thick in her voice as she pleaded with Gabe. "Are you willing to give up everything we have together, our love for each other, because of this?"

"You lied to me!" he shouted. "How in the hell do I know you didn't do it on purpose?"

Jilly paled. "Gabe." One last time, she reached out, but he shook her off.

"Get away from me. I can't even look at you."

He stalked down the aisle. Mia moved out of the way, sure he'd run her down. But, Jake jumped right in his path and put a hand out. "Gabe, brother. Cut her a little slack. She was terrified. And rightly so."

"You knew? First Marla and now Jilly? Didn't I tell you to stay the hell out of my life?"

"Goddammit, Gabe. Calm down. You're walking away from the best thing that's ever happened to you. I know you're freaking right now, but you're going to regret this, man. In a really big way."

"Shut up." He moved forward, but Jake planted his feet and blocked his path. "Get. Out. Of. My. Way."

"No."

Mia wouldn't have dreamed what happened next, but given recent events, it really was no surprise. Gabe flew forward, leaping onto Jake and the two of them sailed to the ground.

"Jake!" Mia said.

"Stop it!" Jillian shouted, running down the aisle.

Gabe was the smaller of the two men, but what he lacked in size, he made up in fury as he pinned his brother down on the ground and began landing punches. Jake's arms flew up

to protect himself and at the same time he nailed Gabe in the nose. A stream of blood gushed from his nose, but the injury didn't register. He just kept pummeling.

Mia and Jillian both danced around the fray, unsure about what to do, armed with the knowledge that they would be cold-cocked for their efforts should they to attempt to separate the brothers.

Jillian took a breath, stepped in, and grabbed Gabe by the shoulder. In his rage, his arm drew back and knocked her in the chest, tossing her into the last row of chairs where she landed with a loud crash.

"Oh, my God. Jilly." As she rushed to her friend's side, she glared at the men. "You stupid idiots! Look at what you've done!"

Mia's words finally broke through the haze of Gabe's wrath, for both hands dropped to his sides and he stood, swaying as though he was drunk. "Jilly...?"

Mia arced her hand down in an angry swipe. "Get the hell away from her. Both of you. I think you've done enough." When it appeared Gabe wasn't going to listen. She shouted, "Get away from her!"

Tears were streaming down his face, but Mia's command registered. He turned and fled toward the salt marshes.

Jillian was lying on her back, a white folding chair beneath her. She tried to sit up.

"No, stay there. I want to make sure nothing is broken."

"I'm fine," her friend insisted. She sat up with a wince and rubbed her back. Her eyes instantly scanned the backyard. "Where is he?"

"I sent him away. I don't want him near you right now."

Jillian grabbed Mia's arm, her brown eyes fierce. "He didn't mean to do it, Mia. You saw him. He's just had to two biggest shocks of his life. He would never deliberately hurt me, no matter how angry he is."

"She's right," Jake said. He limped slightly. A nasty looking welt covered his neck, and his right eye had swollen and now turned purple, but for the most part, he seemed all right.

Mia dropped her head in her hands. "God, what a mess." She looked up at Jake. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Trust me, that little brouhaha's been a long time comin'." He eyed Jilly. "You okay? Any abdominal pain? The baby okay?"

Jilly paled at the mention of the baby. "Oh, God. I never even thought.... "She looked at them with tears in her eyes. "If I lose this baby..."

"That's not going to happen," Mia said sternly. "Can you stand up?" She nodded to Jake. "Help me get her up."

Jake leaned down and lifted Jilly into his arms and they walked across the yard. "Take her up the back way. The last thing we need is to have someone see her like this."

Fortunately, no one lounged in the downstairs den, or on the staircase in the back. It appeared the rest of the household, sans Great Aunt Francis, were still trying to wrestle Marla Hastings Ryan from the property. Hopefully, they hadn't had to call the authorities. That would've been a perfect ending to a complete and utter mess.

Jake laid Jillian down on her bed, propping her up with goose down pillows, his touch gentle. Mia's heart squeezed

painfully. He *did* have the capacity of love and tenderness inside him. If only he could forgive himself....

"Any pain?" he asked Jilly again.

She shook her head. "I'm tired, though. I think I'll rest a bit. If I start to feel strange, I'll call you and you can call my OB."

Mia didn't want to leave her friend, but Jillian needed some time alone. She'd feel the same way had their positions been reversed.

Jake tugged on her hand and led out into the hall. "She's going to be okay."

Although he stood right next to her, his body language fairly screamed: *Hands Off!* She wanted to reach out to him, take him to her and let him know that everything was going to be all right. That he had nothing to be ashamed of and his mother was a mean, spiteful person who'd screwed up his life. But, in the end, she did none of those things, leaving her hands fisted at her sides while her heart ached for the one man she couldn't have.

"What are we going to do?" she asked him.

"I'm going to find Gabe. Try and talk some sense into him."

"Are you sure that's such a hot idea?"

"Trust me, he's hurting right now. The idea that he hurt Jillian, even inadvertently, has got to be killing him. He needs me."

Mia put her hand on his arm and he flinched. His reaction to her touch delivered another blow to her heart, but she strengthened her resolve. "Okay. I'll, uh, be around."

How had she fallen so hard for a man in such a short amount of time. They'd only known each other two weeks. Mia watched him walk away, carrying a big chunk of her heart with him.

She knew one thing for certain. He would leave. Forever. And he'd carry the rest of heart with him.

* * * *

Jake walked downstairs and peered through the front window. Marla had left, but Jillian's parents still stood in the circular driveway. He'd wanted to avoid such a scene all along. Now that the Tyners knew what kind of stock their future son-in-law came from, he'd be surprised if they allowed their daughter to marry Gabe at all.

He headed out the back, pausing to upright the three chairs that had been knocked back during the scuffle. He had no idea where to start looking for his little brother, but the beach was as good a place as any.

He crossed through the salt marshes, picking his way past low-lying sea shrubs and driftwood until he crested the sandy bluffs. When he reached the bottom, he lifted a hand to shield his eyes as he scanned the shore for his brother.

There. About three quarters of the way south, a figure stood facing the sea. Jake broke into a jog, hoping to catch Gabe before the younger man saw him and made a run for it.

Jake was twenty yards from Gabe when he knew he'd been made. He didn't look at him; just stiffened and kept his gaze trained on the gentle swell of the sea, his pain obvious and coming off of him in waves.

"I screwed up, bro'," he said without preamble.

"It was an accident."

"There's no excuse for what I did, Jake. I knocked my woman down. She's pregnant, man. *Pregnant*." He raked a hand through his hair. "Shit."

"She didn't do it on purpose, Gabe. She's not Marla."

"Christ, you think I don't know that?" He whirled on Jake.
"I was just blindsided with a bunch of life changing shit on the eve of my wedding, for chrissakes. I acted like an ass."

"Well, I guess you've taken the wind outta my sails, then. Here I was coming to shake some goddamn sense into you."

Gabe took in Jake's swollen eye. "Sorry about that, man."

"Hey, I got in a few good punches. How's the nose?"

"Hurts like a bitch." He sighed. "Why didn't you tell me about her?"

It was Jake's turn to sigh. "When she first showed up, I was going to. But, that maternal act was too sketchy, so I waited it out, got a little excited. But, then she started hitting me up for cash."

"You should've come to me."

Jake blew out a frustrated breath. There were a lot of things Gabe didn't know. Never *needed* to know. "I was handling it. I didn't want you to get your hopes up and have them crash around you when you learned the truth about her."

"Like you did?"

When Jake was silent, his brother put a hand on his arm. "For all of these years, you've been my brother, my best friend and my father, all wrapped up in one tough-as-nails

package. I admire the hell out you, bro', I truly do. But, you need to let go. You need to let me live my own life."

Gabe was right. Shame poured through him as he realized how he'd gone about protecting his brother; treating him with kid gloves even though he was thirty-one years old, not an eight-year-old boy. "I'm sorry."

"Hey, it came from a good place."

"Ah, what about Jillian?"

Gabe closed his eyes. "Is she okay?"

"She seems all right. A little tired. She's lying down in her room. No abdominal pain or bleeding that I know of."

"God, if she loses that baby because of me...."

"Don't think like that, man. You need to do the right thing." Jake turned and stared hard at his brother. "You love this girl, right? Enough to spend the rest of your life with her? For better or worse?"

Gabe didn't hesitate. "God, yes."

"Maybe this baby thing is a blessing in disguise. Hey, you'll get a chance to raise a kid right. It'll have a dad that actually gives a shit. A mother who loves him unconditionally. Something we never had."

Gabe nodded slowly. "You're right. As usual." He blew out a breath. "I just hope to God she takes me back."

Jake clapped a hand on his brother's back and led them back to the main house. "She will. She loves you. And I have it on good authority that love is the strongest motivator in the world."

"God, Mia, what am I going to do?"

Mia couldn't have resisted reentering Jilly's room any more than she could have left a drowning child flailing in the ocean. She lay next to her friend, stroking her hair the same way she had when Aunt Eva suffered through the worst of the chemo.

"It's going to work out. Gabe loves you."

"I never knew he didn't want children," she whispered as tears sprang anew from her brown eyes.

"Well, he's going to have to learn to love them. And he will," she added. "You two have a chance to bring a child into this world that will have the love and caring that neither he nor Jake had."

"I should have listened to you, and told him earlier."

"What's done is done. This isn't the time for recriminations, Jill. We have to focus on the future. And that includes you, Gabe and the little bean growing inside of you."

Mia felt a sharp prick of envy that she ruthlessly squashed, ashamed she was thinking of herself when Jillian's world had just come crashing down around her. Envisioning Jake's child growing heavy inside her would only bring her pain, because while Gabe would likely come around, Mia knew there'd be no storybook ending for the two of them.

"I'm going to be the best auntie there is," Mia said fiercely.
"I'm going to spoil that kid rotten." She smiled through her own tears.

Jillian looked up at Mia. "You are. I, ah, want you to be the Godmother. Is that okay?"

The tears fell in a rush as she leaned down and hugged this incredible woman whom she was so lucky to have known. "Of course it's okay. I would be honored."

