

Niall bent to kiss her cheek.

Gossamer light, it was a kiss that asked questions he hadn't been aware of framing. As he straightened, he saw that her eyes were wide with surprise.

"You'll be fine," he said reassuringly.

"Fine?" Romana snapped. "Of course I'll be fine. We'll all be fine. I don't need a Faraday man to tell me that."

In fact, that kiss had been something else. It was the fizz of electricity that had shot through her when she'd kissed him. Somehow he'd got under her skin, and even now her lips burned, throbbed, wanting more.

She took another sip of water to cool them.

She didn't want his reassurance. She refused to think about what she really wanted. It wasn't going to happen, because all he wanted was Claibourne & Faraday. Her store. Her life.

Dear Reader,

Welcome to my brand-new trilogy, BOARDROOM BRIDEGROOMS. Claibourne & Farraday is “the most stylish department store in London.” It’s a store filled with precious and beautiful things from every part of the globe. On the retirement of their father, the three talented Claibourne sisters are all set to take the store into the twenty-first century. Romana as head of public relations. Flora, a designer with an instinct for a “look.” India, the oldest of the sisters and passionate in her love for the store, stepping into her father’s shoes as managing director.

But the Farradays, three dynamic businessmen with plans of their own for Claibourne & Farraday, are determined to take full control of the store back into Farraday hands.

India invites the Farraday cousins to “work-shadow” the sisters in order to find out what it takes to run a department store like Claibourne & Farraday. First, lovely, high-spirited Romana Claibourne takes on the frozen heart of Niall Farraday Macaulay and brings it to meltdown....

With love,

Liz Fielding

To find out more about Liz Fielding, visit her Web site at www.lizfielding.com

BOARDROOM BRIDEGROOMS!

It’s a marriage takeover!

Read all three books in this exciting trilogy by Liz Fielding!

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LIZ FIELDIN>

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PROLOGUE

PRESS RELEASE

CLAIBOURNE & FARRADAY are pleased to announce that Miss India Claibourne is to be appointed Managing Director with immediate effect.
Miss Romana Claibourne and Miss Flora Claibourne have been appointed full board members.

CITY DIARY, LONDON EVENING POST

Has sexual equalitynd would, no doubt, love a chance to get his hands on the Claibourne & Farraday assets. I need you to convince him that it's in *his* best interests to leave them with us.
That the Farradays accepted an invitation to shadow our roles in the company suggests they see it as an information-gathering opportunity. Please be on your guard.
Indie

CHAPTER ONE

ROMANA CLAIBOURNE, juggling a desperately needed carton of her favourite coffee, a small leather overnight bag and a couple of designer carrier bags, searched her handbag for her wallet in a state of rising panic. Not that the panic was entirely due to her missing wallet, or even Niall Farraday Macauley's annoying decision to make his presence felt on today of all days.

In spite of anything her sister might believe, there were worse things in the world than men with Farraday in their name.

Worse even than being late.

That was nothing new—she'd never been early for anything. Yet India's crisp little voice mail message this morning had been very clear on one point. Punctuality was essential. Niall Macauley wanted to discuss shadowing arrangements with her at twelve o'clock sharp and she was to drop everything and be on time. Nothing—not even the opening event in Claibourne & Farraday's annual charity week—was more important. This was a *crisis*.

And this was the good part of her day.

'Sorry...' She threw an apologetic glance at the cab driver. 'I know it's in here somewhere. I had it when I picked up—'

'In your own time, miss,' the man replied, cutting her short. 'I've got all day.'

She glanced up. 'Have you?' Then, realising he was being sarcastic, she pulled a face and redoubled her efforts to find the elusive wallet. She knew she'd had it when she picked up her dress because she'd used her charge card. Then, after she'd got India's message, coffee had seemed essential and she'd needed change to pay for it.

She re-ran the scene in her head. She'd ordered, paid and stuffed the wallet into her pocket...

Her relief was short-lived.

Reaching into the depths of her coat was just one stretch too far and the coffee-carton made an escape bid.

Hitting the pavement, it bounced, spun and then the lid flew off, releasing a hot tide of *latte*. Romana watched as in what seemed like slow-motion it washed over the gleaming, handmade shoes of a passing male before splashing spectacularly up the legs of his trousers.

The shoes, and the legs, came to a halt. The carton was picked up on the point of a finger, 'the owner of the trousers said.

She took the carton. A mistake. It was now wet and sticky and the apology which had leapt instantly to her lips transformed itself into a disgusted, '*Eeeugh*.'

And then—mistake number two—she looked up and nearly dropped the carton again. He was everything a tall, dark stranger could and should be, and for a moment she froze, quite literally lost for words. Apologise. She must apologise. And find out who he was.

Even as she opened her mouth she realised that he was far from being impressed by his unexpected encounter with one of the most sought-after women in London. The man's expression encompassed entire sections of the thesaurus, involving the words "stupid", "blonde" and "woman", and the apology died on her lips.

It didn't matter. He clearly wasn't interested in anything she might have to say. He had already turned and was walking quickly through the gilded portal of Claibourne & Farraday, leaving her on the pavement with her mouth still open.

Niall Macauley was expected, and was whisked up to the penthouse office suite where he handed his coat and umbrella to the receptionist before retreating to the cloakroom to wipe the coffee off his trousers and shoes. Tossing the paper towel in the bin, he glanced at his wrist-watch with irritation. He'd had scarcely enough time to make this appointment, and now that stupid woman had made him late.

What on earth had she been doing, juggling a carton of coffee with enough designer bags to keep a small country out of debt? She couldn't even control her hair.

But it didn't matter. Romana Claibourne was late, too. He declined her secretary's offer of coffee, accepted her invitation to wait in Miss Claibourne's opulent office and crossed to the window, trying not to dwell on a dozen other, more important things he should be doing at that moment.

'Not your day, miss, is it?' the cabby remarked as Romana continued to stare after the man. What a grouch... 'Do you want a receipt?'

'What? Oh, yes. Here—' She handed the man a banknote. 'Keep the change.'

She was still holding the dripping carton. There were no rubbish bins in the street and she was forced to carry the thing at arm's length up to her office.

Her secretary relieved her of the carton, took her bags and her coat. 'I'm expecting a Mr Macauley. I can't spare him more than five minutes so I'm counting on you to rescue me...' she began, then caught the girl's warning look.

'Mr Macauley arrived a couple of minutes ago, Romana,' she murmured. 'He's waiting in your office.'

She spun around and saw a man standing at the window, looking out across the rooftops of London. Oh, knickers! He must have heard her. Great start. She grabbed a tissue, wiped her hands, and abandoned any thought of lipstick repair or getting her hair under control—but then there wasn't enough time in the world for that. She just smoothed her skirt, tuted her office.

Niall Macauley was impressive, at least from the rear. Tall, with perfectly groomed dark hair, and a suit in which every stitch had been placed by hand expensively covering his broad shoulders.

'Mr Macauley?' she said, crossing the office, hand extended in welcome as he turned. 'I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting.' About to explain her lateness—without mentioning coffee—she discovered that her legitimate excuses were redundant and instead found her mouth gaping like a surprised goldfish as he turned to her and took her hand.

There was, she thought, an almost Gothic inevitability that Niall Macauley and the grouch she'd drowned with her coffee should be the same person. It was, after all, the first of April. All Fools' Day.

'Did my secretary offer you...?'

'Coffee?' he completed for her when she faltered. He spoke in a deep bass voice that she knew, just knew, would never be raised above that quiet, controlled level. No matter how provoked. She'd already had an example of his exceptional powers of self-control. 'Thank you, but I believe I've had all the coffee I can handle from you for one day.' As he released her hand, it seemed to Romana that there was just a hint of stickiness.

And the word 'crisis' took on a new depth of meaning.

This man was one of their 'silent partners'? It had never occurred to her to wonder, until recently, why they *were* so silent when their name was over the front door. If she'd thought about them at all, she'd assumed they were too old, or maybe just not interested in working when the dividends from the Claibourne family's industry was more than adequate to sustain three averagely lazy millionaires.

It was only after their father's near fatal heart attack that she and her sisters had discovered the truth. That, far from being sedentary, their partners—the venture capitalist, the banker and the lawyer—were empire-building on their own account.

And now they wanted the Claibourne empire too.

This was the banker. A man who'd already demonstrated that he was cool to freezing point. And it was her task to convince him that she was an efficient businesswoman capable of running a major company. She hadn't made a great start.

It was okay. It would be okay. He'd just caught her on a bad day. Tomorrow she'd be fine. She'd soon make up lost ground, demonstrate her worth. Heck, until she'd taken charge of public relations the store had been about as exciting as a dowager duchess. She'd turned it around. She could handle this.

Right now, though, she was approaching the worst moment in her life, and the last thing she needed was an encounter with Mr Frosty.

'I'm really sorry about the coffee,' she said, attempting to match him with a smile about as cool as it could get and still be a smile. 'I would have apologised if you'd given me the chance.' She waited for him to acknowledge that he should have done that. He didn't. 'Do please send me the a sponge and press...'

She had been trying to help, but instead she had a mental flash of him pacing her office in boxer shorts and blushed. She never blushed. Only when she said something truly stupid. This was clearly a 'truly stupid' moment. She glanced at her watch.

'I have to be somewhere else in about ten minutes, but you're perfectly welcome to use my office while you wait,' she added, just so that he understood she wasn't going to stick around and keep him company. Trouserless.

Any other man of her acquaintance would, by now, be grinning like an idiot and praying that his luck was in. It wouldn't be, but Niall Macaulay wasn't to know that. It made no difference; he still gave her a look that would have chilled a volcano. No, she definitely couldn't compete in the coolness stakes, but at least that was a discernible reaction.

Whether it was better or worse, she couldn't say and she nervously fluffed her hair. It was a 'girly' gesture that men either loved or loathed—and one that she'd thought she'd got well under control. Clearly Mr Macaulay would loathe it. Which made it suddenly seem very attractive. She preferred any reaction, even a negative one, to nothing. So she did it again, this time loading the irritation factor by smiling at him. Not a cool smile this time, but one of those big, come-and-get-me smiles. The kind of smile that would have left the average man sitting up and begging like an eager puppy. Not Mr Macaulay. But then he wasn't average. He was more of just about anything.

He was also ice, through and through.

'Miss Claibourne, I've been asked by my cousin to spend some time shadowing you at work. Assuming, that is, you can spare valuable time from shopping to actually do any.' She followed his gaze, which had come to rest on the pile of designer bags she'd deposited on the sofa.

'Don't knock shopping, Mr Macaulay. Our ancestors invented shopping for fun. It made them rich men and it's the shopping habit that keeps the dividends rolling in.'

'Not for long, surely,' he replied, with a lift of one dark brow, 'if the directors shop elsewhere.'

She picked up her desk diary and began to flip through it—anything but meet that chilly gaze. 'You clearly have a lot to learn if you imagine couturier designers would sell anything but their *prêt-à-porter* lines through a department store. Even one as stylish as Claibourne & Faraday.' She gave a little breath of quiet satisfaction. She felt so much better for that. Then she glanced sideways at him. 'Shall we match diaries? If you can spare valuable time for such trivia?' He didn't look that excited by the prospect. His response was the merest shrug which could have meant anything, 'It's just that I can't see you and your cousins being that keen to "play shop",' she pressed.

'Play shop?' he repeated. 'I'm sorry, I didn't realise you actually served behind the counter.' It was her turn to keep silent while her brain spun wildly. India had warnwe were learning the business. Do any of *you* really know the first thing about running a department store? The retail industry isn't for amateurs.'

'Really?' That at least appeared to amuse him. Or was that a suggestion that he considered her the amateur? If that were so, he did have a lot to learn.

'Really. You might be the world's greatest investment banker, but would you know how many pairs of silk knickers to order for the Christmas market?'

'Would *you*?' he asked.

Oh, yes. It had been a question in the trivia quiz on the store's website, that she'd run in the dead month of February. Before she could have the satisfaction of telling him the number, he continued, 'I'm certain you don't get that closely involved in day-to-day matters. You have department heads and buyers whose job it is to make those decisions.'

Only partly true, as she was sure he knew. 'The buck stops on the top floor, Mr Macaulay. I'm simply making the point that I've been down there on the shop floor. I've worked in every department. I've driven delivery vans—'

'You've even been one of Santa's little helpers, according to the *Evening Post*,' he interrupted. 'How much did you learn from that?'

'Never to do it again,' she offered, with a genuine smile—one she hoped he might accept as a peace-offering. Then maybe they could stop sparring and start over. As equals.

'You didn't know about the agreement, did you?' he responded, bypassing the peace-offering and going straight for the jugular. 'That you'd have to surrender the store when your father retired?'

She was a fraction too long in telling him that he was wrong. While she was still reaching for words that wouldn't make a liar of her, he said, 'I thought not. Your father should have been honest with you all from the outset. It would have been a lot kinder.'

That would have been a first, Romana thought. If ever a man had lived with his head in the sand... 'We have no intention of meddling with the details, you know. We'll employ the best management team available to run the store—'

'*We're* the best management team available,' she retorted. Probably. She had no point of comparison. But they were family. No matter how much a high-flying executive was paid, he would never care in quite the same way. 'Leave it to us and we'll continue to deliver the profits you've enjoyed for years without ever having to lift a finger.'

'And without having any say in what happens. Profits haven't budged in three years. The store is stagnating. It's time for a change,' he announced.

Oh, knickers! The banker had done his homework. She'd bet he could tell to a penny how much they'd made in the last fiscal year. Last week, in all probability.

'The retail market has been difficult all round,' she said. She'd already said way too much. India was right. She should have kept her head down and her mouth shut. he continued, ndsome stage-managed occasion, set up for the purpose. I meant now.'

'*Now?*' she repeated stupidly. 'You mean now, this minute?' She laughed—an unconvincing ha-ha sort of laugh—hoping that he was joking. He didn't join in. Her mistake: the man didn't joke. 'Forgive me. I understood you had a bank to run. I assumed you were a busy man, that you'd want to pick and choose.' She hoped she looked sincere when she said, 'You might prefer not to get involved in everything I do,' because she really meant it. *She* didn't want to be involved in everything she did.

'I'm here. You're here. Let's not make a performance over this. Let's just get on with it.'

He thought she was trying to hide something, and it was very tempting to say yes and let him see for himself, but really it wouldn't be a good start.

'Trust me, you really don't want to shadow me today.'

'Trust me when I say that I really do, Miss Claibourne. If I don't stay with you all the time, how will I ever learn?'

And she'd thought the taxi driver had been sarcastic.

