

Some early reviews:

"This book grabbed me from the very first line. Fast paced, and tightly woven, the emotional journey with Ciara and Wyatt is riveting. Becky Barker set the bar high and then she exceeded it. I am just in love with this book." SB

"These two complex characters have created layers of emotional protection to guard their hearts. Will Wyatt be able to expose his vulnerable side? Will Ciara allow him back into her life so they can have their HEA? Or, will the accusations of the embezzlement always hinder their future?" YC

Chapter One

"You ran."

Every cell in Ciara Jayne Moore's body reacted to the deep, sensually compelling voice of her unscheduled visitor. The graveled huskiness of it was intimately familiar. Tension sizzled through her as she stared blankly at the resort checkbook and braced herself for a confrontation with Wyatt Marcum.

Stiffening her spine and drawing on a wealth of hard-earned control, she lifted her head and stared, expressionlessly, at the man with hair as inky dark as her own leaning against the frame of her office door. Despite the few seconds she'd had to fortify herself, the sight of him made her heart pound with the slow, heavy rhythm of a timpani.

Dressed in dark hand-tailored Italian slacks and a white cotton shirt, he looked lean and fit. His stance and demeanor were casual; sleeves rolled to his elbows and arms crossed over his chest. The expression on his face gave away nothing of his emotions, but she knew him well enough to see the underlying tension beneath the aura of raw male power he exuded.

He had the kind of hard-edged, riveting good looks that brought admiring stares from people in all walks of life. It made women stutter and stare. His tightly muscled body was also drool-worthy, and Ciara couldn't control the shiver of remembered sensations.

The blue-grey eyes held an unerring intensity as they focused on her. "I never expected you to run," he said, his low voice an erotic reminder of the incredible depth of his passion. He looked her directly in the eyes, his expression inscrutable.

She didn't want him here. Loving him had nearly destroyed her. She kept her tone steady even though her stomach quivered with nervous.

"I never expected you to order me from your life," she replied flatly. Every time she thought of the day he'd had his security chief escort her from Marcum International's executive offices, the remembered pain and humiliation made her burn with anger.

If she hadn't known him better, she'd have sworn a shadow of regret flashed in his eyes. But Wyatt Marcum wasn't the type of man who let emotion rule his actions. Born into wealth, groomed for success and already a powerful CEO of a fortune 500 company at thirty-two, he rarely showed any sort of weakness.

She watched warily as he slid his hands into his pockets, making his arm and shoulder muscles ripple beneath the Egyptian cotton of his shirt. He watched her in a calm, assessing manner he normally used when sizing up a new business associate. Then he stepped farther into the room with the long-legged grace of a man completely comfortable in his own body. It only took a couple strides to bring him from the door to the front of her desk.

Ciara hated herself for noticing how perfectly his shirt and slacks outlined his tight, sculpted muscles. He epitomized the

corporate male in a suit and tie, and dazzled in a tuxedo, but his end-of-the-work day casual could leave a woman breathless. He had a five o'clock shadow and a dark swirl of hair at the open neck of his shirt as well as on his forearms. She swiftly crushed thoughts of his blatant sex appeal.

"I didn't order you from my life," he corrected. "I had security escort you from the building. Company policy in the situation."

His response had her teeth clenching, but her only reaction was an unblinking stare.

He pulled his hands from his pockets and perched one hip on the edge of her desk the same way he'd done dozens of times in her office at Marcum's.; just as casually, just as though he still had a right to invade her personal space.

"You made me promise," he reminded, his gaze locked with hers. "When we became lovers, you made me promise I'd never let our personal relationship affect our working relationship. You didn't want any favors."

The words spurred a hot flash of temper. Her expression hardened even more, but she refused to respond. Anything she'd say while so angry would come out as a squeak. Her facial muscles already felt tight enough to shatter.