Worried she'd embarrass them both by bawling like a big baby, she released Jillian and patted her shoulder. A soft knock sounded on the door. As they looked up, Jake poked his head in. "I found Gabe. He wants to talk to you, Jillian."

Jillian sat up quickly, tension pinching her features. She nodded.

Mia rose from the bed, surreptitiously wiping her eyes as she passed Jake. Gabe, looking ragged and a little lost met her stare briefly. "I'm sorry, Mia."

She put a hand on his arm. "Don't you worry. Go to your woman."

He nodded and went inside, closing the door softly behind him.

Mia looked up at Jake. "How did you manage that?"

He looked bemused. "As much as I'd love to claim credit, he'd already come to his senses by the time I found him. He's torn up over knocking her down."

Mia shuddered. "God, what a week."

Jake tucked his hands in his pockets and stared down at her. "You okay?"

She nodded. "I'm fine. I'll be better when this is all over and everything goes back to normal."

Jake's face hardened for a moment, but the gesture was there and gone so quickly, Mia wondered if she had imagined it.

"Maybe we should wait in the kitchen or something," she suggested.

"Yeah, I could use a stiff drink right about now."

Pearl was bustling away in the kitchen when they entered, an exotic young woman with short, spiky black hair laughing along side her.

"How's it coming, ladies?" Mia asked.

"We're almost done. The only thing we need to do is the tea sandwiches, which we'll do tomorrow. That way, they stay fresh."

"Got any whiskey?" Jake asked.

"You two both look like you could use it." She looked up. "What was all that racket in the garden? Mrs. T. finally lose it?"

Mia shook her head. "Just a misunderstanding."

Pearl wiped her hands and said, "Let me see what I can scrounge up."

The young woman looked at Jake and Mia curiously. "I'm Gracie, by the way, Pearl's niece. Are y'all excited for the ceremony? Auntie Pearl tells me you're headed to Jamaica for your honeymoon."

Obviously the young woman had them mixed up with Jillian and Gabe. For the briefest of moments, Mia allowed herself the luxury of pretending that it *was* their wedding, their love being united, expressed in front of friends and family.

When she opened her eyes and caught the expression of uneasiness on Jake's face, her little fantasy came crashing down. "I'm Mia Briscoe, the maid of honor and Jillian and

Gabe's wedding planner. This is Jake Ryan. He's the groom's brother."

The young woman let out an embarrassed laugh. "Oh, look at me. I'm sorry. You two just look so in love, I thought y'all were the bride and groom."

"Oh, we're not in ... thank God," Jake breathed when Pearl came in carrying two highball glasses filled with amber liquid. He downed it like a man who'd gone without water for days.

Hurt and disappointment cut Mia to the core. Really, she shouldn't be surprised. He had been upfront from the beginning. Hadn't he told her himself that he couldn't offer her a happily ever after? Why was she always searching for the things she couldn't have?

Mia wanted to escape into the gardens, too hurt to look at Jake let alone be in the same room with him, but Gabe and Jillian entered the kitchen. Gabe's arm was wrapped protectively around her shoulders. Both looked relieved, happy and most importantly, still in love.

Mia was insanely jealous, but she shoved it away. This was not about her. She needed—had—to remember that, not only to keep a cool head for the wedding, but to protect the heart that had already suffered more than one beating in the last two weeks.

"The wedding's back on," Gabe informed them. He laid his hand on Jillian's gently swelling abdomen and smiled. "And I'm going to be a daddy." He looked at his brother. "Ain't that something?"

"You're going to make a great father, Gabe," Jake said. "I can't think of two people who'd make better parents." He

walked over to Jillian and kissed her cheek. "Congratulations, Mama."

It was such an intensely happy moment. Mia should've been dancing cartwheels in the kitchen. Her best friend was getting married to the man of her dreams and they were expecting their first child. The wedding she had meticulously planned was going to happen. Weddings by Mia would finally be in the black.

But, as she stared at the one thing she couldn't have, she realized that this truly wasn't a happy moment at all.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Fourteen

Jake didn't come to her in the night.

Given the way things were going, Mia figured it was for the best. They both needed a clean break. Monday, they would head back to California. Back to their own lives.

She wondered if he would look back on their 'island fling' with fondness.

It would be a long time before Mia could, if she ever did at all.

After a restless night of tossing and turning, she rose at five and began the wedding day preparations. She gave herself a stern pep talk, refusing to allow Jake to muddle her thoughts when she needed to be in top form. Jillian and Gabe needed a wedding planner who executed their biggest day with grace and ease, not one who mooned pathetically over the groom's brother.

Jillian and Sandra left at nine for Beaufort to pick up the wedding dress. Mia figured after all that had gone on during the last twenty-four hours, the two needed a little mother/daughter time. Mia had been impressed with Sandra's verve yesterday. She hoped it would extend to her daughter, and they could have a normal relationship.

Then again, aliens could land to join the wedding.

Per Jake's suggestion, Mia had the front half of the tent sectioned off, leaving space for dancing opposite a dais where the band would perform. Fifteen round tables topped with white linen cloths were positioned in the back half. The food

would be presented on a long table lining the side. Sandra could even call it *boofay* if she wanted.

By eleven, both Jake and Gabe were AWOL. Mia figured the two of them were off together, bonding or some crap. God, she was in a foul mood.

Obviously, that pep talk hadn't worked.

Thank the gods; the alterations on Jillian's wedding dress were perfect. If Mia was into chicks, she would've driven to Beaufort and laid a big, fat juicy kiss on the seamstress's mouth.

After their return, Mia enlisted both mother and daughter to help decorate the reception tables. Crystal bowls that winked like diamonds were filled with spring water where floating candles and flowers swam like sparkling gems.

After she'd lined the aisles with tulle, ribbon and flowers, Sandra whisked Mia away for the preparation of her role as maid of honor in the wedding. She'd been on Majestic for two weeks now, and Sandra walked into the room looking like a plastic, middle-aged Barbie doll every time. The idea of being coiffed and polished by a team of makeover specialists, she wasn't ashamed to admit, put fear in her very being.

Sandra had corralled her hairdresser from Savannah for the event, and Mia sat in a chair being poked and prodded in the head while the sadist posing as a 'hair artist' twisted and pulled her hair into an unnatural state.

A makeup artist expertly transformed her face from merely pretty into flat-out gorgeous. Here she'd thought she had her own bag of tricks when it came to the application of the gunk

and goo women applied to make themselves perty, but man, this lady was *good*.

However, if Mia looked gorgeous, Jillian was absolutely, without a doubt, *stunning*.

She studied her reflection in the bank of mirrors surrounding her in Sandra's sitting room. The long sheath fit her perfectly, the alterations cut so well they hid the bump in her belly. The backless dress trailed down just above her feet, the train edged with pearls and lace.

Her blonde hair curled softly around her face. Her eyelids were shaded with a neutral bronze that brought out the olive in her skin and the brown in her eyes. Her lips were painted a glossy pink and pretty color rode high on her cheeks.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"There are no words," Mia replied.

Sandra, looking both beautiful and matronly in a light blue shift with baby's breath in her hair, dabbed her eyes discreetly with a handkerchief as she took in her daughter.

"You are exquisite, Jilly, baby."

"Don't you dare start crying, Mama," Jillian warned. "If you start, then I'll start, then Mia'll start and we'll be screwed."

"Language," Sandra chided with a smile.

Following a light knock on the door, Gerald poked his head in. "It's time, ladies." He took one look at his daughter and said, "What a fine sight you make, sweetheart. Your young man's going to faint at the altar."

Jillian smiled. "We'll let's hope not, but thanks, Daddy." Mia looked at Sandra. "Shall we?"

Fifty-five guests were seated in the pretty white chairs, anxiously awaiting the bride. In true fashion, Great Aunt Francis sat up front, standing in her stilettos, peering at the house and hollering, "Let's get this show on the road, folks!"

Jake waited at the base of the veranda stairs. He looked so damn handsome in his pewter gray tuxedo that Mia's knees weakened and she feared she'd tumble down the steps. The tailored lines of the suit fit him perfectly, showcasing his wide shoulders and heavy chest. He'd combed his black hair and smelled lightly of that spicy aftershave she loved.

"You look amazing," he said. "Like a princess."

She smiled like a fool at the compliment. The dark cloud following him since the yesterday seemed to have vanished. "Kinda feel like one. Kinda diggin' this whole primp and polish deal."

He offered Sandra his arm, then turned back to Mia and winked. "Be right back."

As the band queued up *Canon in D Major*, Jake walked Sandra down the aisle where she took her seat in the front row. When he returned, he held out his arm and smiled. "Ready?"

Mia nodded, desperately wishing she could erase the vision of *them* walking down the aisle as husband and wife from her mind.

Yeah, like that was going to happen.

The guests turned and watched as they approached, smiling and whispering among themselves as Jake and Mia moved down the aisle and took their places at the altar.

Gabe looked as nervous as a whore in church. He clasped his hands in front of him, then behind. He reached up to adjust his tie, and then surreptitiously checked his watch.

She caught his eye and winked. She mouthed *relax*.

From Gabe's side, Jake looked at Mia and sent her a secret smile peppered with a wicked gleam in his eye, the likes of which caused her to blush and glance away like a virgin.

Reverend Boyer—who seemed to have forgone the drink for the wedding—adjusted his own tie and softly said, "It's time," as the band started *The Wedding March*.

Jillian appeared at the foot of the aisle on her father's arm, carrying a dozen simple white lilies tied with burgundy ribbon in her other arm.

A collective sigh drew from the guests as father and daughter made their walk down the aisle, but the loudest came from the groom, whose eyes had gathered tears at the sight of his beautiful bride.

The ceremony went smoothly, with the exception of Reverend Boyer calling Jillian by the wrong name again, and Mia reassessed her earlier view that the good reverend hadn't hit the sauce prior to the evening's event. After the vows and rings were exchanged, the couple was pronounced as husband and wife and the crowd erupted in cheers and applause; the loudest from Great Aunt Francis, who pumped her fist in the air in a circular motion and whoop-whoop-whooped in a remarkable impression of Arsenio Hall.