'You don't understand. I'm not—'

'You're not working today?' He glanced at her shopping bags in a manner that suggested he wouldn't need a month to discover everything there was to know about her. His look suggested that he'd had her all weighed up from the moment half a carton of latte had taken the shine off his shoes.

'Yes, but—'

'Hadn't you better tell the driver where you want to go?'

'I really think it might be wiser if I faxed you a list of what I'll be doing for the rest of the month,' she replied firmly, ignoring his suggestion.

'I'm sure it will make interesting reading. But I particularly want to see what you're doing today.'

She doubted that. She really doubted that. A little shiver of fear erupted as a giggle. 'It's very commendable of you to take this so seriously.'

'I take everything seriously. I'm certainly not the kind of man who believes he has nothing left to learn. Even from you,' he added.

'That's very generous of you.' Her smile disguised a level of sarcasm that she rarely stooped to. Could it be catching?

'You *are* working today?' he repeated. 'You do draw a full-time salary?'

He made it sound as if she was somehow cheating. Taking the money but not putting in the work.

'Yes,' she said. 'I draw a full-time salary.' And today she was going to earn every penny, she thought, as she leaned forward to give the cab driver their destination.

India had been surprised that the Farradays had bought her delaying tactic, and it suddenly occurred to Romana that perhaps things weren't quite as simple as haden who could teach them nothing?

Niall Macaulay had already admitted that they wouldn't be running the store, but putting in their own management team. Did they need to prove the Claibourne women incompetent before they could hope to dislodge them from the boardroom?

But they weren't incompetent. So everything was just dandy...

'Miss Claibourne?'

'What? Oh... You want to see how I earn it?' she asked.

'You made a big pitch back there about how hard you all work. How nobody else could do the job.'

'I didn't say nobody. But I don't believe an investment banker could easily step into my shoes.' Not this investment banker, anyway. Public relations required warmth. An ability to smile even when you didn't feel much like it.

'Well, you've got a month to convince me. Perhaps you shouldn't waste the time.'

She glanced at him, startled by the grimness of his tone. The man certainly knew how to bear a grudge. 'You're quite sure about this? You wouldn't like to reconsider?' she asked, offering him a final chance to escape an experience she wouldn't wish on her worst enemy. She'd be happy to make an exception in his case, but she didn't want him crying foul afterwards.

'On the contrary. I'd be interested to see what you do for the fat salary you draw on top of your share of the profits. It's not a problem, is it?'

It was the word 'fat' that sealed his fate. 'Absolutely not,' she said, fastening her seatbelt. 'Be my guest.' And she dug out her cellphone and pressed a fast-dial number. 'Molly, I'm on my way. Make sure there's a spare C&F sweatshirt available.' She eyed the man next to her. 'Forty-four chest?' He made no comment on her estimate, merely regarded her suspiciously through narrowed eyes. 'That'll do. Better make it extra long. And I'll need an extra chair in my box tonight for another guest. Niall Macaulay.' She spelt it out. 'Include him in everything this week, will you? And you'll have to double up all arrangements for the rest of the month. I'll explain when I see you.'

'Tonight?' He was regarding her through narrowed eyes. 'What's happening tonight?'

'A charity gala. Today is the start of a week of JOY, which is why your arrival is so untimely.'

'JOY?' Niall Macaulay looked slightly bemused. 'Should I know what that is?'

'A word for delight, pleasure, merriment?' she offered. 'It's also the name of the Claibourne & Farraday charity support event that we started a couple of years ago. It's a great public relations opportunity,' she added pointedly.

'Oh, yes. I remember reading about it in the annual report.'

What else? 'We do it every year and raise a lot of cash fast! 'It's not exactly free. You wouldn't believe the cost of balloons these days. And sweatshirts. But it's good value for money, especially for the children. Of course we do have a very good public relations department.' She smiled at him, but only because that seemed to annoy him most. 'You didn't think this was a nine-to-five job, did you? I don't keep bank hours, I'm afraid.' Then, 'I'm sorry, will your wife be expecting you home?' She was catching onto this sarcastic lark. She was rather afraid she might get to enjoy it.

'I'm not married, Miss Claibourne,' he replied. 'I haven't been for some time.'

Romana wasn't in the least bit surprised.

CHAPTER TWO

NIALL took out his mobile phone and called his secretary, reorganising his schedule for the rest of the day, dealing with queries that wouldn't wait. At least the evening presented no problems. His date with a report on the steel industry would keep.

Romana was making calls too. One after another. Talking to an endless stream of people involved in the gala, checking last-minute details about flowers and programmes and seating.

It was possible she was attempting to impress him. Or maybe she was simply avoiding conversation. For that, at least, he should be grateful.

Staring out at the passing streets as the driver edged slowly through the city in the heavy midday traffic, he had plenty of time to regret the impulse that had prompted him to follow Romana Claibourne out of the office.

Heaven alone knew that he didn't want to spend a minute in her company that wasn't absolutely necessary. He had precious little time for ditzty blondes at the best of times. He had none at all for those who played at being 'company director' in the little time they could spare from shopping. He glanced at the designer label carrier bags, scattered about her long, narrow feet.

Encased in designer shoes with a price ticket to reflect the label, he had no doubt.

His lip curled at such conspicuous extravagance even while the man in him recognised the beauty of the feet, the slender ankles and the legs to which they were attached. There was a lot of leg to admire—Romana Claibourne clearly didn't believe in hiding her best features.

She was pushing back her wild, thick mane of curls when she realised that he was staring at her. Every instinct warned him to turn away as she paused, querying his look. Instead, he did what he knew would most irritate her. He raised one brow...bored, unimpressed...and turned back to the more interesting view of passing traffic.

A charity gala, no matter how good the cause, wasn't his idea of work. It wasn't even his idea of fun. Such events were right at the bottom of his 'must-do' list. He'd far rather send a cheque and pass on the manufactured glamour.

But he could scarcely complain. She'd given hindless nonsense, but she wasn't his idea of a company director.

She acknowledged his bull's-eye with the slightest nod. 'I'll bear that in mind for next year. Thanks for the tip.'

'There won't be a next year.'

'Well, no, not a bungee-jump, but...' She suddenly realised that he wasn't referring to the bungee-jump, but the imminent eviction of the Claibournes from the boardroom. 'But I'll come up with something equally exciting,' she continued firmly. 'If you'd like to show your own enthusiasm it's not too late to phone your office and drum up some sponsorship yourself. It's for a great cause, and I'm sure there are any number of people who'd pay good money to see you jump a hundred feet from a crane with an elastic band tied to your feet.' Her smile was gratefully sweet as she offered him her phone. 'It's being broadcast on the internet,' she added, 'so they'll be able to watch the whole thing live and get their money's worth.' Then, because she couldn't resist it, 'I'll sponsor you myself.'

He'd just bet she would, but he shook his head. 'I'll stick to the arrangement we made. You do whatever you usually do. I'll observe.' No hardship on the eye, at least. Just on the brain. 'You *are* jumping?'

'One of the Claibournes had to make the opening jump and since India and Flora suddenly discovered pressing appointments elsewhere...' She shrugged. 'It's a pity, though. If I'd known you'd be here I could have billed us both as the opening jump. We've already got the front page of *Celebrity* magazine for next week, but with you arriving out of the blue we could have sold pictures to the financial pages, too.'

'How much have you raised in sponsorship?'

'Personally?' She glanced up at the crane. 'Is it worth risking my neck for fifty-three thousand pounds do you think?'

'Fifty-three thousand pounds?' He was impressed, but he wasn't about to show it. 'That many people want to see you scared to death?'

'Scared to death?' Her eyes widened, making them appear impossibly large.

'Isn't that the point? You make a big thing out of being terrified of heights so your sponsors pay out to hear you scream.'

There was a pause before she said, 'I must make sure to give them value for money. Thanks for reminding me,' she said as her attention was claimed by a young woman bearing a sweatshirt.

'Who's the dishy bloke?'

'Dishy?' Romana didn't have to follow her assistant's avid gaze. Molly could only be talking about Niall. 'He's not dishy.' He was mind-numbingly gorgeous. The kind of man that would have a girl dro'

That summed him up perfectly, and she felt a little tremor somewhere in her midriff that had nothing at all to do with jumping into space. 'Should a married woman be having such thoughts about a man who is not her husband?'

'I'm married, Romana. Not dead.'

'Well, you can put your eyes back in their sockets. He might be good to look at but I promise you he's not nice to know. The man is dour. With a capital D. A real cold fish. His name is Niall Macaulay and he's one of the Farraday clan—'

'I didn't know there were any real live Farradays.'

'Unfortunately they're as real and as live as you can get. This one is a dominant male of the species and he's going to be shadowing my role with the company for the next month.' And marking her out of ten for technique. She didn't think he'd be interested in artistic merit.

'You mean he's the one being squeezed into your box at the gala tonight? You lucky cow! Do you think he'd like some coffee?' she asked hopefully.

'He needs something,' she said, with feeling. 'A charm implant would be a definite improvement. But I'd advise against offering him coffee if you value your life.' She looked up at the crane and shivered. 'One of us has to be at the gala this evening.'

'You'll be fine. Just don't forget to smile for the cameras. It'll probably be the cover picture, so when you put on that sweatshirt make sure the C&F logo is front and centre. I'd stay and help, but I have to meet the caterers at the theatre.'

Smile for the camera? *Smile?*

A teeth-baring grimace was all she could manage as she stared in the mirror and retouched her lipstick for the television camera which would follow her every move once she emerged from the caravan. She'd have bitten it all off long before she reached the jump platform. Not good. She put the lipstick in her pocket, along with her handbag mirror, for a last-minute touch-up. If she could keep her hand sufficiently steady.

She caught herself fluffing her hair. Again. Holding her arms firmly at her sides, she fixed a smile to her lips and emerged from the caravan to be met by the television director.

‘Great,’ she said absently as he ran through what would happen. But her mind was somewhere else. On Niall Macaulay, who was standing a few yards away. It was hard to tell if he was regretting his decision to join her. His expression gave nothing away. ‘Sure you won’t join me, Niall? A Farraday jumping would be the icing on the cake. And it would really prove your commitment.’

The director spun to look at him. ‘Hey, this is great. If you could just change as quickly as you can, Mr Farraday—’

‘The name is Macaulay.’ The director looked confused. ‘Niall Farraday Macaulay. And there are more than enough people around here desperate to fling themselves into space for a good cause. I don’t want to be selfish and hold things up.’ Romana gave him a look that suggested he wasn’t fooling her

Romana was temporarily speechless. It was the second time he’d done that to her today, and she didn’t like it.

‘Niall Farraday Macaulay?’ she asked him as she went to weigh in. ‘You really are called that?’

‘It’s a family tradition. A reminder that our time will come.’

‘Not if I can help it,’ she said. Then turned away to take the card to be handed to the jump team. She took it in fingers that were losing any sense of feeling. Only her mouth was working, running away with her, joking to the camera about getting vertigo standing on a high kerb...

It avoided having to think about what was ahead.

She wasn’t thinking at all, or she might have distracted the photographer from *Celebrity* magazine when he wanted to take a picture of the two of them together. Yet, even numb with terror, the PR side of her brain was saying *Go for it!* This would get people talking, create a buzz...and wasn’t it vital to demonstrate her ability to take advantage of a photo opportunity?

‘Claibourne & Farraday working in partnership for deprived children everywhere,’ she prompted, offering a hand to Niall. Her jumping and him watching. Nothing new there.

He sketched a smile, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. He probably did, she realised, and felt instantly guilty; there might be some perfectly good reason for his lack of good humour. And for not taking part in the jump.

A solid grasp of the principles of gravity and plain good sense, perhaps?

‘Get really close, warm and caring...’ the photographer encouraged. Niall was surprisingly co-operative, putting his arm around her shoulders before she could reconsider. It felt almost shockingly good to be tucked up against him. ‘Lovely...big smile...’

Startled by the direction her thoughts were taking, she glanced up at him. The breeze from the river was whipping up his perfectly cut hair and feathering it across his forehead, and as he smiled to order it was plain that, physically, the man had everything. Style, good looks and a set of teeth any film star would pay a fortune for.

The minute the photographer finished, Niall let his arm drop. The smile, however, remained. A warning that she had indeed made a mistake by drawing attention to his presence. It was something the columnist at *Celebrity* would seize on and speculate about at length. And if his photograph appeared on the front cover India would never forgive her.

‘They’re waiting for you,’ he said, the smile turning into the smallest of frowns as she stepped onto the hoist with legs that didn’t appear to belong to her and made a grab for the safety rail as it began to rise. Had he realised how scared she was? Did it matter?

‘What’s the view like?’ The presenter’s voice in her ear prompted her.

Aware that the mini-cam would be picking up the fact that her eyes were tight shut, she managed to blurt out, ‘I’m saving it for a surprise when I get to the top.’

The sound up from behind and for a moment held her hard against his chest. The warmth was welcome, and for the first time since she’d stepped onto the hoist she felt safe. Then he took a step forward.

A gasp of fright escaped her. ‘Are you going to throw me over?’ She’d intended to whisper, but the microphone attached to her sweatshirt picked up every syllable.

‘Not this time,’ he murmured, his response covered by a burst of laughter. Then he placed her carefully on the edge of the platform, with her toes sticking out into clear space. Her toes didn’t like it, and clawed desperately at the inside of her shoes. Only his hand, still on her shoulder, was keeping her from fainting. Actually, that wasn’t such a bad idea...

‘On the count of three,’ he murmured against her ear. ‘And don’t forget to scream.’

CHAPTER THREE

NIALL watched Romana fly. It was a spectacular jump by any standards. Only an underlying suspicion that she was actually scared rigid had prompted him to bring up the card.

Watching her in the hoist, he'd been sure that she was going to lose it completely. And, no matter who was running the company, he had a financial stake in its image.

He should have known that the fooling around was for the camera. He hadn't been sure until she'd pulled out the lipstick, but her hands had been steady as a rock. It was all just part of the act. She'd certainly put on a show for her sponsors.

All she'd forgotten was the blood-curdling scream.

Someone opened a bottle of champagne and pushed a glass into her hand. Romana didn't dare put it to her mouth. The glass would have shattered against her chattering teeth. She just gripped it tightly as around her the crowd chanted a slow countdown for the next jumper.

For a moment she thought she'd be all right, but just as the next bungee reached its full length and then snapped back her entire stomach relived her own experience. She pushed the glass into the hand of the person standing nearest to her and fled to the caravan so that she could be violently sick in private.