Even if she'd wanted to reply, his proximity sucked all the oxygen from her lungs. Ciara fought to ignore the scent and heat of his body, the flex of his thigh so near. She crossed her arms over her chest and nudged her chair backward a bit, needing more space. When she continued to stare at him in mutinous silence, he picked up the name plaque on her desk.

It read: Jayne Moore, Resort Manager

"You disappeared without a trace," he said, his tone holding a mix of awe and disbelief. "That's damned hard to do nowadays."

You dropped off social media, dropped your first name, canceled cell service and stopped using your bank cards.”

Wealthy high-power corporate jocks like Wyatt usually got what they wanted, when they wanted. It gave her a small sense of satisfaction that it hadn't been easy for him to find her. She'd known he would if he cared enough to try. What she hadn't known was how much he cared or why. She still didn't know.

“Our personnel records had you listed as Ciara J. Moore, but I didn't know what the “J” stood for,” he continued conversationally. “We tried every “J” name we could think of, even Jane, but not Jayne with a “y,” he said, almost to himself.

His gaze met hers again. “Do you have any idea how many women your age with the last name of Moore are living in the United States?” He shook his head slightly.

She ignored the question, her heart sinking a little at his words. They'd been lovers. She'd thought him the man of her dreams, and he didn't even know her full name. It was a sorry testament on the importance of their relationship.

“If I'd wanted to be found, I'd have left a forwarding address,” she said.

Annoyance flashed in his steel grey eyes. “I'm aware of that,” he declared grimly. “And you're a hell of a long way from home.”

“You're the one who's a long way from home,” she replied without inflection. “Why are you here, Wyatt?”

His gaze roved slowly over her features. She didn't know what he hoped to see, but it wouldn't be the woman who'd once adored him; who'd willingly given him everything she had to give.

“I came to take you home,” he told her.

The bald statement had her shaking her head. Before the disaster in his office five months ago, they'd shared a passionate

affair and lived together in sensual bliss. Then she'd been accused of consorting with a coworker to embezzle five million dollars from the firm. She'd been framed, but regardless of the damning evidence, she'd never forgive Wyatt for doubting her. If he thought he could easily slip back into her life, for whatever reason, he was dead wrong.

She gave another shake of her head. "Manhattan isn't my home anymore. The Brinson Seaside Resort is home now. The staff here is my extended family, and I plan to spend the rest of my life on this beach in California."

His eyes narrowed slightly, and he studied her with unerring concentration. "You like it that much?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"The sun shines every day," she declared succinctly. "No wool coats, hats or snow boots necessary." Nodding toward the bay of windows to her left, she added, "And I can see the ocean from my office. Real sand and water, not steel and concrete."

He went still for a moment as he stared out the window at waves lapping near the distant, but clearly visible beach.

"You'll have to show me around while I'm here."

Panic fluttered in her chest. He couldn't stay. She didn't want him challenging her decision to permanently end things between them.

"You found me. Count that among your many successes and go home to your high-rise empire."

He turned his attention back to her, his gaze intent. "I'm on vacation for the next month."

Ciara's eyes widened, and then she gave a humorless laugh. "You expect me to believe you're leaving the helm of Marcum's for a whole month? Your headset and cell phone are your best friends. You can't get through a single day without working."

He didn't even blink at the statement. "Gabe welcomed a chance to take the reins, so he's in charge while I'm gone."

His younger brother, Gabe, had worked hard and was vice president of the family corporation, but she found it hard to imagine Wyatt giving up control for very long.

"And you plan to vacation in California?"

"Here at the resort," he replied. His expression didn't change, but his unwavering gaze challenged her.

"Impossible," she said, her pulse racing at the thought. Her palms went damp, her composure briefly shaken. "We're booked solid." Capacity reservations this spring had surpassed her wildest hopes. "There's not even a spare closet."

"I have a room," he told her, watching her with an enigmatic expression. "Beau loaned the owner's suite to me."