After the ceremony, Mia switched into what she referred to as "general mode," but found that all her enlisted help were carrying out their jobs seamlessly. Pearl and Gracie had

created a gorgeous presentation of food. The cake—God, how could she eat that cake without thinking of where the icing had been?—sat on its own table, a lovely display of yellow and blue, looking damn near identical to the one in the magazine.

The band on the dais played bluesy, romantic covers, and after the traditional first dance, other couples joined in. The alcohol flowed freely, people were having a good time, and best of all, Gabe and Jillian were married and in love.

After supervising the details of the reception for a while, Gerald instructed her to "sit her ass down and have a drink. Enjoy yourself. You've done one hell of a job and you need to celebrate."

On the heels of that excellent advice, she grabbed a flute of champagne and took a load off. Everything had fallen into place, which was truly amazing considering all the grief that had gone into planning the wedding. The ceremony itself had been beautiful, but Mia's favorite part had been when Gerald toasted the couple and told Gabe he was proud to have him as a son-in-law.

Jake wandered over, a bottle of Beck's in his hand. He sat next to her, his beautiful blue eyes searching hers. As the alcohol began to do its job, Mia felt the overwhelming urge to memorize each plane and line of his face, for she had a feeling she'd never see him after the wedding.

"Nice job, Red." He tipped his beer in a salute. "If I ever planned to get married again, I'd definitely hire you."

Ouch.

Reminding herself Jake had made no promises, she pushed the hurt aside, determined to enjoy their last hours together. She wouldn't allow the reality of being on borrowed time impede on her happiness.

In fact, she would show Jake exactly what he'd be missing when he stepped on that plane and went back to his perfectly ordered, perfectly loveless life.

Tossing back the contents of her champagne, she held out a hand. "Come dance with me, car boy."

Jake stared at Mia's outstretched hand. She stole his breath; her gorgeous red curls piled high on her head, color riding high on her cheeks, her lush body encased in that fantastic dress.

Of course, it would look a hell of a lot better on the bedroom floor of the cottage.

He let her lead him to the dance floor where several couples were swaying to the band's rendition of Sinatra's "The Way You Look Tonight."

Definitely apropos.

She moved right into his arms, and Jake realized how perfectly she fit, as if she had been fashioned for his body alone. In fact, everything about her matched him in a way he'd never found before.

Even Caitlyn, whom he'd married and certainly cared for, had never elicited the feelings Mia inspired in him. Staring down at her soft red curls, her slim hand clasped in his, he was struck.

Fricking poleaxed was more like it.

He'd fallen in love with Mia Briscoe.

Somewhere between that kiss in Beaufort and right now, she had taken all of his preconceived notions of love and plowed right past them.

It's just a chemical reaction. Hormones.

The hell it was.

As they swayed with the music, he understood now that he wanted this woman in a bad way. In a forever kind of way.

Could he do it? Could he commit to the long haul again? Maybe, for the right woman. And if ever there had been a right woman for him, it was Mia Briscoe. Just the thought scared him stupid, but he ignored it and focused on the fiery woman who'd so easily stolen his heart.

"Mia."

Her free hand traced lazy circles across his chest, the close proximity of her body causing his own to react as nature intended. She lifted her head from his chest, those gypsy eyes heavy-lidded with desire.

"Hmm?"

"I, uh—" *I, uh, what, genius?* Yeah, he was in love with her, but who said she saw him as anything other than some fling? Sure, she wanted happily ever after, but as he'd pointed out, repeatedly, he didn't do happily-ever-afters. With Mia, though, he could. He thought of those summer barbeques, Little League games, coming home from a hard day to her waiting for him.

Forever.

"I just wanted to tell you how pretty you look tonight. And, uh, you smell good, too."

Oh, that's well and truly brilliant, Ryan. You oughta be writing for fricking Hallmark.

She smiled up at him, all but stopping his heart. "Thanks. Did I mention how handsome you look in that tux? Makes me want to rip it off you." She slanted him a sexy look from under her lashes. "With my teeth."

His semi decided to make a full salute. And she knew it, too 'cause she pressed her lower abdomen into his shaft, rubbing against him like a cat.

"You keep doing that," he rumbled in her ear, "and I'll take you on the buffet table."

"I think we'd get mad props from Great Aunt Francis." She tilted her head toward the dais where the woman in question had taken over the microphone. She belted out "R-E-S-P-E-C-T." Thoroughly plastered and loving it, she made several gross misspellings, but it didn't seem to faze the crowd.

"Damn, but I like that old biddy," he said with a laugh.

"Yeah, there's something about her."

"How much longer till we can go back to the cottage and work on getting you out of that dress?"

She sighed. "Jillian and Gabe should be making their grand exit in thirty minutes, and then there's the tear-down."

"I thought they weren't leaving for Jamaica until the day after tomorrow."

"They're not, but they are spending their wedding night in the honeymoon suite at The Wayfarer." She frowned, lines of fatigue pinching her eyes. "I'll be lucky if I'm done with all this by midnight."

"I wager we'll have it done by eight. Nine at the outside."

She lifted a brow. "Want to put your money where your mouth is?"

He gave her a wicked smile. "Honey, I plan on doing that and more."

Sex was a powerful motivator.

Mia now knew that first hand.

After the bride and groom escaped in a long, white limousine, Jake, true to his word, had rallied a horde of strong backs to tackle the formidable task of dismantling the leftovers from the happy event.

In an incredibly sweet gesture Mia didn't think was entirely altruistic, Jake banished her from the backyard, insisting she take a bottle of champagne to the cottage and "get horizontal."

Mia's idea of horizontal after a day like today involved three feet of steaming water in a soaker tub. Armed with a flute of champagne, she immersed herself in a bath filled with rose scented water and relaxed for the first time in what felt like weeks.

Jake had been downright tender on the dance floor, and for one brief, blissful moment, she'd been certain he was about to tell her something ... important. Maybe not the L word, but perhaps the R word, as in relationship? A real one, not a fling, and not here in South Carolina. Could it be he wanted to see her when they returned to California?

He deserved happiness. And she knew she could provide that. Just being with him made her feel ... complete, whole. It was corny and clichéd, but it was true. After meeting Marla Hastings Ryan, she could imagine the hell those boys had

been through. To have a mother whose only motivation was money and security ... to place social status above and beyond love for your children was despicable.

Honestly, it amazed her Jake and Gabe had turned out as well as they had. And truly no wonder, given his mother and then his ex-wife, Jake didn't believe a happy ending was within his reach.

Perhaps they only had this last night together. Maybe he felt determined to continue his life without the love of a woman.

Whether this was their last memory or one of the first in a long line of happy ones, Mia would take this night and show him how it felt to be truly loved.

It was no less than he deserved.

* * * *

Jesus God, he was tired.

Everything was finished. Chairs and tables loaded, tent and dais taken down, aisle runner rolled up and stored back in the event planning truck, currently on its way back to Beaufort.

His respect for wedding planners, Mia, in particular had risen significantly after participating in the event. When he'd married Caitlyn, it had been a matter of driving to Vegas.

In. Out. Shackled.

Determined not to let his fears take over, he pushed the thought away as he walked briskly to the cottage. The arousal that had been on a low simmer all day rose sharply in him as each step took him closer to the woman he desired. His senses heightened; his skin became tight and itchy, blood

pooled low in his groin, lengthening him, hardening him to the point of near pain.

The lights were low when he opened the door. The scent of roses permeated the air, but no sign of Mia. As he walked back toward the bedroom, steam wafted out like a wraith from the bathroom.

Like a hound, he followed the scent of his mate, of Mia's own arousal and roses until he pushed open her bedroom door.

She stood in front of the bureau, a lit candle in her hand. She blew gently on the match and placed it inside a crystal bowl. Her wet red hair trailed down her back like ropes of raw silk, leaving the back of her skimpy robe damp. She looked up at him as he entered and saw his own lust mirrored in her gypsy eyes.

Jake didn't say a word. He simply walked over to her, using his big body to propel her against the wall. With shaking hands, he tore at the sash and parted the silk until he had her soft, supple flesh against him.

Her head fell back against the wall, an offering. He leaned down and nipped gently at her throat, his shaft pounding in tune with his heart. The need to join her was staggering; it stole his breath, threatened to take over his sanity. Never had he wanted—needed—a woman this way.

He crushed his mouth to hers, immediately thrusting his tongue in her mouth, chasing hers the same way he wanted to drive his cock into the hot, wet glove of her body.

Her fingers attacked the button of his slacks, slipping it free and drawing down the zipper with hurried hands. He

shoved the pants down his hips and lifted her, thrusting into her so hard and deep, she cried out. Jake feared he'd hurt her, but he felt her convulsing around him almost instantly, milking his shaft and her breath shuddering out.

His hips took on a life of their own as he pounded into her, their bodies slapping together in rapid succession. Mia's head thrashed back and forth against the wall as she scored her nails on his ass.

He felt his own release coming fast, drawing his testicles close to his body, sending out little licks of fiery pleasure down the backs of his legs. He reached between their bodies, touching her core, rubbing her, whispering hot, erotic words in her ear.

As she started to clench around him a second time, he lifted his head. "Look at me, Mia."

Her gypsy eyes drifted open, her climax just moments away. "God, Jake. Please."

He pulled nearly all the way out of her body. When he thrust home again, he growled, "Mine. You're mine, Mia."

She came hard. "Jaaaakkke."

As her inner muscles stroked him, his own release slammed into him, and he staggered, nearly dropping her, the pleasure so intense.

Using arms gone weak, he secured her and walked awkwardly to the bed. Laying her down gently, he covered her body with his and surged again one last time before dropping his head on her breasts.

Mia reached her arms above her head and let out a satisfied moan. "Wow."

He smiled into her rose-scented skin. "I'll get off of you as soon as I can feel my legs."

She ran her hands through his hair. "I like the feel of you on me."

With regret, he rose and stood next to the bed, shucking his tux.

She eyed his naked body with obvious interest. "Damn. I wanted to tear that tux off with my teeth."