When she'd washed her face, and rinsed her mouth out with water, she realised that her phone, still lying on the chair where she had abandoned it earlier, was ringing.

'Ramona Claibourne.'

It was Molly. 'Are you all right? We've got a television on here, and when I saw you make a run for it I wondered—'

'If breakfast was a mistake? Believe me, it was. Is everyone demanding their money back?' She was still shaking. 'I wouldn't blame them. I couldn't even manage a decent scream. My throat was apparently stuffed with hot rocks.'

'Don't worry about it. You looked terrific. And the jokey stuff was very convincing. I shouldn't think anyone guessed har—unless you can think of something that involves Mr Dour getting his shirt off,' she added hopefully. 'I'd sponsor him for that myself.'

Ramona's mouth dried at the thought. Fortunately there was a sharp rap at the door and she was saved from having to comment.

'It's open,' she called, and turned to see the man himself, with a frown that might have been concern creasing his forehead. She didn't want his concern. 'Come to pay up?' she asked, with a lack of graciousness she regretted the minute he laid a cheque on the table, along with her lipstick and mirror. 'That's very generous,' she said. 'Thank you.'

He gave a small shrug, as if it was nothing. 'Don't let me interrupt your call.'

'Oh, it's just Molly. She saw the jump...' The least said about that the better. 'She's trying to think of some way of topping it. She seems to think you, minus your shirt, would be a good start,' she said, and was assailed by wails of anguish from her assistant. 'Why don't you talk it over with her?' she suggested, handing over her phone. 'And she'll need your address so that she can book you a car for tonight. Six o'clock. Black tie.'

'Six?' he repeated. 'Isn't that a little early for the theatre?'

'I'm working, not having fun. I do all the organising beforehand. I make sure everything goes smoothly throughout the evening, and then I make sure everyone is happy afterwards.'

'While I watch?'

'No one is insisting you come, Niall. You're the one demanding to see what I do every minute of my working day.' Which today would end somewhere past midnight.

She turned away, avoiding a game of 'chicken' to see who could outstare the other. She knew she'd lose. She didn't bother to change back into her suit, but folded it neatly and put it into her bag, then glanced in the mirror as she slid her fingers through her hair in an attempt to tame it.

Her reflection warned her that she was looking less than her best. The colour had leached from her skin, leaving two vivid patches of blusher and making her look like a rag doll. She took a tissue and scrubbed at her cheek-bones. In the meantime, having considered her response and apparently got the message, Niall relayed his address to Molly.

Romana retrieved her phone and her bags and flung open the caravan door.

'Where are you going now?' he asked, following her.

'Why don't you come along and see?' He gave her a look that suggested he was quick learner—he was asking first. 'First I'm going home to hang up my dress. I would have done it earlier, but I had to meet you instead. Then I'm going back to the store to have my hair done,' she told him, walking quickly to the road.

'No lunch?'

She felt i

'Good decision. I can fix most things,' she said, and smiled, 'but an appointment with George on a gala night is not one of them. I'll see you at the theatre.'

'Don't you think it would be more sensible for us to share a car?'

Share? Working with him was going to be difficult enough; she had no intention of extending the time they spent together. 'Is your concern ecological or financial?'

'Neither. I simply thought you could brief me about this evening on the way to the theatre. Speaking of which, you put on quite a performance yourself just now,' he said, keeping step with her and giving her no chance to argue. 'You nearly had me fooled.'

She had no way of telling whether he meant her performance pretending to be scared, or her performance covering up the fact that she was totally terrified. 'Only nearly?'

'How many jumps have you made?'

She smiled as she stopped and turned to hail a passing taxi. There was something very pleasing in the discovery that he wasn't nearly as clever as he thought he was.

'I'll see you at the theatre, Niall,' she said as she climbed aboard, shutting the door firmly behind her.

Romana, swathed in a dark-red salon wrapper, regarded herself in the mirror, searching vainly for some clue as to what about her appearance had so irritated Niall Macaulay.

It couldn't just have been the incident with the coffee that had made him so surly. It had, after all, been an accident. Unfortunate, perhaps, especially in view of the subsequent meeting, but in the travails of life it was nothing. Less than nothing.

A kind man would have said so. A generous man would at the very least have allowed her to apologise before walking away.

But he wasn't kind, or generous. Oh, he'd been quick to cover himself with his offer of sponsorship—quick to pay up, too. Her flash of guilt was immediately squashed. When you had money to spare, that kind of generosity was easy. Her father had always been swift to put his signature on a cheque for birthdays or at Christmas, when all she'd really wanted was for him to hug her, tell her that he loved her. He'd never seemed capable of managing anything quite that difficult.

George appeared in the mirror behind her. 'Big day, Romana,' he said.

'A bad day.' First bungee-jumping. Then a haircut. How much worse could one day get?

'No sacrifice is too great to promote the store.'

'This is as far as I'm prepared to go,' she assured him. The haircut was all part of the week of publicity for the store and had been planned for months. Faced with proving her total commitment, she knew nothing would make a more public statement than cutting her trademark ha

Niall checked out all the restaurants and coffee shops, each very different. There was even a Japanese-style sushi bar, which surprised him. All of them were busy.

He ate his belated lunch in the Buttery, only because it looked the least inspired of the choices available. He gave it perhaps six out of ten. And he was being generous.

Leaving the restaurant, he began to tour the store. It hadn't changed noticeably since the refit in the early twentieth century, and was still steeped in the dated luxury of mahogany and burgundy carpeting that was the store's signature.

The customer base was younger than he'd anticipated, though.

The Claibournes must be doing something right.

Jordan wouldn't want to hear that. He only wanted to know what they were doing wrong.

He first noticed that he had a 'tail' as he wandered through the book department.

It was, he thought, a poor use of expensive selling space. Typical of a department that had once been popular but had outlived its time. It couldn't compete with the new bookstore chains, with their coffee shops and cut prices.

He took her by surprise as he stopped to make a note and the woman following him turned away a little too quickly, drawing attention to herself.

He'd seen Romana's assistant dash into the Buttery. She hadn't acknowledged his presence and he'd assumed she hadn't seen him. It would appear that he was making rather too many assumptions.

In his wide experience of human nature he'd learned to trust first impressions, that glimpse of the unguarded personality before a man or woman realised they were being observed.

Romana Claibourne had climbed out of a taxi hampered by a clutch of carrier bags, in heels a touch too high for good sense and a skirt too short for anyone who anticipated being taken seriously. And with enough hair to stuff a mattress flying in all directions. His first impression had been of a scatty mantrap who wouldn't hesitate to use her looks to get what she wanted.

He didn't doubt for a moment that she usually got it.

Scatty or not, she'd wasted no time in sending a store detective to keep an eye on him, check what he was up to. That took some nerve, he thought as he glanced at his watch and headed for the exit, determined to fit in a couple of hours at his own desk before the gala.

But he really couldn't let her get away with the idea she'd outsmarted him.

Romana was on the point of leaving when Molly caught up with her at the lift.

'I can't stop—'

'You'll want to know about this.' She handed her a shiny burgundy gift-carrier, with Claibourne & Farraday in copperplate gold lettering.

'What is this?'

'The store detective you sent to shadow your shadow just brought this up to the office. Mr find out Macaulay asked her to give it to you with his compliments.'

She groaned. 'He spotted her?'

'Apparently.' The girl was grinning.

'It's not funny, Molly.'

Her giggle suggested otherwise. Romana opened the bag. Nestling inside was a carton of a new scent that had been on display that week.

Summer Shadow

'I do love a man with a sense of humour, don't you?'

'This isn't humour,' Romana snapped. 'The man hasn't got a sense of humour. This is...' She hesitated. She'd been going to say sarcasm. Again. But it was subtler than that. '...irony.'

Niall fastened the studs in his shirt, then picked up his bow-tie. Louise had joked that he'd only married her because he couldn't tie the thing himself.

Four years. She'd been gone four years. Four years of a life so empty that it echoed like an unfurnished room.

He picked up the photograph in the heavy silver frame that stood on the dressing table, lightly touched the lovely face that smiled back at him. Dark, aristocratic—the complete opposite of Romana Claibourne in every way, he told himself.

Then, quite unexpectedly, he found Romana's riveting blue eyes intruding between them. And for a split second he couldn't tell the difference.

Romana fastened the platinum wire choker about her throat and the matching cuffs on her wrists—they were part of the African collection commissioned by Flora after her research trip the previous year, and they'd just gone on sale in the store. The simplicity would offer a stark contrast to the diamonds that

Her Royal Highness would be wearing to the gala; there was absolutely no point in trying to compete.

She'd kept her dress simple too. Understated. Tonight she was one of the supporting cast, ensuring that things ran smoothly behind the scenes while India took centre stage. But she still had to look perfect. Hair, nails, makeup. Everything but the dress a showcase for the store.

Was Niall right about that? Should she be wearing something from their own fashion department? But then it was so much easier for men. A well-cut dinner jacket and a starched shirt was all it took. They could wear the same suit, shirt, cuff-links for years and no one would notice. But still...

She'd worked so hard on building a fresh, lively new image for the store. Still had so much to do. For the first time she seriously began to consider the possibility of losing it. And how much that would hurt. She could not let that happen.

She picked up the scent Niall had sent her and wondered if she'd underestimated the man. Not intellectually. She didn't opaque glass container. Cool as Niall Macaulay. She found herself smiling. Whatever else he was, when it came to making a point, the man wasn't cheap.

And not always cold, she thought, remembering how warm and safe she'd felt with his arm about her. How, just for a moment, she'd forgotten that she was scared to death.

A ring on the doorbell brought her back to reality and she dropped the scent as if burned, scarcely believing that she'd used it.

The reality was that Niall Macaulay was the enemy, plotting to claim Claibourne & Farraday for his own. As she picked up her wrap and her bag and headed for the door, she said out loud, 'It isn't going to happen.'

She wasn't going to let it happen.

CHAPTER FOUR

NIALL crossed the cordoned-off section of pavement where the television camera was already set up and the paparazzi were already camped out. No one took any notice of him. He was too early to be anyone interesting.

He showed the pass Molly had entrusted to the driver of the car sent to collect him and was admitted to the theatre. Every pillar in the foyer was entwined from floor to ceiling with flowers and tiny white lights, a triumph of the florist's art. And centre stage, exactly where he'd expected her to be, was Romana Claibourne, directing the positioning of a display board.

She was wearing a simple, unadorned figure-hugging dress of dark blue satin, a miracle of tailoring that clung to her curves without any visible means of support. It didn't need adornment. Stunning in its simplicity, its style, it was the kind of dress designed to make a man long to get his hands on it—and the figure it so inadequately concealed.

A man who'd lived in a sexual limbo, unresponsive to even the most seductive advances since the death of the woman he'd loved, he found his unexpectedly earthy response to Romana Claibourne's volatile charms deeply shocking.

And it wasn't just the figure-hugging dress but her hair that claimed his attention. The wild—and, to him, unappealing—mane had gone, and now a tumble of tiny curls framed her face, curling onto the nape of her long and very beautiful neck. She'd highlighted its exposure with a choker made from dozens of thin strands of platinum wire. It gave her the appearance of some African queen.

She had been transformed from a ditz-looking blonde he'd have crossed the road to avoid into the most stunning young woman. A man, if he didn't have a care, could lose his head. And his heart.

He took an instinctive step backward, as if the thought threatened him in some way. How could it? He didn't have a heart to lose. He'd given it without reservation to the only woman he would ever love.

But the men struggling to place the heavy boards exactly where she wanted them appeared to have lost theirs to Romana, falling over themselves to please her as she flattered and flirted with them.

He stayed where he was for a while, watching as she had them move t

'Yes, Molly's done a fine job. India, may I introduce Niall Farraday Macaulay? He's begun the arduous task of shadowing me, as you can see.'

India Claibourne, taller than her sister, with her dark hair perfectly cut in a sleek bob, was quite unlike Romana. Turning to him now with a cool smile, she offered her hand briefly. 'You're very keen, Mr Macaulay.' Despite the polite smile she was unable to disguise the edge in her voice.

'I wouldn't have put it quite like that, Miss Claibourne. Romana explained that her job isn't confined to the hours between nine and five. I'm making every effort to be fair.'

'None of us work nine to five—as you and your partners will discover if you can keep up,' she said crisply, before turning away as someone claimed her attention.

He watched her for a moment before turning back to Romana. 'No one would take the two of you for sisters,' he said. 'She's not a bit like you.'

'Not a bit,' she agreed. 'But then we have different mothers.' She removed her arm from his, lifting her smooth pale shoulders in a barely perceptible shrug. 'We all have different mothers.' Then, 'Sorry, Niall.'

'Sorry? What for?'

'She's the one with brains, class and style. I'm the one with too much hair and an out of control coffee-cup.'

She'd summed up his first impression of her in a sentence. It irritated him that she could see through him so easily, that he'd let his prejudice show.

'You've dealt with the hair,' he said.

She shrugged. 'Just a public relations exercise on behalf of our new stylist, Niall. I'm a walking advertisement for the store.' She touched her necklace. 'This is part of a new range commissioned by Flora. And even the scent is our new line. I'm afraid you picked the wrong sister.'

He caught a discordant undertone in the teasing note of her voice. Did the youngest Claibourne feel overshadowed by her clever and glamorous sibling? Was that just the tiniest hint of an inferiority complex?

'On the whole I think not. I'm sure India is best left to Jordan. I wouldn't have missed all this fun for the world.'

'Fun!' She gave him a sharp look, her brows raised in surprise.

'Isn't it meant to be fun?' And he smiled. She wasn't the only one capable of teasing. The only surprising thing about it was that he'd thought he'd forgotten how.

Romana sa stunning presence, who could turn a woman's head without raising a sweat. A man it would give her enormous pleasure to bring to his knees and force to admit that she was his equal. She'd been so sure she had the man taped. And then, in a heartbeat, he'd overthrown all her opinions by telling her about his wife.

'What's he *after*?' India demanded.

'What? Oh... ' Romana was certain of only one thing. That Niall Macaulay had no interest in running a department store, no matter how grand it was. Since she preferred to be driven by someone whose mind was entirely on the task, she wasn't about to tell her sister that. Instead she said, 'Please, Indie! Keep your eyes on the road. And slow down!'

India glanced at her. 'What's up with you this morning?'

'Nothing.' Just a firm belief that she'd lived dangerously enough for one week. 'I didn't get much sleep last night, that's all.'

India glanced at her again, this time with sympathy. 'I haven't slept properly since the lawyers dropped the "golden share" bombshell. So, tell me, what happened last night?'