No! Ciara's brain screamed. Her heart thudded against her rib cage. No! No! No! Beau knew how hard she'd worked to put the past and Wyatt behind her. He'd given her this job and guarded her privacy with tyrannical fervor these past five months.

"Beau wouldn't do that," she said, but every atom of her being pulsed in alarm. Beau was hanging on to the resort with his fingernails. They had to juggle every penny to keep the finances in the black. Would he sell her out to save his beloved resort? Is that why he'd suddenly decided to accept a friend's offer of an Alaskan cruise?

"Everyone has a price," Wyatt murmured softly, unblinking as Ciara stared at him with dark suspicion.

She frowned at the phrase that had caused more than one heated discussion between them during their time together. His jaded view of the world and people in general had been diabolically opposed to her optimism and innate faith in mankind.

No other human being had ever inflamed her as this man did. He kept her emotions on a merry-go-round of highs and lows. There was no sense arguing, because she couldn't be sure what had transpired between him and Beau. At that instant, she decided a good offense was the best defense. She'd just have to thwart his arrogance with calm professional courtesy and treat him like any other guest until she had more facts.

"In that case, enjoy your stay with us, Mr. Marcum. We have an excellent staff that's happy to cater to the needs of all our guests," she said in her cool, most hospitable voice.

"And what about you Cici?"

The softly spoken, intimate nickname threatened her grip on control, but she managed to keep her expression and tone bland. "Your Cici was a naïve twit, and she's dead to you."

His stared into her eyes and something undefinable swirled in the dark depths of his. "If that's true, I regret it more than you know," he said quietly.

"She was a fool," Ciara insisted, "but she wasn't for sale then, and I can guarantee you can't buy her now. If that's why you're here, you might as well have your pilot file flight plans back to New York."

"I didn't spend months tracking you down to be ordered out of your life," he replied, his eyes taking on a gleam of intensity that made her breath hitch. "You know me better than that."

"I know you can't stand losing," she replied. "You also can't stand being wrong, and you were so damned wrong."

Wyatt's penetrating gaze never wavered from her tight one. His tone stayed low and level. "This time you're wrong. I came because I needed to see you."

She shook her head briskly in denial. "I don't believe it for a minute. If you needed to see me it's because you can't bear the fact that I walked away first."

“Not true, and I can prove it.”

Ciara clenched her teeth at his conceit, but kept her composure even though her heart raced, and blood roared in her ears. “I don’t want you here.”

For a few long seconds, they stared at each other, two independent, strong-willed people with an overload of passionate emotion. Then Wyatt leaned toward her.

“Convince me,” he commanded in an intimate whisper.

He was close enough for her to feel the heat of his body and catch his musky, masculine scent. She stared at his full, sensuously-sculpted mouth, watching as it shaped the two words. For just a moment, she allowed herself to remember the erotic pleasure his mouth could give. Heat spread through her body with unwanted speed and force.

Maybe that’s why her brain didn’t grasp the implication in his words. Her brows creased in a frown. “Convince you?”

“Touch me,” he continued, sliding off the desk to stand directly in front of it again. “Touch me while you look me in the eyes and tell me there’s nothing left between us.”

“Touch you?” she repeated on a broken breath. The thought sent panic snaking through her like the strike of a cobra. She could hold her own in a verbal battle against this arrogant, demanding man, but she couldn’t risk touching him. It made her too vulnerable. The memories of the intimacies they’d shared momentarily blazed within her.

“Anywhere,” he said with a rare lopsided grin. “Touch my hand, my arm, my cheek. Just make physical contact when you tell me you don’t want me here.”

Sexual tension crackled between them with the wildness of an electrical storm. Memories of hours of dark passion hung between them. The atmosphere grew heavier with each breath they drew, and Ciara struggled to get a grip.

“Hey, Boss!” A slim, attractive man in his mid-twenties rushed through her open office door. He halted abruptly when he realized she wasn’t alone. “Oops, sorry, I thought you were done with appointments today.”