He smiled down at her. Mia rose from the bed and left the room. She came back a minute later carrying a bottle of champagne and two glasses. She handed him the bottle and the opener and allowed him to do the honors. He filled each of their glasses and handed one to her.

He tapped his glass against hers. "Here's to the best wedding ever planned."

She took a large gulp of her champagne, and then smiled at him. "And to think you thought I was useless."

He lifted a brow. "You definitely have your uses."

She socked him in the shoulder. "Pig."

Jake leaned forward and captured her mouth in a tender kiss. She tasted like strawberries, champagne and ... Mia. The taste he couldn't get enough of. Mia Briscoe, the woman he *loved*.

When they finished their champagne, she grabbed his hand and pulled him back down on the bed. Pushing him on his back, she curled against his side, running soft fingers down his belly, across his thighs. His sex twitched to life.

She stared down at it with interest and lifted a brow. "Already?"

"Apparently," Jake said with a laugh. "You're the only woman I haven't been able to get enough of."

She blushed prettily and ducked her head. "Well, we wouldn't want to waste it." She rose above him, straddled his thighs and sank down on his hard length in one smooth motion, and their sighs mingled as they joined again.

In a rough voice, Jake said, "I can't stop wanting you. I will never stop wanting you."

Her face softened as she rode him gently, her breasts swaying with the movement. "I love you, Jake," she whispered. "I couldn't stop it."

Overcome, he sat up and cradled her to his chest. Thrusting inside her, he said, "God help me, neither could I. You slay me, Mia. I love you like crazy."

Her tears were wet on his face, and he kissed them away as they moved inside each other, their sighs and soft kisses a dreamy ballad to their love.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Fifteen

It was after one when Jake rose from bed. Slipping on his boxers, he padded into the kitchen. He felt like he had participated in a marathon. Except instead of running, it was sex.

Damn, but that woman was insatiable.

After their mutual declarations of love—it was corny as all hell, but he didn't give a shit—they'd gone at it three more times before falling into an exhausted sleep.

Jake felt free. For the first time in his life, there were no painful bonds holding him back, no obligations and responsibilities. He had given his heart without restraint to a woman who would guard it with her own, and he felt no fear. None.

Amazing.

He pulled a glass from the cabinet and ran it under the tap. He downed the contents in three long gulps and filled it a second time.

Sipping, he stared out into the gardens, where the moon shone brightly upon the crushed shell path. For a second, he thought he caught movement, but when it didn't reappear, he figured his exhausted mind was playing tricks.

He finished the water and rinsed the glass out in the sink. Glancing out the window one last time, he saw it.

Or rather, he saw her.

With the light of the moon illuminating her new blonde color, he watched Marla walk boldly up to the cottage.

Shit.

He moved quickly, heading for the front door before the woman who'd ruined his life could ring the bell and wake the woman who'd saved him. He'd surprised her, that much he could tell, for she jumped back and lifted a bejeweled hand to her chest.

"Jacob, you nearly gave your poor mama a heart attack."

"Cut the crap, Marla. What the hell are you doing here?"

She dropped the pretense much quicker this time around.

"I want you to know that you haven't seen the last of me,

"I want you to know that you haven't seen the last of me, young man." She shook her finger at him. "You humiliated me and I will *not* tolerate that."

"Save the theatrics. Your threats don't work anymore. Gabe knows about you and he doesn't want anything to do with you. Neither do I, for that matter, so why don't you take your little act back to whatever rock you crawled out of."

Marla's hand cracked across his face so quickly he didn't have a chance to block the blow. Jake wasn't a violent man, but in that moment, he had to draw every ounce of control he possessed to hold himself back.

"You better be careful, Marla. You do that again and you'll regret it," he said dangerously.

"Did you learn to fight back, Jacob?"

Images of his mother shaking and slapping him when he was a child floated unbidden into his mind, and anger seethed inside him.

"Is your little honey inside? What's her name again? Mia? She's a wedding planner, right?"

Jake stilled.

"That's right, sweetie pie. I know all about her. Just like I knew about that little blonde bimbo you married."

"You stay the hell away from Mia," Jake said through clenched teeth.

Marla tapped a finger against her mouth. "Now, why would I want to go and do that?" She smiled coldly. "I wonder what she'd think about that Peeping Tom business you used to favor?"

"You *tied* me to that chair and made me watch while you screwed that guy." Rage and impotent fear paralyzed him as the memory burned through his brain like wildfire.

"I suppose it is a matter of perception." She smiled again. "Of course, Caitlyn didn't think so highly of you after I told her about it."

"What?" he whispered.

"I have to say, she was a little creeped out by the whole thing. Can't say as I blame her. 'Course, Mia is a successful business owner. Image is everything in her line of work."

Jake's control snapped. He grabbed Marla by the shoulders and shoved her against the side of the cottage. "Listen to me, you crazy bitch, you get the hell out of here. Now." He lifted his hands to her throat and squeezed none too gently. "You leave now. You stay away from me and mine, and I won't kill you."

"You won't do it," she wheezed.

He squeezed harder, rage misting his vision, scaring the life out of him, but damn it, he couldn't stop. More than anything, he wanted to kill his mother right now.

"Are you sure you want to take that chance?" he whispered.

There was a long, tense silence. The beast that had risen in Jake was on a tight chain, the links straining and threatening to break.

Finally, Marla shook her head.

Expelling a harsh breath, he released her. "Get out of here."

This time, she didn't make any smart comments, just turned on her heel and ran into the night, away from the cottage. When he was certain she was gone, Jake let out another ragged breath and dropped to his knees.

Oh, Jesus. What had he done?

He held out his hands and stared at them. Hands that he'd nearly used to murder another human being.

What kind of man had he become?

No one knew about Marla's abuse. Not his father and certainly not Gabe. Jake had learned early on that if he provoked his mother enough, that she would take out her anger on him and not his baby brother.

But, after she'd left, and later when he'd become a man, he had recognized Marla's abuse for what it was. It wasn't his fault. He didn't buy into that crap that the abusee turned into an abuser. A person made his own decisions. Jake had made the decision not to harm other people.

Until now.

Perhaps this was why he had pushed people away, never getting close, so as not to tempt fate.

But, maybe whatever sickness was inside of his mother coursed through his own veins. Had it finally been unleashed? Oh, sweet God, what if he hurt Mia?

Jake wasn't willing to take that chance. It would tear him in two, but he wasn't going to gamble on Mia's well being. She loved him, but she'd get over it. She might hate him for it—hell, she'd despise him, but at least she would be safe.

What the hell was he going to tell her? Certainly not the truth. If Caitlyn had been so easily swayed by Marla, how would Mia react to the truth of his abuse? He couldn't stand for her to look at him with disgust. Or worse, pity.

No, the best thing to do was to make a clean break. And if that meant that he crept out of the cottage like a coward, then so be it. He rose and reentered the cottage. He moved quietly as not to wake Mia while he packed his suitcases as quickly as he could.

Grabbing his sketchpad, he scrawled out a note that ensured Mia would hate him, possibly forever.

He had to see her one last time. It was risky, because she might wake up, but he couldn't just leave her, not when he would likely never see her beautiful face again.

He stole into her bedroom. The candle was still going, flickering shadows on the walls. She lay curled on her side, as though she sought him out in sleep. He stood over her for the longest time, memorizing every line of her body, the elegant beauty of her face.

Leaning down, he pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. "I love you," he whispered.

And then he left her.

* * * *

Mia woke feeling wonderfully, deliciously, used.

Gentle sunlight filtered through the gauzy curtains, drawing lazy lines on the bed. Outside, she could hear the cheerful singing of birds and crickets.

Stretching languorously, she felt her nether regions heat up again. She rolled over and reached for Jake, only to encounter the empty space where he'd once lain.

Cold, empty space.

As she rose, intent on finding the man she loved—the man who loved her—she reveled in the tight muscles their marathon lovemaking session had induced. It took a few moments to find her robe, since the sash was hiding behind the bureau. She tightened it and opened the door of the bedroom. "Jake?"

No answer.

She had a pressing urge for the bathroom that preceded the need to find her lover. After taking care of business, she walked into the living room, only to find it empty. She checked her watch. Wow, it was after ten. By nature an early riser, she hadn't slept in this late since high school. Of course, she thought with a licentious grin, she'd had a *very* busy night.

He probably went out for a run, she thought. Or maybe he was begging breakfast off Pearl. Breakfast in bed sounded wonderful, she mused as she began making coffee. She pulled down two mugs and poured a cup for herself, enjoying the hot burn as the coffee slid down her throat.

Mia took the cup with her as she walked down the hall to Jake's bedroom. Maybe he was sketching in there. No, probably not, she decided, opening the door. He liked to do that at the kitchen table.

She flipped on the light and stopped short to see no evidence of Jake anywhere in this room. His ball cap, which had often rested on the bureau, was gone. No biggie, she told herself. Obviously he was wearing it.

But, a trickle of unease teased her spine as she took in the made bed. When she opened the closet, the unease turned into alarm.

His suitcase was missing.

Mia checked the drawers of the bureau and each one of them was as the first: empty. They weren't scheduled to leave until tomorrow.

Maybe he was just preparing?

Mia's gut said no, but she ignored the niggling feeling and went back out into the living room. His sketchpad was no longer on the bar where he'd kept it, nor was his suitcase near the door.

Beginning to panic, she put her mug down and reached for the phone.

And saw the note.

Next to the cordless unit, sat an unlined sheet of paper, likely from Jake's sketchpad. There were words on it, but she couldn't read them for some reason. Why couldn't she see?

It was then Mia realized that a sheen of tears had prevented her from making out the words. She knew without reading his note that he was gone. She stood there staring at

the note he'd so carelessly left, her hands trembling, her body stalling with indecision.

Finally, she bullied herself into reading it.

Mia,

Remember that conversation we had our first night in this cottage? About love being nothing more than a chemical reaction? I realize we were talking about Gabe and Jillian, but I think it applies to us, too. I was wrong. The dust has settled, leaving nothing but mild fondness. Thanks for the good time. It was a real experience.