'Last night? Nothing happened last night!' As her sister's head swivelled, her 'trouble' antennae now on full alert, Romana realised she'd said it too quickly, too emphatically.

'Not so much as a dropped tray. I was just too wound up to sleep. Or tense, maybe. I seemed to spend the entire night reliving that moment when I jumped into space. Bouncing up and down.' She felt queasy just thinking about it. Which served her right for being economical with the truth.

'You didn't have to do it, Ro.'

'Didn't I?' She shrugged. 'Maybe not. It made all the newspapers this morning, though. Even the broadsheets.'

'I saw. It would have been quite brilliant if it hadn't been for Niall Macaulay with his arm around your shoulders under the headline "Claibourne and Farraday Jump for JOY". Whatever were you thinking about?'

'I thought I'd impress him with my PR skills. As you said, it made all the newspapers.'

'It provoked speculation about the Farradays in the morning papers,' India grumbled. 'Made them noticeable. I don't even want to hear that name, Romana. I certainly don't want to read it.'

'It's difficult to avoid,' she said, trying to make light of it, trying not to remember the way she'd felt when he'd stood at her side, her body pressed tightly against his. 'Since it's over the front door.'

'Not for much longer. Once this nonsense is sorted I'm going to rebrand the store and change the name to Claibourne's.' She turned to Romana. 'Sharp, snappy and modern. What do you think?'

Romana stared at her sister's determined profile and realised she'd had this all worked out. She'd probably an involuntary mew of delayed embarrassment.

Her sister glanced at her. 'What?'

'Nothing. Just something in my throat.' She made a point of clearing it.

At least she wouldn't have to face him this morning. She'd never got around to telling him the location of the adventure playground they were opening. And he hadn't asked. Presumably he didn't find the prospect of twenty or so sets of sticky fingers grabbing at his perfectly creased trousers especially appealing.

Smart man, she thought as India turned into the car park, slotting her Mercedes coupé between a black Aston Martin convertible and the Mayora Rolls. The guests were prompt, at least.

Maybe Niall would give the celebrity auction a miss, too. He hadn't looked too impressed by the idea, and he must have pressing concerns of his own to deal with. There was no way he could spend every minute of the working day at her back. Which should have been comforting. But oddly wasn't. His ascerbic remarks seemed to set her up, give life an edge...

She left India talking to a group of local VIPs and headed for the big log cabin built to provide a warm, safe environment for indoor play. Today it was also stacked with supplies of free goodies, including the sweatshirts so despised by Niall, and tenanted by the caterers booked to provide refreshments for both adults and children.

Molly was already there with some of her staff, making sure that the C&F flags were flying the right way up and the banner was straight. She'd also grabbed all spare hands to fix bunches of balloons to anything that was fastened down. One of the spare hands, she realised—a fraction too late to get her face under control—belonged to Niall Macaulay. No prizes for guessing who'd come in the Aston, then. Dark, dangerous and sexy, it suited him down to the ground. He straightened as she approached.

'Niall, I didn't expect to see you here.'

'I've been here since ten-thirty—which, according to the schedule, is when you should have arrived.'

'Blame India,' Molly said. And from behind Niall's back she winked. 'She's such a sedate driver. Nothing will persuade her to go over fifty, even on the motor-way.'

Romana pulled her lips hard back against her teeth to stop herself from breaking out in hysterical laughter. Whether at Molly's outrageous lie or at the sight of Niall wearing jeans and a Claibourne & Farraday sweatshirt.

The jeans, she couldn't help but notice, clung to his thighs in the most photogenic manner, and his hair looked as if it had been recently combed with his fingers. Nothing could have been further from the image that had so impressed itself upon her only twenty-four hours earlier.

'Schedule?' she asked, forcing herself to keep her mind on the job. 'What schedule? I didn't even give you the location of the playground. I don't believe you actually asked...'

Niall wasn't fooled. She'd hoped to evade him this morning. He didn't blame her, but this g

'Problem?'

She bit back an expletive as Niall crouched down beside her. 'No, I do this for fun.'

'Oh, right.' He made a move to go. 'I'll leave you to it, then—'

'No!' She instinctively put out her hand, grasping his warm wrist to keep him at her side. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap. The tap came off in the caterer's hand.' The sudden quiet at least assured her that the water had stopped gushing all over the kitchen. She realised that she was gripping his wrist like a drowning woman clinging to a life raft. 'Niall...about last night.' She expected him to say, Forget it. You were tired. Something like that. He didn't say a word. 'I shouldn't have snapped at you when I arrived. I was just...well, I felt...'

'Embarrassed?'

'Yes. I don't normally fall asleep when someone asks me to supper.'

'I'm sure you were tired.'

That might have done the trick if he hadn't made it sound less like reassurance and more as if she'd been living it up instead of working day and night to make the JOY campaign a huge success.

'I've been working long hours,' she retaliated defensively. Then, because this was supposed to be an apology, she tried again. 'And I shouldn't have lied about the fashion show. I just didn't think you'd want to...' She faltered. It was so much easier to say exactly what she thought when she wasn't thinking.

'Want to shadow you at a fashion show?'

'No. At least not that fashion show. I didn't want to...'

'Bring up the past?'

'I don't suppose it ever goes away, does it?'

'No.' Then, 'Did you know you snore? Very gently. Like a little piglet...'

She snatched her hand back, unravelled her soaking sweatshirt from around the stopcock.

'What is it about stopcocks?' she demanded, returning to the safer subject of plumbing. 'Do plumbers get a kick out of tightening them to immovability, do you suppose? Or is it just to guarantee that feeble women have to pay their outrageous call-out charges?'

'Sound business practice—if you're a plumber,' he said. 'I'll find a mop.' Niall straightened, so that she was left with a full-frontal view of his denim-clad thighs. 'And a bucket.' She backed carefully out of the sink-unit cupboard, trying not to cause a wave, and stood up. 'You get out of those wet things.'

'For goodness' sake, Niall, a bit of water won't kill me.' She started opening cupboards, looking for the mop.

'Here, take this,' he said, pulling his sweatshirt ovody, and wrap it about her.

'I'm not fussing. Trust me on this, Romana. You really need to get out of those wet things. Now.' And, pushing the sweatshirt into her hands, he backed her in the direction of the cloakroom.

'But—'

'But nothing. I may not know a lot about PR, but you can safely leave me to deal with a flooded floor.'

CHAPTER SIX

ROMANA deeply resented Niall's high-handedness, but she didn't have time to argue so she took the sweatshirt and retreated through the lobby and into the Ladies'.

Then she turned and faced her reflection in the mirror.

And groaned.

Her white silk shirt was soaked through and transparent. As was the lace bra beneath it. She might as well have been naked.

She knew she should be grateful that Niall hadn't just left her to find out for herself when she opened the pages of *Celebrity* magazine, because the photographer wouldn't have missed an opportunity like that. He'd have made a great story out of 'How Romana Saved the Day'. And she'd have had to just grin and—she pulled a face—bear it.

She stripped off her blouse and bra, rolled them up and stuffed them into her bag. Then she dried herself and her hair, which had taken a full-frontal soaking before she'd been able to get beneath the sink. Only then did she pull on Niall's sweatshirt.

It felt soft and warm against her skin, and it smelled good. There was leather and fresh air and something indefinable that was Niall Macaulay. She didn't have time to analyse it, though. The caterers needed the kitchen. So she flung open the door, prepared to resume battle with the mop.

It wasn't necessary. Niall had used a wet-and-dry vacuum to suck up the water. The floor was dry. Disaster averted. He wasn't even breathing hard. She muttered something short and scatological beneath her breath.

'Okay?' he said, straightening from the cupboard where he was stowing the machine.

'Er, yes. Thank you. You've done a great job. And thanks for this,' she said, pulling at the front of the sweatshirt.

'My pleasure.'

'I don't doubt it.' She wasn't usually coy, or given to blushing, but she really wished she hadn't said that. Looking around, anywhere but at him, she quickly went on, 'I don't know where Molly's girls have disappeared to.'

'Maybe they didn't want to get their feet wet.' The corner of his mouth kinked in the suggestion of a smile.

'While you're getting used to

'We're three dangerous ladies,' she replied sharply. 'Warn your partners.' Then, 'I'd better go and let the caterers know that it's safe to return.'

'Leave it a minute or two while I fix the tap.'

'You can do that?'

'Watch and learn,' he told her. Just as she'd advised him. Then, 'You learn fast when you live in an old house. Something's always coming away in your hand.'

'Oh, right.' She tucked her damp curls behind her ears. 'Well, I'd better go and make sure nothing else has gone wrong,' she said. She turned in the doorway. He was already bent over the sink but she couldn't leave it like that. 'Thanks for your help,' she said again. And, because she knew she'd been churlish, 'This has to be above and beyond the call of shadowdom.'

Niall straightened, and all trace of a smile had disappeared. 'Just what did you expect, Romana? That I'd stand back and watch you struggle? Make notes, perhaps? Award you marks out of ten for the way you handled the situation? The speed with which you reacted? Taking points off for bad language?'

'Of course not!' She looked shocked at his angry response. He was rather shocked himself. Shocked that she could have thought him so cold. He hadn't used to be cold. 'I didn't mean—'

'Didn't you? Those kids are more important than our petty squabbles. A lot more important than faulty plumbing fixing,' he said, and meant it. But it didn't change anything else. 'Of course, if it had happened in the store—' he shrugged '—I'd be less inclined to overlook the matter.'

'I see. So why aren't you there with a team of surveyors, checking the maintenance records? Why are you here at a very small, very local adventure playground for special-needs children?'

She had a point. He wasn't learning anything about running a national institution out here in the sticks. But he was learning a lot about Romana Claibourne. None of which Jordan would want to hear.

'Getting you out of a fix?' he offered.

'Romana, I've got to get back to town. Legal stuff.' India glanced in the direction of Niall Macaulay, who was talking to Molly. Then, 'Was he impressed, do you think?'

'Impressed?' He put out his hand and touched Molly's arm, smiling as he said goodbye, and Romana felt a sharp stab of something very like jealousy at the easy manner between them.

'Romana?'

'What? Oh... ' She dragged her thoughts back from the brink of that particular no-go area and decided that this was not a good moment to tell her sister how he'd saved the day. There never would be a good moment... 'He's hardly likely to say so, is he?'

'I suppose not,' India

She was so utterly female, he thought. Her curves soft and inviting. His mind filled in the silk of her skin beneath his hand and his body responded with an urgency that left him gasping.

He realised she was looking up at him, a tiny frown creasing the space between her vivid eyes, as if she was waiting for a reply to something she'd said.

'Sorry, what did you say?'

'That it's not compulsory. Owning a car.'

'Compulsory?' He was stunned at the way his mind was running, the fantasies it was conjuring up from nowhere, as if Louise had never existed. 'Oh, no. I just assumed a smart little town car from Daddy would have been parked at the doorstep for your seventeenth birthday,' he said. 'Something small and sexy. In lipstick-pink.' She looked great in pink lipstick. Though she hadn't retouched it since she'd arrived this morning.

Her soft, pouting lips looked great without it, he decided. And discovered that such thoughts were no help at all.

'Oh, I see. One of those important milestones in growing up. Sex for my sixteenth birthday, a car for my seventeenth and a drink for my eighteenth.'

'I didn't say that.' But he'd implied it. He shouldn't be having this conversation. He shouldn't have come today. This wasn't shadowing; it had nothing to do with business.

She shrugged. 'It's always seemed a rather odd arrangement of priorities to me.'

'I imagine it's more a question of bowing to the inevitable.'

'You think so?' Her lips tucked up in a tiny, catlike smile. 'Oh, well, two out of three isn't bad.'

Oh, no, he wasn't going there. He didn't even want to think about that. 'Well, as you say, it's not obligatory.' And he started the car.

Which two?

'Of course I do have a driver's licence. Somewhere. And you're right about the car—except that it was red, not pink—but I've lived in London all my life. Driving in the city is a layer of stress I can do without.'

'Are you telling me you sent it back?' He reversed out of his parking space and headed for the road.

'Of course not. That would have been ungracious. I gave it to someone who actually needed a car.'

He glanced at her. She had this knack of saying and doing things to make him look at her. 'Your father didn't object?'

'Why should he? It was my car.' She was shaking her fingers through her curls in a vain attempt to get them back in some kind of order. 'He didn't say that level. On any level. This was business, he reminded himself. Just business.'

'Well, that's a refreshingly different attitude,' he said.

She took out a compact and retouched her lipstick. 'You're not going to try and convert me?' she asked, glancing at him sideways through ridiculously long lashes, and he suddenly caught on to the 'girly' stuff. It was deliberate, he realised. She did it when she wanted to annoy him.

'Why would I do that?' he asked, deciding that a little payback was in order. 'One less woman on the roads can only be a matter for rejoicing.'

She pulled a face. 'I was beginning to think you were thawing into a human being, Niall Macaulay.'

He thought meltdown was probably a closer analogy. He might be naturally immune to the sex-kitten image. But make that a sex kitten with brains, charm, a steely core of determination to win at any cost...

'Don't let the jeans fool you.'

She glanced across at them, her gaze lingering for a moment before she said, 'I like the jeans.'

Never had he felt so self-conscious about what he was wearing, but, since that was clearly her aim, he resisted the urge to reply in kind and they drove in silence until he indicated left at an approaching junction.

'Where are we going?'

'To get lunch,' Niall replied. 'I've got a table at the Weston Arms.'

'You don't mean that place down by the river?'

'Don't I?'

'I do hope not. Look at us!' And quite suddenly she laughed. A soft, throaty chuckle that would have melted permafrost. 'Jeans, an open-necked shirt and enough sticky fingerprints to set up a glue factory. And that's just you.' She brushed her hand over her trousers. 'And look at these poor things!' He tried very hard not to. He failed. The fine linen had dried out quickly enough, but it was now creased, with grubby patches on the knees. 'And my hair.'

'It doesn't look any different to me.' Not true. Her wild tumble of curls had been thoroughly tamed by the hairdresser for the previous night's gala. His efforts hadn't survived her doze on his sofa, and the soaking had finished the job, so that it now curled softly about her ears and into the enticing hollow at the nape of her neck.

'Forget it, Niall. They wouldn't let either of us inside the front door.'

He jerked his mind back from the void.

'You may have a point.' Lunch in a romantic riverside restaurant was the last thing he should be contemplating. Molly was one tricky lady.

'There's no "may" about it. Besides, I don't have time to do lunch at the Weston full justice. It's a leisurely occasion today.'