Ciara felt dizzy with relief at the interruption. She quickly pulled herself together, shattering the intimacy that had her and Wyatt in its grip.

“No problem, Dane,” she said, dragging in a ragged breath. “Mr. Marcum was just leaving,” she added with a pointed glance at Wyatt.

“Marcum?” the blond man repeated, turning his avid attention to the taller man.

Wyatt held out his hand. “Wyatt Marcum.”

“Dane Evans, I manage the retail mall here at the resort.” He introduced himself, and then asked, “You wouldn’t be Wyatt Marcum of Marcum Communications, with the hottest new trend in waterproof electronics, would you?”

“Yes,” Wyatt replied simply, but she noted the flash of pride on his features. Marcum Communications was just one of many divisions of his family’s corporation, but the new electronic line was his concept, and he’d worked for years to get it developed and marketed.

Dane’s eyes widened and then his gaze went from Wyatt to Ciara and back again. “Any chance you’re discussing a new west coast franchise for this resort?”

His tone sounded pitifully hopeful. The staff here was like a family, loyal to a fault, but they all understood the cost of maintaining the place.

“I’m here on vacation, but I’m not averse to a franchise discussion.”

Ciara’s eyes narrowed on Wyatt’s face. He stared back at her with what she considered his closed corporate expression. She

hated that look, but this time she knew what he wasn't saying. He'd dangled a franchise in front of Beau. Nothing and no one was more important to Beau than this resort. Having a Marcum Communications shop in the resort's exclusive little shopping center could give them the financial cushion they badly needed.

"Mr. Marcum will be staying in Beau's suite for a short while," she told Dane and then turned to Wyatt. "I'm sure you're exhausted from your flight," she added dismissively. "Please don't hesitate to call the desk if there's anything you need."

"Why don't we discuss the franchise over dinner?" he suggested with a renewed glint of challenge in his eyes.

"I have plans." She replied coolly, but didn't elaborate.

"Hey, no need to worry about the staff get together," Dane hurriedly told her. "That's what I came to tell you. We're postponing due to too many conflicts tonight."

"Then I'll see you at seven," Wyatt shot at her before she could come up with another excuse. "I was told your Surf and Sea Restaurant is the best in town. I'll meet you there."

Ciara didn't comment. She just watched him walk from the room in his confident, long-legged stride. Her gaze involuntarily settled on his tight, muscled rear end, and she hated herself for finding it as sexy as sin.

The half-glass front entrance to her office allowed her to see the entire lobby and registration area. Her gaze followed Wyatt until he rounded the corner toward the elevators and out of sight. Only then did the hammering of her heart slow to normal.

"Well, hell," said Dane, regaining her attention. "No wonder I haven't been able to ignite even a small spark of interest from you these past months. You have a thing going with one of the world's wealthiest bachelors."

"No!" she refuted, her voice tight.

His brows rose at the uncharacteristic sharpness of her tone.

“Save the denial,” he continued. “The wall of tension when I walked in here was so thick I nearly bounced off it. Whatever you have going with him is hot.”

“You’re wrong,” she declared tersely. He had to be wrong, she silently added. Anger and resentment were the only emotion left between her and Wyatt.

“But you’ll negotiate for the franchise?” he asked hopefully. His baby blues and hopeful tone had her heaving a sigh. Ciara knew Dane genuinely cared about the resort’s financial future. They both knew what a franchise would mean. But having supervised Marcum’s marketing team last year, she also knew Brinson’s didn’t come close to being an acceptable, upscale market for the franchise. Asking Wyatt for it would be tantamount to begging for a personal favor.

It hadn’t been easy to block thoughts of him from her mind. She didn’t want to relive the hurt and humiliation or be reminded of what she’d lost; friend, lover, mentor. She knew Wyatt didn’t want anything more than answers and payback for her disappearing act. She’d wounded his pride. He’d annihilated hers.