Jake

Mia had to reread the note three times before it finally sunk in. He'd left her.

Jake had told her loved her last night. They'd lain in bed talking about the future, their future. About the ninety-minute commute from L.A. to San Diego. How they would spend the weekends together when she wasn't working on weddings. They even talked about her moving to San Diego.

God, what a joke.

How could anyone be that cruel? She didn't know him at all. How could she have given her heart to a man who'd stomped it to dust with no regret or care at all?

Well, he'd warned her, hadn't he? Part of her refused to consider it. Part of her desperately wanted to believe it was some big joke. That he would come waltzing in the cottage, a big grin on his handsome face.

But, reality sank in. His suitcases were gone. *He* was gone. She could still smell him on her. Holding the note in her hand, she crumpled to the floor and sobbed.

* * * *

When Mia finally pulled herself together enough to stop weeping, she dressed and went to the main house. No, no one had seen Jake since last night. There was however, a thoughtful note thanking the Tyners for their hospitality tucked in the front door.

Thoughtful, my ass.

Mia ignored the others' stares as she tore through the house, asking anyone and everyone she could find if they'd seen Jake. Still hoping, like a pitiful fool, that he'd made a mistake. That *she'd* made a mistake.

Although loathe to interrupt their time at The Wayfarer, Mia drove to the first inn Gerald Tyner had acquired.

Jillian opened the door to the honeymoon suite, wrapped in a white terrycloth robe, an obvious post-coital glow riding high on her cheeks. "Mia? What's wrong?"

"Have you seen Jake?"

"What? No, I thought he was with you."

"Yeah, well, he's not." She pushed through the door into the gorgeously appointed suite. "Where's Gabe?"

"In the shower. Mia, what in the world is going on?"

Don't you dare start crying again. "He left me, Jilly. He told me he loved me, and then he left me."

Jillian wrapped her arms around Mia and pulled her in close.

"What's going on?" Gabe asked, emerging in a cloud of steam from the bathroom wearing a robe identical to Jilly's...

"Jake's gone," Jillian said.

Mia broke away from her friend and stalked over to Gabe. "Where is he? You two are close. I know he told you where he's going. I need to know. You have to tell me now, Gabe!"

Gabe sent a panicked look at his wife, and then laid an awkward hand on Mia's shoulder. "Hey, let's just calm down a sec, okay? Then we can figure it all out."

"I am calm!" Mia shrieked. "He made love to me and he told me he loved me. We talked about my moving to San Diego so that we could be closer. We talked about having a life. A *life*, goddammit!" The tears were flowing now, no matter how hard she'd tried to stem the tide, but she didn't care. She didn't care about anything other than finding Jake. "Then, I woke up this morning and found this." She lifted her fist, shaking the crumpled note.

Gabe pried it out of her clenched fingers and scanned it. As he read the words his brother had callously written, his brows pinched into a frown. "That's not like Jake," he said.

"That's what I'm saying! Why would he tell me those things, talk about making a future with me, and then leave a note like *that?*"

Gabe ran a hand through his wet hair. "Shit. I don't know. I'm sorry, Mia. I don't have any answers for you." He turned and walked over to the night table. He picked up his cell phone and dialed. "Hey, Jake, it's your brother. Where the hell are you? Mia's worried sick about you, man. Give us a call, okay?" Gabe snapped the phone shut. "Voice mail."

Jillian led Mia over to a chair and urged her to sit. Mia put her face in her hands. "I'm sorry, you guys. I didn't mean to ruin your wedding night—morning, whatever. I'm sorry—"

"Hey," Gabe said. "No apologies necessary. I'm a little worried myself."

The cell phone in Gabe's hand rang. He stared down at the readout, then opened it. "Jake?" he said. "You okay, man?"

Gabe nodded, frowning. He looked over at Mia, who fought the urge to rip the damn phone out of his hand. "Okay, sure, bro'. I'll tell her. Yeah. Take care. Thanks."

Snapping the phone shut again, he leveled Mia with a stare. And her heart dropped like a stone to her feet.

"He's okay," Gabe said. "He wanted me to tell you he's real sorry it had to end up this way, but it's, ah ... it's over."

His words sank in. Not a joke. It was real. Jake had decided sometime last night that a life with her wasn't something he wanted. In fact, he must have found it incredibly unappealing if he'd left in the middle of the night.

She stood. "Okay. Well, thanks. I know now. That's good." She looked at Gabe and Jillian. "I'm going back to the house to finish up the job. I'll see you guys later, okay?"

"Mia..."

Mia held out a hand. "I'm fine." She let out a cold laugh. "Well, I will be anyway."

I hope.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Sixteen

Caitlyn Graham lived in Brentwood, in a twenty-two-room mansion she shared with her producer husband.

Mia called Jake's ex-wife and told her she was a friend of Jake's, deciding to go with the truth and see where it led her.

"Jake Ryan?" Caitlyn asked.

"That'd be him."

"God, I haven't thought about him in years. What's he up to? Still racing cars?"

Two months after the wedding, Mia had managed to finagle the name of Jake's ex-wife from Gabe. After that, it had only been a matter of looking her up in the book.

"He owns his own shop now."

"Hmm," Jake's ex-wife said. "That doesn't surprise me at all. Who are you again?"

"I'm his ... girlfriend. We met on vacation a couple months ago."

Okay, she'd settle for half-truths.

"Things serious between you two?" Caitlyn Graham asked.

Her spidey sense kicked in, and she went with instinct. And lied through her teeth. "Yes, actually. We're thinking about getting married."

The other woman was silent for a several moments. "I wonder if I should be telling you this."

"Telling me what?" Mia asked, trying not to sound too anxious. Resisting the urge to shout, "Tell me! Tell me! Tell me! Spit it out!"

"It's really none of my business..."

"If you think it's important, maybe you should tell me. Of course, I wouldn't want to put you in a bad spot..."

"Well, since you're planning to marry him, I guess it's only fair that I warn you. He, um, let's see, how can I put this?"

How about in plain English, you nitwit?

"He's a Peeping Tom."

"Huh?" Mia asked. Definitely not what I was expecting.

"Yeah, that was my reaction when I first found out. But, his mom—she's really nice. Have you met her yet? Will you tell her I said hello?"

"Uh, sure. Now, what was it you were saying about Jake?"

"Well, Marla—his mother—she came to me one day, because she'd heard we were married. I guess they don't have much of a relationship. She says their dad sort of kidnapped them and moved all over the country so she couldn't be with her little boys. Isn't that terrible?"

Heartbreaking. Now, get to the goddamn point.

"Yeah, terrible," Mia said. Wow, Marla had sure snowed Caitlyn Graham. Mia couldn't help but feel a little grateful. Which was not very nice, but there it was.

"Anyway, I guess Jake used to peep in women's windows and stuff like that. One time, Marla caught him spying on her and her husband while they were ... you know." She cleared her throat delicately.

What a crock.

"Why did she tell you this?" Mia asked.

"I guess she wanted to make sure I knew what I was getting myself into. To protect me." She paused. "To be

honest, it really freaked me out. It was what ultimately ended our marriage."

I'm sure it had nothing to do with all those guys you were screwing.

"I just think you should know, early. You know. Before you get married."

"Well, I really appreciate the warning. Thanks so much."

"What was it that you were calling for?" Caitlyn asked.

"You know? I can't remember! In light of this new discovery, I seemed to have forgotten. Thanks for your time."

Mia slammed down the phone before the other woman could ask any more questions. She laid her head in her hands.

Sandra had sung praise loud enough to cross the country and couples lined up to hire Mia for their weddings. Her baby was in the black. And while she should've been dancing a jig, she felt nothing but irritation and restlessness.

Work, once her saving grace, was now a chore. Seeing happy couples in love, helping them plan the biggest day of their lives rubbed salt in a wound that refused to heal.

During the day, she forgot about Jake—well, tried anyway—long enough to perform the job for which her clients were paying her handsomely. At night, she lay in bed and allowed him to crowd her brain.

Though he'd told Gabe he was fine on that horrible day on Majestic, Mia just couldn't shake the feeling that everything was not *fine*. True, she had only known him for two weeks, but her heart recognized his. He was her mate. She refused to give that up.

Which either made her the world's most pathetic loser or a woman with a nose for the truth. She decided that she needed to know for herself before she could put this whole mess behind her and move on. It had taken her two months to garner the courage, but she'd managed to finagle the name of Jake's ex-wife from Gabe.

And after their conversation, her brain buzzed. She was getting close to something, she could feel it. Something had happened in the middle of their last night together in South Carolina.

Something that had made Jake run. Fast.

Mia didn't know what that something was, but she'd lay odds it had to do with Marla Hastings Ryan. How in the hell was she going to find out? Obviously, Gabe didn't know. Mia didn't buy it for a second that Jake was some kind of Peeping Tom. You could spot those guys a mile away; they usually wore a big sign on their foreheads that read: *Hey, I like to stalk women and paw through their underwear drawers!*

Besides, Jake was not a watcher. He liked to participate and take charge. He was not content to sit on the sidelines. She knew this first hand. She'd wager he'd be totally skeeved out by the idea of peeping in windows.

What in the hell was she going to do now?

As she tapped her fingers impatiently on her desk, it hit her. Mia was going to pay Miz Marla a visit. Provided, of course, she could find her.

* * * *

[&]quot;Boss! You gotta call!"

Jake lifted his head from the engine compartment of a client's 1962 Chevy Impala. Wiping his hand on a shop rag, he walked through the shop and into his back office.

"Jake Ryan."

"Hey, bro'."

"What's up, Gabe? How's married life?"

"Fricking amazing, man. Did you know that I can have sex anytime I want now?"

"Couldn't you do that before?" he asked, wondering why he was having this conversation.

"Well, yeah, but that's not the point."

"What is the point?"

"Oh, right. You're a busy man. Jilly wants you to come to dinner on Saturday night. And she won't take no for an answer."

"Buddy, I really don't think I can."

"I'm serious, brother. She will park her pregnant ass outside your shop until you come. She's been asking for a month. She wants to see you. Plus, I want you to check out our new digs."