He refused to bite. He wasn't going to the Weston with her now or at any other time. 'Maybe you'd better call and cancel the reservation.' He indicated the car-phone. After she'd done that, he said, 'Have you any idea where we might eat without causing eyebrows to be lifted and noses to wrinkle in disdain?'

'There's a drive-thru burger place by the next roundabout.'

'So?'

She grinned. 'So, after this morning I crave the artery-hardening comfort of a double-decker cheeseburger with large fries.'

'Followed by the nerve-jangling caffeine high of a large cola, no doubt?'

'Total bliss. Lead me to it.'

'I don't know about bliss, but I guess it beats making polite small talk over starched linen.'

'Polite?' She feigned surprise. 'You'd planned on being polite? Maybe I should have taken the restaurant option after all.'

'Too late,' he said, turning into the drive-thru. He stopped by the window, placed their order, paid, and then, after picking up the food, pulled into a parking bay so that they could eat.

'Well, this is different,' he said, opening the brown paper sack and handing Romana her lunch.

She opened the box containing her burger, picked it up and then, licking at some sauce that had dribbled onto her finger, said, 'There's a lot to be said for fast food. I'd have been chewing through the table leg by the time we'd been served at the Weston...fine restaurant though it is.' As she bit into the bun everything oozed out of the sides, involving a lot more finger-licking. 'Oh, yes...This is soooo good.'

There was a natural earthiness about her that was utterly compelling, and Niall found it an effort to drag his gaze from her fingers. She had tiny hands, slender fingers, nails painted the same vivid pink as her lips. No rings. Not even for fun. Some mayonnaise dribbled down her thumb and it was all he could do to restrain himself from taking her hand and sucking it clean.

'Maybe we could try something more civilised after the fashion show?' he suggested. 'Maybe, since we'll be at the Savoy, we could have supper in the grill?'

'You're a glutton for punishment.' She glanced sideways at him. 'Don't you think you'll have had enough of me by then?'

'Maybe you have other plans?' he enquired, sidestepping the question of just how much of her company he could take and at the same time offering her a graceful get-out. Or the chance to show that she was running scared. She took neither.

'You've got to be kidding. I haven't any time to spare for a social life this week. with my face in the food.' She still wanted to get to know him better, find out what made him tick. What he was really after... She wouldn't do that in some anonymous restaurant where, with the table between them, he could keep her at a distance both physically and mentally. 'I really would like to see the rest of your house some time, though.'

'You're suggesting we try supper again?'

He couldn't resist reminding her of that, could he?

'Er... I don't think so—' Romana caught sight of the dashboard clock and gave a little yelp. 'We have to go.' She stuffed the remains of their impromptu picnic into the brown paper sack, sucked the sauce off her thumb and wiped her hands on a paper napkin. 'I'll just get rid of this.'

'Wait.' She turned to take the napkin he was holding, but instead he leaned towards her and, catching the back of her head in his palm, gently wiped the corner of her mouth with it. Then he turned her chin with the tips of his fingers and did it again on the other side.

For a moment his stone-grey eyes seemed to soften, warm, become the eyes she'd seen as he'd woken her last night—in the split second before he'd reverted to the iceman. She caught her breath, held it as the look went on, and on until she was certain that he was going to kiss her. Her lips heated

up and she knew she wanted him to kiss her. Instead he released her chin and held up the napkin between two long, slender fingers. 'Mayo,' he said, before tucking the napkin into the bag.

Romana scrambled out of the car and dumped the bag in the nearest bin. Mayo! She took a deep breath—another mistake since, instead of a head-clearing blast, she filled her lungs with air tainted by the smell of burgers and traffic fumes from the nearby dual carriageway.

How could this get any worse? She'd thought he was going to kiss her—worse, had wanted him to kiss her—when all he'd been doing was mopping up the mayo that had squidged all over her face. The second time that day he'd stopped her from looking stupid.

And what had he seen in her eyes?

A reflection of what she'd seen in his?

She hadn't imagined that. And the thought made her skin prickle with excitement.

She returned to the car, concentrated on fastening her seatbelt as Niall started the engine, looking anywhere but at him. Then, as he began to move off, she said, 'I'd advise putting the top down.'

'It's not exactly mid-summer.'

'No, but it's fine and dry. Of course if you're happy for your car to smell of burgers and fries for the next week...' She shrugged. Why should she worry?

She resisted the urge to rub at her cheek. Scrub away the stirring sensation where he'd touched her. *Mayo!* No wonder he'd changed his mind about that kiss. As she let slip an involuntary mew of embarrassment, Niall glanced at her, and of his day and find her there. He'd wake her and they'd make love and then make plans for the rest of their life while they had a late supper. He'd had nearly a year of that...

He'd anticipated spending the rest of life doing that.

That was the only reason it had been in his head when he'd woken Romana, why taking her to bed had seemed such a great idea. The memories. It wasn't personal. It couldn't be personal. Yet just remembering the moment was enough to stir confused guilt-engendering longings, and he raised the back of his hand to his mouth in an attempt to cool it.

He'd come within a heartbeat of kissing her. She'd sat beside him in the car, looked at him with her lips softly parted, waiting for him to kiss her.

With the heat of her lips still on his, he found himself wishing he had.

A woman wearing the burgundy and gold uniform of a store employee paused on her way out. 'That's a private lift. It's just for the offices,' she said helpfully. 'You'll find the store lifts around the corner.'

He nodded his thanks and dragged his mind back into line. Romana was not Louise. Nothing like her. Never would be. And this wasn't a social event; something she seemed to have little difficulty in remembering. Unlike him. But then she had a lot to lose, which tended to concentrate the mind.

Under normal circumstances the enormity of the prize would have kept his own mind fully focused. But this wasn't normal by any standards. It certainly wasn't the way he was accustomed to doing business. He usually conducted business at a distance.

He'd just have to make good use of his time. No business was perfect; he'd find the weak spots and use it against the Claibourne sisters if it came to a court battle.

He didn't need magic for that. He needed facts. He wasn't interested in romance these days. Only profits. And Romana might sleep like a baby, but she wasn't one. No matter how soft her skin, her hair. She was a smart woman with an agenda. Well, he had an agenda of his own, and he was grateful to her for reminding him of his priorities.

He punched in the code to summon the lift. Romana hadn't thought to cloak it behind her hand and it was second nature to him to notice the smallest details. You just never knew when they'd be useful.

Romana kicked off her loafers, then bent to check them for water damage. They were her favourite pair, but they seemed to have survived their inundation. Unlike her trousers, which would never be the same again. Carrying her shoes, she walked barefoot across the thick carpet to her desk and checked for messages. There were dozens, neatly listed by her secretary in order of urgency.

They were going to have to wait. She took a sharp little black suit from her clothes cupboard and spent a sinful five minutes under a hot shower, blasting away the morning, enjoying the luxury of washing her short hair and blowing it dry in minutes.

Then she made-up carefully—she wouldn't have time to do more than retouch her lipstick before the auction started—and put on her designer suited to the way you looked. If you looked as if you were in control, most people bought it.

When Niall came up to the office, she wanted to be in total control of herself and her surroundings. No more girly nonsense. No more getting soaked through like some girl in a wet T-shirt competition. She was a professional woman and this was her world. Hers. It wasn't Claibourne versus Farraday any more. It was personal. And Niall Macaulay was going to have to work damned hard to wrest it from her.

As she fastened her watch to her wrist, she noted that his half-hour was almost up. When he rang through from the store—always assuming he hadn't just gone back to his office—she was going to be sitting at her desk, dealing with those messages. She smiled at her reflection. He could sit and watch her. Like a good little shadow. Right?

Wrong.

As she opened the bathroom door she discovered that Niall had beaten her to it. He was back in full banker mode. Chalk-stripe suit, white shirt, perfectly knotted tie, his hair gleaming damply from a very recent shower. And he was using her desk. The only thing he hadn't taken over was her phone. He was using a mobile. But she knew that concession was simply to prevent her checking up on his calls. He was making a statement, too. He was saying, in three months from now, this will all be mine.

He looked up as she froze on the threshold. 'At last. I thought you'd drowned in there,' he said, flipping his phone shut.

She refused to show her anger, although the smile took real effort. 'What's your problem? I obviously wasn't holding you up. Did you pick the lock on India's bathroom, just to prove a point?'

'There was no need. Your sister took pity on me.'

'India?' That seemed unlikely.

'No, the other one. Flora? I met her as I got out of the lift. She was in a hurry but she still took a moment to show me your office. And then, since you were still in the shower, she offered me the use of hers. She's a nice girl,' he said. 'Very open. No hidden agenda.'

Oh, good grief! What on earth had Flora been saying to the man? 'She's not a girl. She's a woman. A very clever one,' Romana responded. 'And none of us have a hidden agenda.' Except you, she thought. She just knew he'd got plans for this place that didn't include expanding the customer base. But she kept her suspicions to herself and said, 'I didn't realise she was in the office today.'

'She just came to pick up some notes that were being typed up by her secretary. She said she doesn't spend a lot of time here.'

Oh, great! 'She doesn't need to. She's not an administrator. She contributes in other ways.' Damn, that sounded so defensive.

'Yet she has an office here. Secretarial help. The use of all the facilities. Her own private bathroom, even.' He made his objections sound so reasonable. Before he went in for the kill. 'How much does office space cost in this part of town? Per square foot?'

She was quite certain that, like a good lawyer cross-examining a witness, Niall Macaulay made her think twice before making a spectacle of them

both. Or maybe he'd just imagined the flash of something hot and reckless that sparked behind those big blue eyes. 'Of course I'll be fine, Niall. We'll all be fine. I don't need a Farraday man to hold my hand and tell me that.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘NICE going.’ Molly grinned as she joined her on the podium. ‘Not many men can keep a kiss that light and still make it look like hot sex.’

‘Kiss?’ Romana repeated, her expression blank, her heart pounding like a kettledrum. ‘Oh, you mean, Niall? Just now? That wasn’t a *kiss*. It was just his way of saying good luck.’

‘It would work for me.’

‘Really. And how’s your lovely husband these days?’

‘Adorable. And in for a treat tonight. I feel inspired.’

‘Oh, please!’

While Molly went to claim her seat Romana took a sip of water, fanned her cheeks with her notes.

She’d lied. That kiss had been something else. It was everything that she’d seen in his eyes at the drive-thru when she’d thought, hoped, that he was going to kiss her. It was the fizz of electricity that had shot through her when she’d kissed him. Somehow he’d got under her skin, and even now her lips burned, throbbed, wanting more.

She took another sip of water to cool them. Then she picked up her notes and tapped them against the auctioneer’s desk, refusing to look across to where he was leaning, one shoulder against the wall, watching her, ignoring Molly’s attempts to catch his eye as she patted the seat she’d saved for him.

She didn’t want his reassurance. She refused to think about what she really wanted. It wasn’t going to happen because all he wanted was Claibourne’s. Her store. Her life.

The adrenalin shot of anger was just what she needed to sharpen her up and, picking up the gavel, she brought it down briskly on the desk. In an instant the room was hers.

Only Molly waved her catalogue, still attempting to catch Niall’s attention. Romana leaned on the high auctioneer’s desk and looked at him. The entire room followed her example. ‘Please do take your seat, Mr Macaulay,’ she invited, indicating the space her assistant had kept for him. ‘So that we can start.’

She’d told him to leave. He no doubt wished at that moment that he’d taken her advice. But it was too late for that. She knew it and so did he. He acknowledged her with the smallest nod and walked across to the front row.

He was halfway there when she asked, ‘Did you have trouble parking?’ Her tone was conversational, sympathetic even. He settled in the chair, his expression un-readable. She could read it like a book. It said, *You’ll pay for this later*. ‘You do know that there’s a hundred pound fine for lating.

‘Since when?’ he asked. Was he playing along? Or genuinely confused? She really didn’t care.

‘Since now,’ she replied. ‘I just made it a rule.’ The audience, wired for the occasion, was quick to laugh. She held up the gavel for silence. ‘And I’m fining you another fifty pounds for questioning the authority of the auctioneer.’

More laughter, but she had the room. They were all watching her now and it took only the lift of a hand to restore quiet.

‘Do you have a problem with that?’ she asked. Niall held up his hands in surrender, shaking his head, apparently not prepared to risk further penalties. ‘Pity,’ she said, and once more the audience erupted as she turned to the clerk. ‘Make a note, please. One hundred and fifty pounds, Mr Niall Farraday Macaulay.’ She looked back to the audience. ‘Don’t feel too sorry for him, ladies and gentlemen. Mr Macaulay is one of our shareholders, so he can afford to be generous.’ And everyone thought that was hilarious, too.

Niall, sitting on the end of the front row—and now the focus of the press photographers—smiled. It might have convinced the cameras, but it didn’t convince her.

She didn’t think he objected overmuch to being teased in public. If he did that was tough. But she’d just used a very public stage to remind the world that, under their management, Claibourne & Farraday was a very successful venture.

And that was something else.

With luck, the broadsheets would quote her. And if they printed a photograph of Niall, Jordan Farraday would be thoroughly irritated. It would make up for that cosy picture of the pair of them that had appeared in the papers this morning.

It might make Niall Macaulay think twice before patronising her again, too. And as for kissing her... Well, next time, with any luck, he’d choose his time and place with a bit more care. So that she could take him up on the promise his lips had made.

She jammed the brakes on that line of thought and concentrated on the job in hand. ‘Right, then. We all know why we’re here today, so if you’re quite ready, Mr Macaulay, I won’t waste any more time...’

The auction went at a furious pace, lasting just over the hour. Romana flirted with the celebrities who had turned up to add a little lustre to the ephemera they’d donated. An entire team of footballers, a TV weatherman and a couple of actors all got the big smile and a kiss for their contribution—without having to pay a hundred and fifty pounds for the privilege—and the press photographers had a field day.

Niall didn’t get more than the briefest glance, and that only when he paid a ridiculous amount of money for a signed football shirt for a soccer-mad godson with a birthday on the horizon. The original of a political cartoon for his father and tickets for a gala at the Royal Ballet for his mother didn’t even rate a nod.

But when he wenbug.

Yet with his mouth just inches from hers, his eyes dark with a desire he steadfastly refused to admit, and yet seemingly could not resist, she felt her lips softening, her eyelids drooping as a sweet languor seeped through her limbs.

She felt warm and boneless. As aroused as if his hands were on her body. As if his lips were on hers. She heard the tiny sound that escaped her, a soft whimper that demanded his lips at her throat.