When her office went quiet again, Ciara realized her whole body was trembling with heavy aftershocks of an emotional earthquake. Seeing Wyatt, hearing his voice, and inhaling the scent of him had shaken her to the core. She’d love him madly and passionately. He hadn’t just broken her heart. He’d shattered it. She’d slowly, painfully put it back together again, one aching piece at a time and couldn’t allow him back in her life.

Chapter Two

Wyatt prowled the owner’s suite on the penthouse floor. The décor of Beau’s apartment had an air of faded elegance, but it was

clean and tidy. He didn't mind the less than pristine furnishings. It felt more comfortable than most hotel rooms.

He studied the huge diagram of the resort on the living room wall. Ciara had an identical suite next to this one. They were the only two apartments on the top floor of a five-story building.

This suite had a wall of windows facing west that gave him a great view of the ocean. The late afternoon sun shot streaks of gold through the turquoise water. Those same shades of gold and turquoise could be found throughout the resort as the official color scheme.

Pacing from the windows to the southern-facing French doors, he looked out on a deck that housed a glassed-in patio with a small rectangular pool, a hot tub and a huge entertainment area. The pool water sparkled invitingly, making him imagine sharing it with Ciara. The thought of her slick, damp skin sliding against his own made his body harden with an instant rush of need. Frustration tightened his expression because he didn't see that happening anytime soon.

He'd hoped for some sign that she'd missed him. They'd been as intimate as a man and woman could be, the most passionate of lovers, yet all she'd shown him today was a short spurt of anger and an obvious desire to be rid of him. It stung his pride, but not nearly as bad as it'd suffered five months ago.

His security team had provided incriminating evidence of her involvement in an embezzlement plot. Videos showed her meeting in hidden areas of the building with the accountant and mastermind, Todd Baxter. The team had uncovered encrypted emails between the two where they'd plotted the theft. Ciara's emails had been filled with mocking references about Wyatt, his private life and sexual preferences.

Wyatt sighed and raked a hand through his hair. It had been an ingenious and effective scheme. The thought of Ciara's involvement with Baxter had distracted him while the other man and the money relocated to a country with no extradition policy.

A team of cyber experts had eventually uncovered Baxter's methods for electronically altering the files, and she'd been cleared of any complicity. But by then, she'd disappeared. He wanted her back.

Patience, he reminded himself. He'd made a major mistake in the way he'd handled the situation. According to his late father, Marcum men never accepted failure. If they made a mistake, they rectified it, but they never failed. He didn't plan to fail now.

Thoughts of his dad always brought a pang of loss, even though they'd never been close. Wyatt hadn't wanted to devote his life to expanding the family's financial empire. Hadn't wanted the oppressive responsibilities or a workaholic lifestyle. He'd wanted a career in electronic engineering, and his dad had resented him for it.

Then one horrific night, a freak ice storm and a fiery car crash had killed his mother and sister, Willow. His precious sister. Almost a decade later, the thought of her tightened his chest, so he locked away the memories as he'd done back then.

After the wreck, he and his dad had forged a strange new bond, doing their best to block all sentimentality from their lives. He'd boxed up the gut-wrenching grief and locked it away, hardening himself to the kind of emotion that dictated most people's lives. He'd adapted to an emotionless existence. His dad had slowly drunk himself to death.

Wyatt had dropped out of college and followed generations of Marcum men into the business world. In the decade since,

people labeled him heartless and driven, arrogant and demanding.

The opposite side of the resort's top story housed the Surf and Sea restaurant along with a large commercial kitchen. A wide hallway and bank of elevators divided the two sections of the floor with only one elevator that opened onto the owner's suites.

A few minutes before seven, Wyatt used his key card to access the security doors between the two sides of the floor. A short hallway brought him to the lobby entrance of the restaurant. He glanced around the elegant dining room, noting that most of the tables were occupied. The resort's color scheme of aqua and light gold continued in the décor here with the addition of some deep purples.