Jake closed his eyes and pinched his brow. He'd been successfully avoiding his brother and sister-in-law for two months. Being around them reminded him of Mia, which reminded him of the happiness he'd held in his hand for a brief moment.

But, they were persistent. Jilly wanted Jake in their lives. Family was important to her. "Fine. Want me to bring anything?"

"You can bring some beer or wine. We're having ribs. I just bought this killer barbeque."

While his brother rattled on about his new grill, Jake wished Gabe would just hang up. He wasn't a social person by nature, and his disposition had gotten a hell of a lot surlier in the last two months.

His employees had fast learned to stay out of his way. And he was drinking too much on top of it all.

Now he had to put on a happy face and play nice with his family, so they believed the lie he'd told back in South Carolina.

Wonderful.

* * * *

It took two weeks and a lot of digging, but Mia finally managed to find Marla Hastings Ryan. Apparently, the woman changed residences like underwear. It had been frustratingly difficult to nail her down.

Until two months ago, she'd lived in the Bay area. Before that, Vegas. And the list went on and on. One constant element in her locales was the proximity to California, i.e., Jake and Gabe. Of course, it was easier to blackmail your oldest son if you didn't have to fly cross-country every six months.

Mia traded favors with an old friend who worked at the *Los Angeles Times* to get Marla Ryan's latest address. In Boston, which was as far away from California as you could get without crossing the Atlantic. Interestingly enough, she'd moved right after the wedding. Mia was willing to bet that

whatever had spooked Jake had to do with the sudden, longdistance move.

Mia was taking a huge chance, but she didn't have a choice. Well, she did, but she was going to see this through. With all the new business, she'd hired an assistant and could afford the plane ticket plus the days off. She flew to Boston to have a conversation with Jake's mother.

It was entirely possible that she would come up empty-handed. Boston was a big city and she was looking for one heartless woman in a city filled with millions. In her rented Ford, she found the run-down row house in South Boston through trial and error. She had to stop and ask for directions twice, the first time a wash because she couldn't decipher the gas station attendant's words through his heavy Bostonian accent.

She pulled the car up to the curb and peered through the passenger window. It looked like the rest of the houses on the street; peeling paint, cars up on blocks, trash and debris in the yards. No lights shone in the windows of Marla's house, but Mia tamped down on her disappointment.

She pulled out her notepad and scrawled out a note. Snow fell in thick flakes; heavy eddies that swirled around her as she ran up the front steps. She knocked loudly and hit the bell, not surprised when her calls went unanswered. Mia slipped the note in front door, then dashed back to the rental, intent on heading back to the hotel.

Now all she had to do was wait.

* * * *

Marla didn't call that night. Nor did she make contact the next day. On Thursday, six hours before Mia had to catch her flight back to California, the call came.

"Mia?" Marla asked in her smoker's rasp.

"Yes! Marla, hi. I'm so glad I caught you. Listen, I'm in town for the next couple of hours and I'd really like to talk to you."

"Why?" she asked, obviously suspicious.

"I have some questions, okay? I understand if you don't want to talk to me, but I'd really appreciate it if you could make the time." She would have to go against instinct and be nice if she wanted answers.

"Is Jake with you?" The fear was blatant in her voice.

"Uh, no. To the best of my knowledge, he's in San Diego."

"You're not seeing him?"

Mia sighed. "It's a long story. Look, I'm pressed for time. I've got a flight to catch at five. Can you meet me?"

When the older woman remained silent, Mia added, "I can pay you for your time."

She rattled off an address and hung up.

Progress, Mia thought.

The address Marla gave her belonged to a dive bar called The Blue Lagoon. It bore no resemblance to its lovely name, instead inspiring visions of biker gangs and drug addicts.

Oh, yay.

Mia fingered the pepper spray on her key chain and walked through the snow-packed parking lot filled with rusted pickups and cars. The room was dim when she heaved open the door. Dim, but filled, even at one in the afternoon.

She supposed everyone needed a hobby.

Mia spotted Marla at a booth near the back, but she almost didn't recognize her. No longer blonde, her locks were now dark brown, and she looked as though she'd aged twenty years.

She slid into the booth and offered the woman who'd ruined Jake's life a smile when what she really wanted to do was whack her in the head with her Prada handbag.

"Thanks for meeting me," Mia said.

"You got the money?" Marla took a long drag from her cigarette and blew a stream of blue smoke toward the ceiling.

Mia pulled an envelope stuffed with five twenty-dollar bills out of her purse and slid it across the table. Marla peered inside for a moment, and then, satisfied, slipped it out of sight.

A waitress wearing jeans and a T-shirt so tight they appeared painted on approached their table. "Whaddyah want?"

"I'll take a bottle of Beck's."

She turned and walked away. What amazing customer service.

"You're sure Jake ain't here with you?" Marla asked.

Mia noticed the refined air she'd affected in South Carolina had been replaced with what she suspected was the real Marla Ryan: haggard, mean and money hungry.

"He's in San Diego, like I said."

"Why'd you dump him?" she asked. "He's not good enough for the likes of you?"

Mia thanked the waitress when she delivered her beer and took a sip before answering. "Actually, he dumped me."

Marla's brows lifted. "Really. How interesting."

"Why's that?"

"He just seemed so..." She waved a hand absently. "In love, and all that bullshit."

Mia's heart squeezed.

Marla eyed her as she took another drag. "In fact, he threatened me."

"Threatened you? Why?"

"Said if I came near you, he'd kill me." She shuddered. "Damn near did, as it was."

"What are you talking about?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you, girl? That boy of mine slammed me against the house and damn near choked the life out of me."

"When?" Because that certainly hadn't happened when she'd crashed the rehearsal.

Marla scowled and stamped out her cigarette in the ashtray. Pulling another from the pack, she lit it before answering. "I came back Saturday night to give him a piece of my mind for the way he humiliated me in front of those people." She emphasized those people like she was saying those disgusting pigs.

"In the middle of the night?"

"What?" Marla asked.

"Did you come by in the middle of the night?"

"What the hell's it matter? Yes, it was in the middle of the night."

Which meant it was after he'd told her he loved her.

"So, he tried to choke you?" Mia prompted.

"Yeah, the little shit got strong. Didn't used to be able to fight back like that when he was a little pissant brat."

"Did you beat him, Marla?" The words popped out of her mouth of their own volition.

The older woman took a swig of her drink and eyed her suspiciously. "I didn't *beat* anyone. I *disciplined* my child. You one of those left-wing types who thinks spanking's child abuse?"

There was a difference between a swat on the butt and a slap on the face.

"That boy was always asking for it. Always provoking me, sassing. Nothing but trouble from the day he was born. And that brother of his? Jesus Christ. If I hadn't seen them myself, I'd wonder if he had a set of balls."

Mia tamped down on the white-hot rage that sang through her blood. *She* wanted to strangle Jake's mother. Instead, she asked, "Marla, why did you tell Caitlyn Graham that Jake was a Peeping Tom?"

"Caitlyn Graham?" Marla colored slightly, then paused to drag on her smoke. "You've been a busy girl. I gotta wonder why."

"It's none of your business why. Answer the question."

Marla toyed with the lit cigarette in her hands. "I might be persuaded to answer the question..."

Tired of playing games, Mia demanded, "How much?" "Two hundred."

"I've got one-fifty cash. That's it."

"Guess I don't have the answers you need, then." Screw this. Mia gathered her purse. "Fine."

Marla's hand shot out and she gripped Mia's wrist. "Okay. One-fifty."

Mia slid back in the booth. When Marla held out a hand, Mia said, "Talk first."

Marla considered and then sighed. She knocked back her drink and signaled the waitress. Took her time lighting another cigarette. When the waitress came back with another glass filled with ice and whiskey, Marla didn't spare her a glance.

"Caitlyn Graham," Mia said.

"I'm not proud of this, mind you. But, that boy needed to be taught a lesson. My ex-husband didn't exactly get my motor humming, if you get my meaning. I had a couple of affairs, nothing big, just a little side flings here and there. Thing was, Jacob, he was always threatening to tell his daddy." She took a deep swallow and stared up at the ceiling as though the mysteries of her life's decisions were mapped up there along with the stain of grease and tobacco. "Had to teach that boy a lesson." She shook her head. "Seems like I was always teaching him something. Anyway, I couldn't let him get the upper hand. You let your kids control you, then where the hell are you? Got a couple of brats that don't listen. An embarrassment, that's what."

"What lesson did you teach him, Marla?" Mia asked, her patience on a tight leash. She was ready to reach across the table and shake the information out of the woman.

"I, uh, tied him to a chair next to my bed. Made him watch while I ... you know."

Under the table, Mia's hands curled into fists. She had to sit on them to keep from striking Marla Ryan.

"Then I locked his sorry ass in the closet for a couple of hours, just to be sure he got my meaning."

"Why did he threaten you that night in South Carolina?" Mia asked softly.

She colored again. "I told him I would tell you about it. Change the tune of the story, same way I did with Caitlyn."

"And he tried to choke you when you did that?"

Marla scowled again. "Little bastard."

Mia suspected it had less to do with her and more with the resurrection of a painful memory of abuse that had Jake lunging at his mother. Her heart bled for him.

Mia gathered her purse and stood.

"Hey! We made a deal. You think you can come in here all high and mighty—"

"Shut your mouth," Mia said in a hard voice. "You don't even deserve to speak. You disgust me. You ruined the lives of your sons, of your husband." She glared down at this utter waste of human life. "You're goddamn lucky I didn't wake up that night 'cause you can be sure *I* would've finished the job." She slapped her hand down on the scarred table. "You stay away from Jake and Gabe. Or next time, I'll kill you myself." That last bit was in a whisper, because really, she didn't want anyone to overhear her shelling out death threats.

Mia lifted her head and walked out of the bar. She was so angry she almost wished someone would accost her in the parking lot; then she could use her fists to relieve her rage.

She drove directly to the airport, going through security in a daze, her thoughts as muddled and thick as Georgia mud. With two hours left until her flight, Mia went to the nearest restroom and locked herself in a stall.