Was this the way men and women were entrapped, became love’s fools? The body overriding the brain? Not her. She knew that the sensation was as fleeting as the giddy rush of champagne. Brief and meaningless. But still she closed her eyes and waited.

And waited.

When she opened them again, she discovered that Niall hadn’t moved a muscle. She said nothing, was afraid even to swallow, certain that to draw any kind of attention to herself was to invite disaster. But then, as if dragging himself from some deep pit of concentration, he finally straightened, letting his hands drop to his sides.

‘Thank you, Romana,’ he said.

For what? She mouthed the words, but the sound remained stuck somewhere, deep in her throat. She cleared her throat and tried again. 'For what?'

'For establishing a point of principle. For admitting that I have a case.' And with that he stepped back, picked up his carrier bag and walked in the direction of the lift.

'That's it?' she demanded of his retreating back. 'You were simply establishing a point of principle? You don't want—' About to say, your pound of flesh, she thought better of it. 'Settlement in full?'

'The kiss will wait,' he replied, turning to face her but continuing to walk backwards, as if he found it necessary to put the maximum distance between them. 'Don't worry. I'll tell you when.' And then he disappeared from her sight as he took the turning to the lift.

Don't worry? Romana remained where she was, pinned to the spot as she re-ran the encounter in her head. *He'd tell her when?* What the heck did that mean? That he'd snap his fingers and say 'when' at some moment of his choice and she'd have to jump? No...he wouldn't snap his fingers. He was a man who'd never had to snap his fingers in his life. One look was all it took.

'Oh, sugar,' she said.

The words were little more than a whisper, a croak.

Niall returned to his office. He should have returned the minute he got that phone call. He'd told himself that Farraday pride was more important. But it wasn't Farraday pride that had kept him at the store that afternoon. It was Romana Claibourne.

And he was just as determined to be at the fashion show tonight. He'd just royally turned the tables on her and he wanted to see her sweat.

Fromewhere else. In a large lonely kitchen with a man she should be kicking while he was down. Instead, she'd been haunted by the thought of Niall alone with his memories.

And she had known she'd never be able to sleep until she reassured herself that he was all right.

'This is it, miss.'

She glanced up at the house. The front windows were dark, but a faint glow of light filtered through from somewhere at the back and she got out. The quiet was illusory, she discovered. From beyond the old market she could hear the sound of music coming from the many restaurants that had sprung up in the area. 'Will you wait, please? I won't be long.'

The driver left the meter running while she crossed the narrow pavement and walked up the steps to the front door. She lifted the knocker and held it for a moment, hesitating between the cast-iron certainty that she was about to make a fool of herself and the knowledge that she could do nothing else. Then she let it fall with a sound that seemed to echo throughout the house.

She waited. Nothing happened.

She glanced at the cab driver. He was talking into his radio while keeping an eye on her, taking care that his expensive fare didn't make a run for it and disappear up some back street. She didn't blame him.

She turned back to the door and lifted the knocker again. Before she could bring it down the door opened, wrenching the thing from her hand so that she nearly overbalanced and fell into the hall.

'What is it?' Niall, still in his dress shirt but with his tie pulled loose, the top button undone, sounded thoroughly irritable. Then, as she recovered her balance and the light from the street fell on her, he said, 'Romana? What on earth are you doing here?'

There were any number of answers to that question.

I was just passing and I thought I'd take you up on your offer of the grand tour...

There's been a change of plans for tomorrow...

I've mislaid my doorkey and I need a bed for the night...

But only the truth would do. 'I was concerned about you, Niall. When you left the Savoy you looked...bleak.'

'You mean you thought you'd find me drowning my sorrows in a bottle of Scotch? That would make excellent ammunition in the war between the Claibournes and the Farradays, wouldn't it? India would undoubtedly award you an A for effort.'

'Are you?' she asked, ignoring his sarcasm. 'Drowning your sorrows?' He was somewhat dishevelled, with what looked like a cobweb caught in his hair, but he didn't look as if he were drowning in Scotch or anything else.

'Oh, hell. Look, you'd better come in,' he said, holding the door wide for her.

'I've got a taxi waiting.'

He glanced at the black cab, waiting at the kerb. 'Let it go. I'll take you home.' He instantly picked up on her doubtful look. 'Don't worry, I haven't found a problem yet that looked better through the bottom moment. He took her silence for a negative. 'This was domestic territory. Children and servants. In those days they saved the really expensive stuff for the public rooms.'

'You said you'd uncovered some of the original decoration?'

'In the drawing room.'

'Show me.'

They descended to the next floor where Niall opened a pair of panelled doors and switched on an overhead light. Romana wasn't sure what she'd expected to find, but the dreary faded paint and barely visible floral decorations left her distinctly underwhelmed.

'Louise researched the history of the house and discovered that this room was painted in 1783 on the occasion of the marriage of the silk merchant who owned it to his second wife. It would have been the very best that money could buy.' He ran his hand over the walls. 'The floral frieze was hand-painted by a local artist who produced designs for the silk weavers.'

'Really? And it was all so expensive that no one has been able to afford to redo it since?'

'Louise thought she'd just repair the damage in the corner and keep it the way it is,' he said, missing the sarcasm. Or maybe just ignoring it.

She looked around. The drawing room was beautifully proportioned, with high ceilings and three long sash-cord windows that looked out over the street, a floor below them. Maybe she was a phillistine, but she thought what the walls needed was a couple of coats of good emulsion in a cheerful colour, with the doors and windows picked out in white.

'Is it all like this?'

He made a 'help yourself' gesture, standing back while she toured the landing, opening the doors, glancing in at the rooms opening off the main landing. The only room that was truly habitable was the master bedroom. Even a man so lost in love he would put up with this mess would expect somewhere comfortable to sleep. And a well-fitted bathroom.

Not that she noticed the decoration particularly. The only thing that caught her eye was the silver frame containing the portrait of a lovely young woman with glossy raven hair, dark sparkling eyes. She could see why the sight of the model at the fashion show had drained the colour from his face, driven him home. The likeness was superficial, but in a wedding dress, wearing a veil...

'What do you think?' he said, from the doorway.

She closed the bedroom door behind her. 'You don't want to know what I think,' she said, shivering a little. And not just with the cold.

'Come on, Romana, don't be shy. It doesn't suit you.'

'It's foot in the mouth time again, is it? Time to tell you what your best friends are too kind to say?' He didn't answer, knowing full well that she was simply playing for time and hoping he'd be sure all this is totally fascinating. A restoration project might even make good television. But only a historian would consider living with the result.'

'But Louise was—'

'I know. She was an architectural historian. But you're not. You're a man of your time. You understand that when your silk merchant decorated this room in 1783 he was showing off. Big time. Using the latest style, the most expensive decorative techniques to tell the world that he was a man of substance. If Louise had learned anything from her history books she'd have encouraged you to do the same. Life moves on, Niall. You can't live in a museum.'

'That's your considered opinion, is it? Get in a firm of decorators and leave them to it?'

'No.' Oh, she could see the possibilities. It was a house made for a big family, to be lived in from attic to basement. A wonderful home. But even with the dust swept away and the walls repainted it wouldn't be the home for a brooding widower who was stuck in a rut that was getting deeper with every passing year. 'My considered opinion is that you should buy yourself a light, airy loft-apartment overlooking the river and move on.' His expression suggested she didn't know what she was talking about. He was wrong. 'You bought this house for Louise because you loved her and because it was in your power to make her dream come true. But you were way off track when you said she'd give you hell for not finishing what she'd started.'

'Is that it?' His jaw tightened as he held back the things he wanted to say to her. Mostly, Romana suspected, along the lines that she didn't have a clue what she was talking about. 'Have you quite finished?'

'No, I haven't.' Not by a country mile. 'You're a businessman, Niall, not a historian. What Louise would give you hell for is staying here and ignoring your own natural instincts to capitalise on your assets. This is an upwardly mobile area—you'd make a good return on your investment.'

'Well, thanks for reminding me that I'm a banker, with a profit margin where my heart should be—'

But nothing was going to stop her now. 'You said it,' she reminded him. Then, 'What is worse, Niall, what would make Louise really unhappy, is that you're doing *nothing*. You're not living in this house; you're not restoring it. You're just letting it grow cold around you while you grieve.' Then she drew in a shaky breath. 'Now I'm finished.' And she moved her shoulders in what might have been a shrug. 'You did ask.'

'So I did.'

'And?'

'And I think now might be a good time to try that drink.'

Romana followed Niall into the kitchen. There were papers and envelopes scattered over the table, and he'd come to drive me home.'

'I said I'd take you home, not that I'd drive you.' And he took a bottle of brandy and a couple of glasses from the dresser. 'So, now you've dissected my character and put my life to rights, why don't you take your coat off, draw up a chair and tell me what makes Romana Claibourne run. Why she does things that scare her rigid. Why she's not tucked up in bed right now with some man who adores her.'

He'd bared his soul to her and now it was her turn? She responded by opening the fridge door. 'Have you eaten?' she asked.

'Isn't that my line?'

'Not exclusively. And I'd rather have a glass of wine than brandy. If there's a choice. If not, I'll stick with tea.' She checked the sell-by date on a box of eggs that had been bought in the food hall at C&F. 'At least you're not above shopping for food,' she remarked, adding a block of cheese and a bag of ready-washed salad to her food cache and putting them on the kitchen table.

'I have a standing order delivered weekly.'

Romana slipped off her jacket and hung it over a chair. 'You have your groceries delivered?'

'I work long hours,' he said, returning the brandy to the dresser and opened the door to a pantry lined with wine racks. 'Especially when I'm running a bank and shadowing you. Red or white?'

'White, please.' Romana worked her way around the kitchen, opening cupboard doors until she found a basin and an omelette pan, while he peeled the foil from the neck of the bottle. 'Have you got a grater?' she asked.

'Probably.'

When he didn't elaborate, she said, 'Can you give me a clue as to its likely whereabouts? And I could do with a whisk.'

'I've no idea where the grater is, but the whisk is in the toolshed. I used it to stir some paint.'

'Paint?' She raised her eyebrows. '*Paint?*' she repeated. 'When?'

'Not recently,' he admitted, pulling the cork. 'But you don't need a whisk to make an omelette. A fork will do the job more than adequately. You'll find one in that drawer over there.'

About to tell him what he could do with his fork and his omelette, she belatedly caught the glint of challenge in his grey eyes. Wind her up and watch her go. Her sisters had used to do that all the time, until she'd realised it was no fun for them if she didn't erupt on cue. But something about Niall Macaulay had got beneath her carefully established guard.

'Thank you,' she said, refusing to perform.

'Tell me,' he continued, pouring the wine as she cracked the eggs with more force than was absolutely necessary, 'what is it like to be the youngest of threlled back over powerful forearms, the overhead light picking out the cobweb that still clung to his dishevelled hair.'

'What were you doing when I arrived?' she asked, ignoring his invitation to sit but instead leaning back against the table and watching him as she sipped the wine.

He glanced at her. 'Doing?'

'You looked as if you'd been—'

'Drinking? That's what you said.'

'No, that's what you said.' She shook her head. 'You looked...still look...as if you'd been digging around in the cupboard under the stairs. A bit dusty, a bit ruffled.' She reached up and picked the cobweb out of his hair, holding it out for him to see. He glanced at the cobweb, then at her, and suddenly she realised how close they were. Close enough for her to see what she had been trying so desperately hard to ignore.

Not an enemy who was going to do his level best to take her world away, but the kind of man for whom the world would be well lost.

'Did you find what you were looking for?' she asked, desperate to break the bond of tension that held them locked, inches apart, unable to advance or retreat.

'Who said I was looking for anything?' he asked, and looked away. She stepped back as he poured the egg into the pan. It sizzled fiercely as, still using only the fork, he pushed it towards the centre. Then he added a handful of cheese, totally absorbed in his task.

Romana glanced across at the box by the dresser. Papers and envelopes. One large envelope bearing the name of a society photographer.

He turned when she didn't answer and, following her gaze, said, 'I needed...' For a moment he seemed to struggle for breath. 'I needed to find the photographs. After tonight. That girl in the wedding dress was so like her—'

He didn't have to explain which photographs. 'You think so? There's a photograph of Louise in your bedroom, and apart from her colouring I didn't see much likeness to the model.' She picked up the box and put it on the table, then the envelope. 'But let's have a look,' she said, matter-of-factly.

'No!' He reached out, grasped her wrist to stop her sliding out the carton of proofs. 'I don't think now is the time.'

She indicated the hob. 'Is something burning?'

He turned and grabbed the pan, rescuing the omelette before it was ruined. He flipped it over, broke it in two and divided it between two plates. 'It's a bit brown on the outside,' he said, turning as she slipped the proofs from the carton so that they slid across the table, a jumble of bright images.

He snapped back as if punched.

She took one of the plates from him. 'Fork?' she prompted. For a moment she thought he was going to snatch the plate back and throw her out. But he was still in control. Still keeping it all buttoned up. The pain, the

No wonder his eyes appeared stone-cold. When you were hanging onto control by your fingernails, refusing to confront the pain, you couldn't risk any kind of emotional response.

He leaned back against one of the units, taking a mouthful of egg and melted cheese, making himself go through the motions, acting as if nothing was wrong. But she knew now that it was all a sham. She'd had a glimpse of something else, something warm and alive, a heart still beating behind the brick wall he'd built around it.

She took courage from the fact that he was staying as far away from the photographs as he could without being too obvious about it. She was getting to him. Maybe, if she pushed it, she could blow that control apart and give him back his humanity.

Romana ignored the photographs. Instead, she put down her plate and riffled through the contents of the box. It made her feel like a voyeur, picking over the entrails of someone else's life, but she was determined to goad some spark of reaction from him.

The box was full of letters, mementoes, the kind of snapshots that all people in love take of each other. Silly stuff. Stuff no one else should ever see. Unable to go through with it, she turned away, took another mouthful of the omelette. Like him, she was going through the motions. Acting as if everything was perfectly normal.

'My sisters came round and cleared the house before I got home. Took away her clothes, the wedding presents. Put all that stuff in a box to be dealt with later,' he said at last, cracking. 'When I could face it.'

'You shouldn't have left it so long.'

'Is there a time scale for these things?' he asked. 'I didn't know.'

'You can't bury grief. You have to deal with it.' While he refused to confront the pain he would remain locked in this empty house, unable ever to move on. 'Talking about people we've loved and lost keeps them alive. You need to look at the pictures, remember the day, the things she said, you said—'

'Stop it!' For a moment his eyes flashed, hot and quick. 'You don't know what you're talking about!' Then he made a hopeless little gesture with his hand. 'I hope to God that you never find out...'