A young, attractive redhead greeted him with a smile. Her nametag identified her as Kennedy, the restaurant's hostess.

"Good evening, sir. Will you be dining alone?"

"Wyatt Marcum," he responded, thinking about how rarely he had to identify himself in Manhattan. "I'm meeting Ms. Moore for dinner."

"Of course," she replied, blushing.

Her blush made him wonder what, if anything, the staff knew of him. As soon as he'd learned Ciara's location, he'd ordered a comprehensive study on the resort. It was relatively small, just fifty rooms, with a tight-knit group of employees. He supposed they had an active grapevine.

"Ms. Moore is speaking with the chef right now, but I'll be happy to show you to your table."

He followed her as she wove through the collection of round, candlelit tables, absently noting the age of the customers. Most looked to be middle aged couples, with or without children.

Not exactly the wealthy, twenty-something age group that sought the latest in electronic devices, he noted absently.

The sun still shone at this hour, but heavily shaded windows gave the room a dim, more intimate setting. He liked the tasteful, relaxed feel of the low-ceilinged area. He'd bet his Aston Martin that it reflected Ciara's talent for design. She had a gift for making people feel comfortable. A trait he definitely lacked.

The hostess paused at a table for two located just outside the kitchen doors where wait-staff swung in and out with orders. He could hear the clang of pots and pans mingled with the chatter of kitchen staff. A frown settled on his features.

Nobody in his social sphere would ever have seated him close to the noise and congestion. With money came privilege. He'd grown up with the best society had to offer and took the trappings for granted. Although he'd worked long and hard to maintain those privileges, his financial status had never won him any points with Ciara.

Tonight, she wanted to remind him that he'd trespassed, uninvited, into her territory. He'd manipulated her into sharing dinner, so she maintained control of it. No privacy, no intimacy, just business. Her ability to challenge him on every level kept him both annoyed and intrigued to the point of madness.

He took a seat facing the kitchen and refused the offer of a drink. As he watched and listened, he saw her approach the doors with a trim Hispanic man in a waiter's uniform. The smile she gave the younger man caused a pang of envy. He missed the simple pleasure of it. The smile disappeared as soon as she spotted him at the table.

Wyatt rose as she approached. She hadn't changed from the pale green business suit she'd worn earlier. Her thick, lustrous, midnight dark hair had gotten longer, but now she'd pulled it into a tight knot at her nape. Both were clues to the fact she

wanted to keep things on a professional level. It couldn't happen. Everything between them was intense, passionate, and very, very intimate.

"Johnny, this is Mr. Marcum. He's staying in Beau's suite. Wyatt, this is Johnny Cantu, our head waiter."

Wyatt offered his hand. Johnny shook it and then helped Ciara with her chair before he could assist her. They settled across from each other at the small table, but he felt a chasm as wide as the Golden Gate Bridge between them.

"Can I start your meal with a drink?" asked Johnny. Ciara glanced at him, but he shook his head. "Just water, please," she answered for them.

"Would you like a few minutes to study the menu?" Wyatt promptly replied. "Ms. Moore knows my preferences and your specialties, so I'll let her order for us."

Ciara's expression tightened at his familiarity but she didn't hesitate for long. "We'll both have the grilled salmon with whiskey sauce, roasted red potatoes and steamed asparagus, please, along with the dinner rolls."

"Salad? Appetizer?"

She glanced at him again, but he shook his head.

"That will do it, Johnny, thanks."

As the waiter moved out of earshot, Wyatt's attention focused on Ciara. She shook her napkin and placed it on her lap, avoiding eye contact with him.

"You admire him." He could always tell if she just tolerated someone or actually liked them.

"He's a great employee and a good guy. He works five nights a week but is always willing to take on more hours when needed."

"And there's always a need?"