And sobbed.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Seventeen

"Damn, you've gotten big, Jilly." Jake stepped inside and kissed his sister-in-law on the cheek.

"You say that to me in six months and I'll clock you."

Jake smiled. The gesture seemed so foreign to him now, his facial muscles felt like they'd atrophied from lack of use. He handed her a bouquet of whatever flowers they'd had in season at the market. He looked around the large, airy kitchen of their new home. "Where's my brother?"

"On the back porch, playing with his new toy."

"This is a nice place."

"Isn't it, though? We got a great deal on it, too. Gabe's been doing some renovations in his spare time." She placed the flowers on the counter and cracked open a window. "Jake's here, sweetie," she called out to her husband.

While Jilly dug around for a vase, Gabe came in through the glass French doors. "Hey, bro'. Wanna see my barbeque? Got the ribs going on it right now. Marinated those babies for two days."

"Gabe, show him the house first. I want him to see the baby's room."

Gabe rolled his eyes behind his wife's back.

"Don't you roll your eyes at me, Gabriel."

He smiled sheepishly, and Jake laughed. Marriage definitely suited his brother.

They lived in a two-story Arts & Crafts Bungalow. The hardwood floors on the lower level were polished to a shine

with area rugs spread out here and there. The living room was open and comfortable, like the kitchen, with bookshelves lining one wall. It reminded him of the Tyner's library, which reminded him, of course, of Mia. He'd have to refuse to acknowledge South Carolina as a U.S. state if he wanted to forget about her for good.

Right. Like that's gonna happen.

Gabe's office was on the lower level. The large space was occupied by motherboards, monitors and stacks of three-ring-binders filled with software programs.

Two bedrooms and a bath comprised the upper level. The nursery was painted a soft yellow, with moons and stars decorating the wall. Jake was surprised to see several of his own charcoal drawings framed and hanging. "Hey," he said softly.

Gabe tucked his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "We hope you don't mind, but Jilly wanted your drawings in here. She figures even if we're having a little girl, she's going to want to be racing or building cars like her Uncle Jake."

Touched, Jake looked at his brother. "Thank you, Gabe. Thanks a lot."

Gabe chuckled awkwardly. "Hell, that's enough of this sentimental bullshit. Let's go look at my new baby."

Jake followed his brother downstairs and into the kitchen. And stopped dead.

Mia stood in the kitchen, a glass of wine in her hand, smiling at Jillian. She wore jeans and a bright red sweater that hugged her curves and brought out the color of her

emerald eyes. Her hair was down, all of those soft, glorious curls cascading down her back.

God, he'd never seen anything better.

She turned and met his eyes, her easy expression slipping. After a moment, she said, "Jake."

"Mia."

"I didn't know you were going to be here tonight." Her gypsy eyes slid to Jilly, who was suddenly busying herself with the flower arrangement. "How are you?"

Terrible. Lonely. Missing you. "I, uh, I'm okay. You?" Her smile was tinged with a hint of sadness. "Fair to middlin'."

He didn't understand why she wasn't tossing her wine in his face and storming out of the house. After the note he'd left and then the phone call to his brother, she should hate him. She was *supposed* to hate him.

God, please don't let her hate me.

"You wanna check out that barbeque?" Gabe asked, trying to break the tension.

"Oh, for God's sake, Gabe. Can't you see they need to talk?" Jillian wiped her hands on a towel and marched over to her husband. "Come on. You can show *me* the damn barbeque. Again."

Gabe and Jillian escaped out onto the porch, leaving Mia and Jake to simmer in awkward silence.

"Would you like a beer?" she asked.

"Yeah."

He moved to get it at the same time she did and they bumped against another. Both of them stilled, Jake's hands

on her slim shoulders, Mia's wide green eyes staring up at him.

"I know about your mother," Mia blurted.

Jake dropped his hands and took a step back, not sure he'd heard her right. "What did you say?"

"She lives in Boston now. I tracked her down and paid her a hundred bucks to tell me what happened that last night in South Carolina."

"Are you crazy?" he asked.

"I never believed you meant what you said in that note. You aren't the kind of man to throw love around lightly. I think you meant it when you told me you loved me." She took a step closer to him and his hands itched to hold her, to crush her to his chest and absorb her into his body. "And I think you *still* love me." She lifted a hand to his face. "I still love you. I always will."

Jake couldn't stop himself; he framed her face with his hands. "Mia." He leaned down and took her mouth gently, slipping his tongue along the seam of her lips. She sighed and let him in, their tongues tangling sweetly. His body burned for her immediately; her effect on him was that strong.

"We can work this out," she murmured against his lips. "It wasn't your fault."

Jake blinked and tried to clear his lust-fogged mind. "What?"

"What your mother did to you. It wasn't your fault. You were just a boy."

He stumbled back. He felt like he'd been blindsided by a two-by-four. "What exactly did you two talk about?"

Mia met his gaze head on. "She told me about when she tied you to the chair."

Jake felt the blood drain from his face. *Oh, God.* When she took another step toward him, he held up a hand. "No. Don't touch me."

Hurt crossed her pretty face and he hated it, *hated* that he was hurting her, but he couldn't stand to have her touch him, to taint her with whatever was inside him.

"We can work it out. We can get you help."

"Help? I tried to kill my mother, Mia!"

"I know," she said softly.

"You want to know why I left you? It wasn't because Marla threatened to make me out to be some perverted voyeur. It was because I wrapped my hands around my mother's neck and nearly strangled her. Don't you get that?"

"Yes, I do. I would—"

"Jesus H. Christ! There's something sick inside me. I'm not going to take the risk of doing that to you someday."

She paled. "What are you talking about?"

"What if I hit you? Or choked you?" he asked her in a ragged whisper.

"You would never hurt me."

"How can you say that? You have no idea what I went through. You don't know what she did to me."

She touched his arm and he shook her off roughly. "No. No, dammit. I can't do it. I won't. I love you, Mia, but I'm not willing to risk your life."

Her pretty green eyes filled with tears. "You're not a killer. Stop talking like this. You need to see someone, talk to someone about what happened to you."

"Don't treat me like a child," he growled. He ran a nervous hand through his hair and backed up another step. "I've got to get out of here."

"Jake, please. I love you. Don't leave me again. Let's work this out. Don't you think we're worth giving it a try?"

He squeezed his eyes shut against the burn of unshed tears. "I can't." He looked at Mia, taking in her beloved, devastated face. "I won't. I'm sorry," he croaked.

"Not as sorry as I am," she said. "You know, someone I know once gave me some excellent advice. 'If you want to feel sorry for yourself, that's one thing. But, don't play the martyr.'" She drew a breath. "Get some help."

Feeling as though he was about to come apart, he fled his brother's house. He tore out of the driveway in his Mustang and left so much rubber in his wake, he was surprised he hadn't lost the tires along with Mia.

* * * *

Jake spent the next week in a drunken stupor.

He called Greg and told him to supervise the shop until further notice. He turned off his cell phone. Bought enough liquor to fill a swimming pool. And drank all of it.

He drank to rid himself of Mia. Of her memory, her taste, the way she felt in his arms. The way he fit so snugly, so perfectly, inside her.

He drank to rid himself of the memory of his mother. Of the slaps and punches, the hours locked in the closets and the attic.

That chair.

Then, when he could no longer recall the contours of Mia's face, the shape of her bright green eyes, he drank to remember. On Saturday, seven days after the scene at Gabe and Jillian's, his brother showed up on his doorstep.

The pounding on his door echoed the rapping in his brain. He peeled open one bleary eye and stared at a half-empty bottle of Jack lying on its side on the carpet. While he tried to figure out how the carpet had ended up on his couch, the pounding became more insistent, and he realized it wasn't his head.

Jake lifted his upper body from the ground and pulled his legs off the sofa. His muscles groaned in protest, and he wondered how long he had been in that position. The last thing he remembered was lying on the couch attempting to draw Mia's face in his inebriated brain.

He dragged his body upwards until he was standing; a difficult enterprise considering the entire world and its contents were spinning wildly. He staggered to the door and after two tries, managed to wrench the damn thing open.

Gabe stood on the porch looking fresh as a daisy. Jake weaved a little, and then decided it was a good idea to lean against the jamb. "And on the seventh day, God created Gabriel."

"Jesus. This is worse than I thought." Gabe pushed past him and stalked into the house.

Jake shut the door and stumbled back to the couch. He leaned down, and then lifted the bottle to his lips. "Ah, the nectar of the gods. Want some?"

"Sweet baby Jesus, it stinks in here. When was the last time you showered, man?"

"Can't remember."

"That's always a good sign. What is it with you lately?"

"Why is everyone suddenly so concerned about me? Who gives a rat's ass? Can't I go on a bender in peace?"

"O-kay, bro'. You're officially cut off."

It was embarrassing how easily his brother was able to remove the bottle from his hands. Gabe walked into the kitchen and started making a hell of a racket. Jake shut his eyes in protest. He must have drifted off, because the next thing he knew, he was being lifted under the arms. "Hey," he protested.

"Help me out, man."

"I don't do dudes."

"Shut up, Jake."

It took considerable effort on both of their parts, but Gabe managed to wrestle Jake into the bathroom where he forced him to take a cold shower. He screamed and hollered the entire time, but Gabe was sober and at the moment, stronger, so Jake endured the icy spray.

After he was dried and dressed, Gabe walked him into the kitchen and sat him down at the table. Moments later, a mug of steaming coffee was placed before him, followed soon after by the order. "Drink this now."

Gabe scared up some toast and made him eat that, too.

Jake glared at his brother. "You're a regular Florence Nightingale, you know that?"

"Cut the crap. I want to know what the hell is up with you."

"Nothing," he said mulishly. "This toast tastes like ass, by the way."

"Call a caterer. What happened with Mia?"

"She didn't tell you?"

"She left right after you did."

Loyal to a fault, his Mia. Imagine, flying all the way to Boston to confront his mother. Hell of a woman. A woman who wanted him to get some help. A woman who loved him and refused to give up on him.

Well, if you want to feel sorry for yourself, that's one thing. But, don't play the martyr.