He clung to the plate as if it would protect him. But he wasn't eating. She took it from him. Took his hand. 'At least you had someone who loved you above everything. You know how that feels. You will always have that.' While she had never had anyone who cared for her first, last, always.

He was right. She couldn't feel his pain. But she was feeling something that hurt. Something that twisted like a knife in her gut at the sight of him locked in grief for his dead wife. It was why she was here, in his kitchen, instead of tucked up in her lonely bed, taking care not to ever get emotionally involved.

But if she'd to the floor, was open her arms and hold him while he let out the pent-up grief of four long years.

CHAPTER TEN

‘IT’S ALL right, Niall. Just let it out...’ The words she murmured didn’t matter. She just wanted him to know that she understood the bottled-up grief—that desperate feeling of being left behind, abandoned.

She kissed his forehead, then his temple, murmuring her own heartbreak as she comforted him, telling him things that had been locked up inside her for as long as she could remember. And all the time she held him, his head at her breast, the fingers of one hand tangling in his hair, the other cradling his cheek.

‘You’re not alone,’ she whispered as she kissed the tears from his eyes, kissed the line of his jaw, her hand slipping to his neck as he turned and she nuzzled tenderly at his throat. ‘I’m here.’

‘Romana...’ Her name was wrenched from him, warning her to stop even as his arms tightened about her as if he would never let her go. ‘Romana,’ he said, as if she was all that was standing between himself and hell.

She murmured his name in echo of hers, closing her eyes and tilting her head back a little to offer him that total surrender which was the true and perfect solace a woman offered to the man she loved when he was in pain. Offering the cradle of her arms, her body, a place where he could forget everything, asking nothing in return.

He lifted his head, looked up, and when he once more whispered her name there was a new intensity to his voice. In the quiet still of the kitchen the mood had altered subtly, and she knew that he was with her, seeing *her*.

‘Romana.’ He said it again, over and over, as if it was a new word, as if he had never seen her before—as if he’d suddenly opened his eyes and seen a new world. ‘Romana...’

‘I’m here,’ she said. And she slipped the top button of her shirt. And then the second.

He reached up, and for a moment she thought he would stop her, but he just touched her hand briefly before raising his fingers to her face, cradling her cheek. Looking at her. It seemed for ever—as if he were trying to read her deepest thoughts.

Whatever he saw in her eyes must have been what he was hoping to see, and he captured her face between his hands, leaning into a kiss that was at once assured yet sweetly hesitant, his lips silently seeking her consent every step of the way.

Is this good for you? he seemed to be asking her. Do you like this?

Her answer, with her lips, her tongue, her hands, was yes...and yes...and yes... And as his mouth grew more demanding her own need matched his hunger and she slipped back against the cushions.

‘I want to touch you,’ of his fingers, stroking them down the length of her breastbone until his hand reached the soft curve of her breasts.

Again he waited for her, silently asking the question. Do you want this? In reply, she unfastened the front of her the black lace bra.

‘Silk,’ he whispered as he opened his hand to encompass her breast. ‘Pure silk.’ And then he pushed her back into the soft cushions, going down with her to take his mouth on the same exploring journey as his hand.

Every touch, every kiss, every murmur was slow and sure. The brush of his lips, the melting heat of his eyes, the intimate pressure of his body bombarding her with sensations that aroused her to an almost painful awareness of her desire for him, her longing for this.

The touch of his skin beneath her hands, the roughness of hair over his chest, his unmistakable arousal—all was exciting and new, and Romana held her breath, afraid that anything she might say or do would break the spell. Then she whimpered softly as he eased away, and this time when he murmured her name that was a question too.

‘Romana...?’

In answer she reached up and put her arms around his neck, bringing him back to her. ‘I want to touch you,’ she said, repeating his own words back to him. ‘I want to undress you.’

And slowly, tenderly, they each had their wish, learning each other’s desires, pleasures, until the heat built between them and they lost any sense of place or time.

It would have been quite perfect if, as he came, the name on his lips had been hers.

For a moment he was utterly still. Louise’s name had shocked them both out of the sweet aftermath of love. Neither of them breathed. The silence so dense it vibrated against her eardrums.

‘Romana,’ he said. Too late. ‘You know I didn’t... I wasn’t thinking...’

Niall didn’t know what he was thinking. He’d held Romana in his arms, had made love to her with a passion that he’d thought beyond him. She was the woman he wanted. Still wanted. No one else.

And yet Louise had been there with them. They had been talking about her. Remembering her. Her photographs were scattered about the floor where they’d fallen. She was there with them, waiting for him to say goodbye.

‘It’s all right, Niall. I understand.’

‘Do you? I don’t.’ All he understood was that he’d hurt her in a way that he didn’t know how to mend. That it certainly wasn’t all right. It was as wrong as it could be. But as he reached out in an attempt to hold her, reassure her, she turned from him, swinging her legs to the floor, gathering her clothes from where they’d fallen amongst the wedding photographs.

Shutting him out.

‘You needed someone, Niall,’ she said, matter-of-factly. ‘I was here. Don’t let’s make a drama out of it. Would you call me a taxi while I use the bathroom?’

‘I’ll take you.’ He wasn’t asking her, he was telling her. He couldn’t let her just walk away, shrug off something that for him had been both of them. Then he ruined it all by saying, ‘Just so you’ll know for the future, Romana, I’ll confess to having tried it twice. I discovered two things. One is that sorrow floats.’

‘And the other?’

‘That you feel like hell for days afterwards.’

‘Wouldn’t once have been enough to show you that?’

He favoured her with one of those ironical, self-deprecating smiles that he did to perfection. ‘I was just checking to be sure.’

‘You’re a thorough man,’ she said, and reached up to touch his cheek, where she’d kissed away his tears. It was the first time she’d seen a man cry. She hadn’t known they were capable of such emotion. She had no experience of it. ‘Will you be all right on your own?’

‘And if I say no?’ She frowned. ‘Would you stay?’

She hesitated a moment too long before she said, ‘That was a one-off, Niall. An inevitable response to an excess of emotion. A repeat performance would be self-indulgence. Or possibly a cynical ploy by me to undermine your position.’ She offered him the chance to blame her for what

‘I had happened, ease his guilt. ‘You’d never know.’

‘I don’t believe you’ve got a cynical bone in your body,’ he said, rejecting her sacrifice.

If she hadn’t already made the mistake of falling in love with him, she would have done so then. But falling in love with the enemy was only ever going to leave her exposed on all sides. With no one to turn to for comfort when it all ended in tears. And this time she’d be the one shedding them.

‘What about you?’ she asked. ‘How cynical are you?’

She already knew the answer. A cynical man wouldn’t have got the name wrong. He wouldn’t have been that lost in desire. And he clearly thought her question beneath answering. Maybe that was why he slotted a CD into the Aston’s music system—why he chose music rather than conversation on the drive across London.

She couldn’t wait to escape, clambering out of the car before he could help her. But he insisted on walking her up to her front door, waiting while she unlocked it, his hand lightly on her arm, detaining her when she would have turned to shut the door.

‘Romana...’ he began. And then couldn’t find the words.

‘Don’t! Please don’t apologise. There’s no need. You love Louise. You haven’t come to terms with her death.’ Then, as he turned to go, she was the one with her hand on his arm. ‘Niall—’ He waited. ‘You probably don’t want to hear this...’ But she was going to say it anyway. ‘You’ll honour Louise most by living your own life well. She wouldn’t want you to waste it in self-pity, or reg, and he wasn’t listening. ‘For a girl whose mother abandoned her for a fat pay-off, whose father thinks a chequebook is the answer to everything, you seem to know a hell of a lot about love.’

‘That’s old news,’ she said, and shivered.

‘It was new to me.’

She looked up. He’d been listening to all that rubbish she’d poured out?

‘When did you last see her?’ he asked.

She raised an eyebrow.

‘Oh, I see. I must live well. You can wallow in self-pity. Well, if you want my opinion, Romana—’

‘I don’t.’

‘—I believe your mother was the loser.’

She swallowed back her own tears. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Her mother had soon made up her loss with other babies. Little titled babies.

‘As for Peter Claibourne, he’s a man with a pride problem. A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. Beautiful women. His children. Possession is all. He’s never learned to cherish the objects of his desire.’

‘He loves India.’ The words were out before she’d thought them. But then they’d always been there, buried in her subconscious. Stirring up someone else’s dark memories, she discovered, could backfire. ‘Forget I said that. Please. He loves us all...’

‘Love is such a catch-all word, with so many shades of meaning. It involves a lot more than woolly sentiment. If your father had taken the trouble to get to know you, build a relationship, he’d never have bought you that car for your seventeenth birthday.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Don’t I? Isn’t that why you gave it away? Not as some fine altruistic gesture but in a fit of girlish pique.’

‘You—’

His fingers flew to her lips, blocking the expletive. ‘You know I’m right. And if he loved India, really loved her, he wouldn’t have left her with the mess she’s in now. Think about it.’ Then, after the slightest hesitation, he bent and kissed her cheek. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow, Romana.’

‘Not if I see you first!’

She shut the door on him. Double-locked it, slid the bolt into place, and with her hand over her mouth, still warm from his touch, leaned back against the door. Then, stripping off her clothes, she flung herself into bed, repeating over and over to herself the word he’d blocked with his fingers.

It didn’t wipe out the heat of his touch. Or the painful longing to be held that way again. The longing to have him make her. She would not love anyone.

Niall, the wreckage of his life strewn across the kitchen floor, sat for a long time in the dark, thinking about Romana Claibourne. About how she’d broken through the barriers he’d erected to protect himself from feeling anything ever again. How he’d held her, kissed her, made love to her right here on Louise’s sofa.

Except it wasn’t Louise’s sofa. His wife had been dead for four years. And he had been dead, too, in every way that was important. Until Romana Claibourne, sexy, smart and with a smile that could light up the night, had dropped a carton of coffee at his feet.

From the first moment he’d set eyes on Romana she’d been impossible to ignore. He’d had all the opportunities in the world to walk away. There had never been any intention to spend all day and every day with her. Heaven alone knew how often she’d told him to go away. Yet he had stayed. Put pressing business of his own on hold.

He began to pick up the photographs, one by one, looking at each of them for a long time before putting them back into the box. Putting the lid back in place. He would never forget Louise, he knew. She would always be in his heart. But Romana was right. She had loved him. He would have changed places with her if he could. And if he had been the one who’d died, she would have felt the same way.

That was what love was.

But nothing could change what had happened. No amount of guilt, no amount of self-imposed suffering would bring her back. And tonight, looking at the photographs of their wedding, he had finally accepted that. That Romana had seen it so clearly, had finally used words that Louise might have used in the same situation, had hurt. But only because she was right. Living well was exactly what Louise would have expected from him.

He’d cried out her name tonight, but it hadn’t been some attempt to fool himself that the woman in his arms was Louise. It had been goodbye. He just hadn’t understood.

Romana had released him from a self-imposed prison and unwittingly he’d hurt her. Saying sorry would never be enough. He had to do something, show her how much he cared. And he opened the cuttings file provided by Jordan and began to search for something...anything that might give a clue.

‘On your own? No faithful shadow?’ Romana looked up as India stopped by her office door. Then, ‘You look terrible, Ro. Was there a party after the show last night?’

‘I’ve no idea. I left as soon as it was over.’

‘I hear Niall Macaulay didn’t waste much time on the fashion show, either.’ Her sister’s voice rose on a probing little suggestion that maybeou. You’re handing over the neonatal equipment today at the hospital. Had you forgotten?’

‘I’m on my way. Can I give you a lift?’

'No. Everything's organised. Molly can manage without me.' She picked up her bag. 'I'll be along in time for the lunch.'

'Romana...'

She waited. Her sister crossed the office and picked up the mobile phone lying on her desk.

'Don't forget this,' she said, switching it on. 'I need to be able to talk to you at any time.'

Romana realised, belatedly, that India didn't look all that hot either. Her sister's problems with the store were greater than anything she had to deal with. 'Have you heard from Dad?' she asked.

'He's not answering my calls.'

No surprise there. Niall was right. Their father had gone on an extended holiday to convalesce, leaving them to deal with the Farradays while he drank cocktails and flirted with pretty women who recognised a good thing when they saw it. 'We're on our own, then.'

'Men! Who needs them?' India grinned. 'Although from what Molly's been telling me, you and Niall Macaulay are striking sparks off one another. Maybe you should put personal prejudice on the back-burner and think of the store. If you seduced him, it would utterly compromise him.'

Romana felt the betraying heat rise to her face as she said, 'Molly doesn't know what she's talking about.'

'Really? And yet you always speak so highly of her when you're twisting my arm to raise her salary. Didn't he take you out to lunch yesterday?'

'You girls *have* had a nice chat.'

'Well?'

'We had lunch,' she admitted, and was finally able to grin back. 'A cheeseburger and fries with a large diet cola at the drive-thru by the roundabout.'

'Right. I guess I'll save the seduction plan for Flora, then. It's time she pulled her weight.'

'Lucky Flora,' Romana said, drily. 'And how do *you* propose to go about bringing Jordan Farraday to his knees?'

'I've got my moles digging for dirt. There must be some.'

'Watch yourself. They've got press cuttings on us from birth.'

They must have if the one in her bag was anything to judge by. An envelope had been lying on her doormat when she'd dragged herself from bed at the insistent ringing of the alarm. She'd opened it and found a magazine article about her mother. The small note attached said, 'Nothing is. But there had always been someone else to answer the telephone. An au pair, or a housekeeper. And if her mother had answered she'd have hung up anyway. Because what was there to say?'

She stepped out of the taxi and looked up at the elegant town house as she paused for a moment to take a deep breath, steady her pounding heart. Then she walked up the path and knocked on the front door.

It was opened by a tall, tanned young woman, with a child of perhaps six or seven clutching at her legs. She smiled shyly up at Romana, then coughed.

'Bless her, she's got a cold,' said the au pair, an Australian whose warm voice was full of laughter as she scooped the child up and hugged her.

'Who is it, Charlie?' a voice called from a room at the rear of the house.

'I'm Romana Claibourne,' she told the girl, handing her the magazine clipping. 'Will you please give this to Lady Mackie and ask her if she'll see me?'

'Charlie?' Romana's mother appeared at the end of the hall. Her stunning figure had thickened a little with the years and the babies, and tiny lines plucked at the corners of her eyes, but she was still a great beauty. She always would be. And in the flesh her face had a warmth that the glamorous photographs Romana had cut out of magazines as a child and a teenager, and hidden away in a shoebox at the bottom of her wardrobe, had never captured.

Then she'd got older and realised her romantic fantasies about why her mother had left her were so much nonsense, had stopped listening to that tiny hopeful voice that had reasoned that one day—one day—she'd come. She'd stopped reading the stories. Stopped looking at the pictures. Made a little funeral pyre of the shoebox fantasies and let it all go.

But Niall was suggesting there was another side to the story. Prodding her as she'd prodded him.

For a moment her mother stared against the light, her eyes narrowing as she sought to recognise her caller.

'It's Romana Claibourne,' the au pair said, handing her the cutting before taking the child upstairs.

'Romana?' The voice was soft and husky. Familiar and yet strange. 'Romana, is it really you?'

Romana fought the pull, the emotional need. 'Someone—a friend—gave me that cutting and I had to know if it was true. What you said. About making mistakes. Do you really regret—?'

But her mother didn't wait for her to finish. She reached out, took her hands. 'Oh, my dear, dear child. I'd almost given up hoping. I thought you'd never come.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

‘HOW’S it going? It’ll be fine.’

‘You’re never going to forget that, are you?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘It was a life-changing moment. You never forget those.’

He’d been having rather a lot of them lately. That moment she’d invited him to enjoy the scent he’d bought her. The way she’d straightened his tie. Her skin beneath his hand when he’d stopped her from digging a deeper and deeper hole with her runaway mouth. The way she’d looked with wet cotton clinging to her breasts, how it had felt with her legs wrapped around him, her voice whimpering softly, begging for more...

‘Did you know who I was?’ she demanded. ‘When I got out of that taxi?’

‘No. I was expecting a sober-suited businesswoman with a lawyer in tow.’

‘Wait until June,’ she murmured.

‘Of course if you’d been laden with C&F carriers, instead of designer bags, I might have twigged. Not that I’m criticising the result,’ he assured her. ‘The dress was stunning.’

‘It was supposed to be understated.’

Heaven help him if she ever chose to make an impact. ‘Try a sack next time,’ he advised, and changed the subject before the rush of heat got out of hand. Next time he wanted her in bed. He wanted her there when he woke up.

Thoughts like that didn’t help, so he fetched some plates and concentrated on their lunch. ‘Tell me about your mother,’ he pressed, pulling out the chair next to hers. Anything to stop thinking about the way she’d un-buttoned her shirt. Or the fact that he was close enough to reach out and unbutton the one she was wearing now. ‘How was it? Meeting her?’

‘We talked a lot. She said that my father lost interest in her within a year of their wedding.’

‘Not a man given to long-term commitment?’

‘No. I suppose we should be grateful that he stopped marrying his amours after number three,’ she said. ‘Apparently fidelity isn’t his strong point. She put up with his affairs for as long as she could because of me. Then she met James and discovered what love was all about.’

‘So why didn’t she take you with her?’

‘My grandmother apparently had her investigated when she married Daddy, and somehow found out that she’d had an affair with an older man before they met. A public figure. They’d met at a party and she’d been totally infatuated, pursued him relentlessly, and of course he’d been flattered.’

‘She was very lovely,’ he said. Her daughter had the same bone structure, the same generous mouth. He could have lived with the hair if he’d had to. Without it, he was lost.

‘And he was very lucky,’ she said. ‘His wife forgave him, the newspapers were too busy hounding some politician caught with his trousers down to get wind of it, and my mother retired from the scene—miserable, hurt, feeling rather stupid, very guilty at the damage she’d done when it stays.’

‘Great.’ Romana had the disconcerting feeling that something had just happened and she’d missed it. ‘Well, I really do have to be going.’

‘I hoped you might volunteer to stay and help with the decorating.’

‘Really?’ It was hard to keep her racking heart from running away with her mouth when staying and spending the day with him was such an appealing idea. But this was something he had to do on his own. ‘Why would I want to do that?’

‘For fun?’

‘When I want fun,’ she replied, ‘I’ll go shopping. I’ll ask our interior design team to come and give you a quote, if you like. The whole works. Heating, plumbing, decoration.’

‘I’d get a better rate if I waited until we take over.’

‘Get real, Niall. It isn’t going to happen. Beneath that stern exterior you’re pure mush. You wouldn’t take the store away from me.’

‘Wouldn’t I? And even if that were true, there’s still Bram and Jordan. They’re about as mushy as concrete.’

‘They have to shadow Flora and India,’ she countered. ‘Ice and steel respectively,’ she assured him. ‘But thanks for lunch; it was a treat.’

‘We’re getting better at it,’ he said. She looked up. ‘The food thing. Maybe we could risk a restaurant next time?’

‘Don’t let’s get ambitious.’

‘You want to take it in easy stages? Okay, I’ll give the formal lunch a miss tomorrow—’ No! That wasn’t what she wanted to hear! ‘I’ve got some stuff I have to clear up. Let’s see how we manage at the ball on Saturday night. Who knows? We might even manage dessert.’

‘Buffets are tricky things. The scope for disaster is legion.’

‘I’m prepared to take the risk,’ he said. ‘If you are.’

His eyes seemed to be saying a lot more than the words. Romana swallowed. ‘You’re still coming to the charity ball, then? I thought you said you’d learned everything there was to know about me.’

‘I lied. I have no idea if you can dance. Save something slow for me.’

‘You dance?’

‘That might be an exaggeration. I need someone to hold on to.’

‘Niall...’ He waited. ‘Nothing. I’ll make sure Molly’s got you on the seating plan, shadow-man.’

‘Don’t forget that a shadow has to be...’ he reached out and brushed his fingers against her throat ‘...touching close.’

‘S’ hair was a golden halo framing her face, balancing the elegant curve of her neck. And her dress was anything but understated. It was as insubstantial as gossamer: floating layers of black silk chiffon that drifted almost to her ankles but didn’t hide them—or the exquisite shoes she was wearing. It was scattered with tiny black jet beads that caught the light as she moved. She wore a jet choker about her throat.

Not that anyone would be noticing her hair, or the dress. They wouldn’t be able to tear their eyes from the plunging neckline.

‘Niall...’ He’d rapped on her apartment door, and when she’d opened it, her bag in her hand, her wrap over her arm, she’d for once been too surprised to say anything except his name. It had come out in a little rush of breath. ‘What are you doing here?’

Losing his head.

Burning his boats.

Or did he mean jumping ship?

‘I’ve come to take you to the ball, Cinders,’ he said, his own breath taking a holiday. ‘Your pumpkin awaits.’

‘Niall, this is kind—’

She lied. She didn’t think he was kind. She thought he had an ulterior motive and she was right. He hadn’t seen her for two whole days and he wanted to be alone with her. To spend ten quiet minutes in her company before the mayhem of the evening. Just to sit beside her in the dark and hold her

hand.
‘—but I’ve got a car booked.’ She glanced at the tiny jewelled wrist-watch that had replaced her workmanlike Rolex. As she lifted her wrist he caught the familiar scent of her perfume. Summer Shadow. Summer, autumn, winter, spring... ‘It should be here any minute.’
‘It is here. I told Molly to cancel your hire car. It seemed wasteful to have two when we’re both going to the same place.’
Her flush darkened. ‘Told her? You’re not running Claibourne & Farraday yet.’
‘Maybe you should be telling her that.’
‘And you are certainly not my idea of a fairy godmother—’
‘No? You don’t know how glad I am to hear you say so. And on reflection I believe I may have got the wrong fairy tale.’ This was more like a variation on *Sleeping Beauty*—only in this case Beauty had woken *him* with a kiss. He grinned. ‘Cinderella would never have been allowed out in a dress like that.’

‘You don’t like it?’
‘I didn’t say that. I just hope you weren’t trying for understated—because I’m telling you, you’ve failed. Totally.’ And he took the wrap she was holding.

Romana couldn’t stop a little smile tucking up the corners of her mouth as she turned to let Niall drape the soft fabric over her shoulders. He’d given him a chance to make some crass remark, but the sudden telling heat from his eyes almost burned her. The longer he thought about it, the more she really, really wished she hadn’t asked such a stupid question. ‘I think you should be locked up before you cause a riot,’ he said. ‘But maybe I’m easily impressed.’

She knew that wasn’t true. But she’d won him round. He’d agreed when she’d said she was unique, brilliant, utterly irreplaceable. For a man so difficult to impress such an admission was pure gold. Suddenly charged with energy, confidence and feeling totally in control, she reached up and twitched his tie into line.

‘Shall we go?’ he said, taking her hand.
They sat in the back of the car, not quite touching. Only his hand over hers, never once letting go, connecting them.
‘How’s the decorating going?’
‘The drawing room is finished.’ He glanced at her. ‘I got impatient and hired some help.’
‘What next?’
‘The kitchen needs some work.’
‘Nothing too modern, though. You’ll keep the butler’s sink and the table and the dresser...?’ She stopped.
‘They’re staying. The men start work tomorrow.’
‘That’s going to be tough to live with.’
‘I thought I might go away for a while.’
‘Oh.’ Suddenly she didn’t feel quite so on top of the world. ‘Good decision,’ she said.
‘I’m long overdue a holiday.’
‘Right.’

The car came to halt, but he didn’t move his hand from hers even when the hotel doorman opened the car door. Didn’t let go, didn’t move. ‘Save the first dance for me,’ he said.

‘The first dance?’ They weren’t the words any girl wanted to hear, and Romana’s heart dipped a little further. ‘I won’t have time for dancing,’ she said. ‘Maybe I’ll manage a few minutes later on.’

‘There won’t be a later.’
He wasn’t staying? As she made a move his hand fastened over hers. ‘The first dance,’ he insisted and, taking her agreement as read, stepped out of the car—her hand still in his as he helped her out, his arm beneath her elbow as they entered the ballroom.

Romana immediately went into a huddle with Molly over last-minute changes to the running order of the evening. Niall had details of his own to attend to and, having changed the seating arrangements so that he was beside Romana, he went in search of the master of ceremonies for the evening.

‘You are so predictable, Niall Macaulay,’ Romana said when, having toured the room with India and Flora, greeting friends, thanking contributors to the charity, could have put me here in the first place.’

‘You could have seen me from over there,’ she protested.
‘I could have seen you, but I couldn’t have heard you, or...’ he leaned closer so that he had a breathtaking view of her enticing cleavage ‘...enjoyed the delightful scent you’re wearing.’

‘It’s new. I’m promoting it,’ she reminded him.
‘You’ve sold me. Shall we dance?’ She glanced at the dance floor. It was empty. ‘Someone has to make the first move,’ he prompted.
‘It should be India,’ she hedged.
‘She’s busy winning friends and influencing people.’
‘You’re up to something,’ she said, as he took her chair and she stood up.

‘Of course I am.’ He glanced at the MC who, primed with folding money, had been watching for his move and now approached the microphone.
As they reached the centre of the floor the MC said, ‘My lords, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Miss Romana Claibourne and Mr Niall Farraday Macaulay—members of the two great families who founded Claibourne & Farraday—who have gallantly volunteered to open the ball with a waltz.’ There was a ripple of applause, a few whistles. ‘But first Mr Macaulay is going to claim a special lot he bid for at the Claibourne & Farraday charity auction this week. A kiss from the lovely Miss Claibourne.’

Romana couldn’t believe it. She’d thought they were beyond this. That if they could be nothing else they were friends. But he was going to throw it all away for a PR stunt. Just to show her that anything she could do, he could go one better.

And he was right. Nothing...*nothing*...would stop the editor of *Celebrity* from putting this picture on the cover.
It would probably make most of the morning newspapers too.

This was her field and he was upstaging her. Having agreed that she was unique, brilliant, he was now showing her that he was better, that he could make a front-page story that would wipe out everything she’d worked so hard to achieve.

He was a Farraday first and last, and even as she was trying to find the words to express her feelings he put his hand to her waist, drew her closer and for a moment looked down into her face. He had won and there was nothing she could do to stop him from claiming his prize.

His kiss. The store.
Around them a slow handclap began, and Niall finally lowered his lips to hers.
It would have been awful under any circumstances. A slow, lingering kiss that just went on and on, with an audience of a thousand whooping and clapping guests. But that wasn’t the worst of it.

The worst of it was that her lips were responding with a heat she couldn't disguise to ensure her pleasure every step of the way, it had been *her* name he was saying. Her name.

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, please.' And as their lips touched once more the only sound was the sigh that rippled through the crowd.

Then he said, 'One more thing. I want you to know that my surrender is total. Heart, body and—'

'Soul?'

'Department store.'

She laughed. 'That sounded like a...Elizabeth? How do you know my middle name is Elizabeth?'

'I've been doing my homework. I wanted you to be sure—as I am—that I have the right woman. And I want you to know that whatever decision is made about the future of Claibourne & Farraday my voting share is at your disposal. I'm trusting you to make the right choice. As I'm trusting you with my life.' They were centre stage, the object of speculation for a thousand pairs of eyes.

'Is that everything?' he asked. 'Or do you want me on my knees?'

'You'd do that?'

'If you insist.'

For a moment she pretended that she was seriously considering it. Then she laughed. 'Later. We'll save that until we're on our own.' And she grabbed his hand and headed for the exit.

'But what about all this?' he said, as there was a sudden burst of noise behind them.

She glanced back, saw India headed in their direction. 'Molly can handle it,' she said.

'We did the right thing.'

'I couldn't agree more.'

Romana lifted her hand so that she could see the wedding ring glinting on her hand in the moonlight. Niall reached up and laced his fingers through hers before pushing her down amongst the pillows to demonstrate just how right it was...

Later...much later...she said, 'If we'd told everyone first they'd have expected a huge family wedding.'

'You're right,' Niall conceded.

'I mean, it would have given the Claibourne & Farraday wedding department a PR spin that money couldn't buy, but I didn't want our wedding to be a PR event.'

'And a big family wedding might have been a little bit tricky under the present circumstances,' he added.

'But we're going to have to tell them,' she said.

'Go home and face the music?'

'Eventually,' she conceded. 'But we should have a honeymoon first, don't you think?'

'I didn't know two people could have such perfect'

'Maybe we should send them an e-mail.'

'Oh, that's a great idea.'

'I'm full of them. And I've just had another one...'

'Okay.' Romana sat at the terminal at the internet café, her fingers poised above the keyboard, the diamonds in her wedding ring flashing back the sun and Niall's arm about her waist. 'What shall we say?'

'Best keep it short and simple,' he advised. 'How about this? "Just a note to let you both know that the shadowing was a complete success. Married yesterday. See you—eventually. Love, Romana and Niall."'

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