All of a sudden, something in Jake shifted, widened, as though his soul was splitting into two. He looked at his brother, the man he'd sheltered since his birth. A man who was now married and about to be a father.

And a hell of a lot better off than Jake.

Jake took a sip of his coffee and all of the words, the lies, the truths, the shame of it, came pouring out. He spoke of that horrible day in their parents' bedroom, and the first time Marla reconnected with him. He was like a glass of water that'd sprung a leak; the truth leeching out of him like water trickling to the floor. All the while, his brother sat there listening, clasping his hand.

When he got to his real reason for leaving Mia, Gabe was as insistent as she'd been that it wasn't his fault. "You're not

a violent man under normal circumstances, Jake. Look at what this woman—our *mother*—did to you. I'm surprised you didn't hit her before. And I don't think there's a person out there who'd blame you if you did." Gabe drew a ragged breath and cursed. "Wish I hadn't dumped all that Jack. I could use a stiff one right about now." He ran a hand through his hair. "Why didn't you tell me, Jake? When we were kids? Why didn't you tell Dad?"

Jake leaned back in his chair. "I was afraid she would hurt you, too. She always used that as leverage, which is why I never told Dad. She said if I told anyone, she would hit you, too."

"But, it's been twenty years! Jesus Christ, Jake, the woman left and *still* you said nothing. I always suspected..."

"What?" Jake asked sharply.

"I had a feeling something was going on. I even brought it up to Dad once, but he said you were a boy and you were bruised up from scuffling around. Then he told me to mind my own business. I never brought it up again."

So much for keeping secrets.

His father had known. Jake waited for the crushing blow. He realized Mia had spoken the truth; the past was gone. He didn't need to be a martyr any longer.

"Mia was right about one thing," Jake said sometime later, after he'd sobered up considerably.

"What's that?"

"I think I need to get some help. Talk to ... someone, I don't know, like a therapist. Maybe work some of this bullshit out in me. See if I have what it takes to make her happy."

"I'd say Mia's a smart lady. And you're right. You need to take care of you first." He clapped a hand on Jake's shoulder and looked him in the eye. "But, don't take too long, bro'. Life's too short, and too much shit happens to let it get in the way of love. Trust me on this."

Jake knew his brother was thinking of that evening when he'd discovered Jillian's pregnancy. And he'd worked it out. They were so happy they were stupid with it.

He stared wryly at his baby brother. "When the hell did you get so smart?"

Gabe grinned. "I had a hell of a role model."

Jake took a breath. "About what you said ... about life being too short and not letting Mia go ... I won't. I love her, man. And I want a life with her."

* * * *

Mia sealed the last box in her house with a long strip of packaging tape. She carried it to the door where it sat with the nine others that were waiting to be loaded into the moving van parked in her driveway.

She walked into kitchen and sipped her peppermint mocha, which had *not* given her any extra energy despite the coffee company's claim to the contrary. Then again, she was on something like her fifth, so she was probably approaching burnout.

As she stared at her empty house, the place where she'd started her now thriving business, she felt a prick of sadness. She really loved this house.

Her new house was great, too. With the business she'd picked up in the five months since Gabe and Jilly's wedding, she'd made enough cash to put a sizeable down payment on her own place. The move would be good for her, she decided, even if she was still uncertain. It was a new city, but Mia was good at adjusting.

Well, for the most part, anyway.

She'd kept tabs on Jake through her friends. He'd finally gotten some help. Jilly told her he'd revealed the pattern of abuse to his brother, and at last allowed someone to shoulder the load. He was seeing a therapist, and the help had made him more creative in his work.

At least they had that in common, if nothing else.

Mia had waited for a call. She knew she had to give him time; she wasn't surprised that he hadn't contacted her that first month. But, one month stretched into two and then three and still nothing.

And now, he was doing fabulously.

And Mia was flat-out miserable.

She should be happy for him. Even if his therapy included the realization that she didn't fit into his life, she should feel something.

Damn it, it was hard.

That night in Jilly's kitchen, Mia had been so *sure* that everything would work out. That if he knew he had someone to help him, to lean on, they could muddle through their problems and make a life.

But, she'd blown it. Apparently, admitting to the man she loved—particularly a "man's man" who shouldered the world's

problems—she knew about the beatings he'd sustained as a boy was *not* conducive to inciting trust.

Mia would always love Jake. She knew this instinctually. Her love hadn't lessened over the last five months. If anything, it had grown and multiplied until she was just a big, mushy Hallmark card someone had abandoned to collect dust, forgotten.

Mia shook her head from her reverie. She needed to focus. These last boxes needed loading, and then she had to scrub the house. Tossing her paper cup in the trash, she walked over to the front door and lifted the first box.

She wrestled with the knob to get her door open.

There Jake stood, on her front step, looking so handsome and virile, so *healthy*, her eyes watered. She could smell him; that amazing combination of hot male and spicy aftershave. He'd tucked a black T-shirt into a pair of faded Levi's. He wore a red ball cap backwards, his blue eyes hidden by a pair of wraparound shades.

"Hi."

Mia shifted the box to her hip. "Hi."

A beat or two of uncomfortable silence followed. *This sucks,* Mia thought.

"What are you doing here?" she blurted.

Jake frowned and took off his sunglasses. "I, uh, heard you're moving."

Mia looked pointedly at the U-Haul parked in her driveway, which he couldn't have missed unless he was blind, because his Mustang sat parked behind it.

He nodded. "Yeah. How have you been?"

"Fine," she answered. *Just dandy.* Why was he here? Did he want to start over? *Please, God.*

"How about you?" she asked, wondering if this conversation could get any more awkward.

"Better. I've taken on a few more specialists at the shop, and we've acquired some pretty high-brow clients. Business is booming."

"I know what you mean," Mia said, and dropped the box on the floor. The damn thing was too heavy to hold. "I've got more business than I know what to do with."

"Still planning weddings?"

"Just call me General Mia," she said brightly, her heart pinching.

"You're probably wondering why I'm here." She shrugged.

"I wanted to thank you. For what you said at Gabe's that night, about needing help. You were right. And I was being a martyr. I have my whole life." He shook his head with a chuckle. "But, I'm changing that now." He paused, averted his eyes. "I've been seeing someone."

Mia wasn't sure it was possible for her heart to physically break, but it damn near felt like it was cracking in two. "That's great," she managed. "I'm happy for you."

Am not! Am not! Am not!

Before she did something totally embarrassing like burst out in tears, she hoisted the box up and pushed past him. As she walked to the back of the U-Haul, she heard him curse.

"Mia, wait. Let me help you."

"I don't need your help," she said under her breath, blinking back the sting of tears.

"You're set on moving, huh?"

She straightened and faced him. He was so beautiful it broke her heart all over again. And that some other woman got to enjoy him, to make love to him ... it just wasn't fair.

She wanted to howl at the injustice of it all.

"Any way I can change your mind?"

"I've closed on the new house already, Jake. It's done."

She walked back to the house to retrieve another box. The sooner she got it done, the sooner she could leave with her pride intact.

Well, most of it, anyway.

"Mia, wait!"

She stopped on the front step and turned. He fiddled with his sunglasses. "I need a wedding planner."

Mia's heart sank. Tears pricked the backs of her eyes, and this time, she didn't try to hold them back. "How could you possibly be that cruel?" she whispered.

"Huh?"

"You come over here after three months and tell me you're fine and dandy, and 'oh, by the way, I'm seeing someone,' and now you want *me* to plan your fricking wedding?" She took a step down and drilled him in the chest with her finger. "Are you nuts?"

He stared blankly at her for a moment, and then started laughing. Really hard, down-and-out, wow-this-is-the-funniest-damn-thing-I've-ever-heard laughter.

Mia drew back her fist and punched him in the gut.

His breath left his lungs in an *oof!* He straightened and rubbed his stomach, eyeing her warily. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm laughing because I screwed this up. Royally. When I said I was 'seeing someone,' I meant I was seeing a therapist, like you suggested. And when I said I needed a wedding planner, it was because I want to get married. To you."

Mia blinked. "What?"

Right there on her front lawn, Jake dropped onto one knee and pulled a black velvet box from his pocket. He opened it up and held it out to her. Inside was a princess-cut diamond solitaire the size of Wyoming.

"Mia, I was lost until I found you. I was walking around with half a heart until you tried to bully me out of your seat on an airplane, and my life hasn't been the same since. I've missed you, baby. Bad. I want to marry you. I want to make babies with you."

Mia couldn't speak. She could barely see for all of the tears gathering in her eyes. She lifted her hands to her mouth and managed to nod.

"Yes?" he asked hesitantly.

God, he was adorable. "Yes, Jake."

She sank down on her knees on the lawn and threw her arms around him, breathing in his scent, her tears soaking his T-shirt.

"I love you, Mia," he said hoarsely. "That will never change."

With trembling fingers, he slid the diamond on her finger.

"I love you, Jake. We're going to be so happy."

He leaned in and kissed her, their lips sealing their fate. The kiss went from sweet and gentle to hot and needy within seconds. Before it could burn out of control, Jake leaned back and looked at her.

"Wait. What about the move?"

"What about it? It will actually work better, don't you think? I'll be in San Diego now."

Jake stared at her. "San Diego? As is in California?"
"Yes," she said slowly, wondering what the problem was.

After a moment, Jake chuckled and shook his head. "That little shit."

"Who?"

"My baby brother, that's who. He told me you were moving to Chicago."

She laughed. "Guess he's doing the meddling now, huh?" "We'll let him pretend, anyway."

Jake picked her up in his arms and she squealed. "What are you doing?"

"Baby, it's been five long months since I've been inside you, and I can't wait another five *seconds*. You gotta bed in here?" He glanced around the empty interior of her house.

Mia shook her head and went to work on his throat with her lips and teeth.

He groaned and set her on the kitchen counter. "This'll do."

He stared at her, love shining in his eyes. He took her hand and placed it on his chest. "You are my heart."

Mia took his hand and kissed his palm, then laid it on her heart. "And you are mine."

As Jake gave her that wicked, wild grin of his, she realized that *this* was what life was about. Friends, family and love.

[Back to Table of Contents]

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