“Always, in this business,” she agreed. “He just earned his associate degree in restaurant management, so he’s been juggling work and school for the past couple years.”

“Does he plan to stay on staff now that he has his degree?” Ciara frowned, and he wanted to smooth the line between her brows. He wanted to touch her, feel the satin of her skin and the warmth she always generated. No matter how often he’d wanted her in the past, she’d always welcomed his touch with sexy sweetness.

Something in him had gone cold when she left New York. He wanted her back in his life, but she’d thrown him a curve with her dedication to the resort and her insistence on staying in California. He needed time to properly analyze the situation and formulate an effective strategy.

“I think he’ll stay for a while. His wife is expecting their first baby, so he doesn’t want to change insurance right now.” Wyatt knew the status of the resort’s finances and knew she didn’t have the resources to pay competitive wages. Still, she’d worry about her people and want the best of them. It was a trait he admired. He did his best to keep his staff content but mainly because it garnered loyalty. For Ciara, everything was personal.

“When’s the baby due?” he asked, just to keep her talking even though her tone remained detached and impersonal. He’d missed the sound of her voice, missed their sharing of opinions and spirited discussions.

“Not until September, so I’ve got four months before any decisions have to be made.”

He nodded, studying her normally expressive features. Not so tonight. Her golden-brown eyes held a closed expression. Her lush, kissable mouth was firm and tight, denying him the warmth of her smile.

When she didn't offer any further conversation, he prodded. "It looks like you have a capacity crowd tonight," he said, absently thanking a waitress who brought them frosty glasses of water.

"We try to keep prices down and encourage guests to eat in-house."

"Difficult with the cost of food, supplies and service?"

"An ongoing challenge," she admitted.

"But you've managed to pull the resort from the brink of bankruptcy in five short months," he said, stating the fact rather than asking a question. Her marketing skills had brought both old and new business. He knew the enormity of the task and that she'd worked twelve-to-fourteen-hour days, seven days a week to achieve it.

Ciara's reaction to the praise was an indelicate snort. "And, of course, you had a complete financial study done before you headed out here."

"It's what I do," he replied without apology. She knew how he worked. He never tackled a problem without arming himself with all available knowledge.

"And you didn't break any privacy laws doing it?" Another bone of contention between them. She resented his ability to access private banking and tax information. He considered the practice a tool of doing business. Instead of responding, he lifted his glass for a long drink of water.

The smells coming from the kitchen had his mouth watering and stomach rumbling. Sometimes he got so busy he forgot to eat. When they'd been together, Ciara had taken it upon herself to make sure he ate at regular intervals. Another thing he'd missed since she'd left New York.

Their meals arrived, and his plate held twice as much food as hers. She had to have requested the double portion for him.

Always the nurturer, he thought, even though she hated his guts right now. Her caring nature had surprised and pleased him when they'd first gotten to know each other. It touched something deep inside him that he couldn't quite define.

They ate in silence for a while, the sounds of the kitchen and chatting patrons rumbling in the background. He normally ate to assuage hunger without wasting time. Tonight, he slowed the process to draw out the meal, and they finished about the same time. As soon as he put down his fork, she got straight to business.

"Would you really consider Brinson's for a franchise?" she asked, her gaze trained on his face.

"If you want it," he stated simply, shifting his attention directly to her.

"And the cost?" she asked.

"Wholesale cost of product, to be paid quarterly with the first quarter payment due after you turn a reasonable profit."

"Up-front, buy-in costs? Percentage of profits?" She questioned warily.

"None."

Her eyes narrowed. "Absolutely no strings?" she asked, her voice growing more suspicious with each question.

"None."

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because I wouldn't refuse you anything," he declared in a no-nonsense tone.

The bold statement had the air crackling between them. He noticed a jump in her pulse and the tightening of her lips.

"I've never asked you for anything," she reminded flatly.

He nodded solemnly. "I know," he said, dropping his napkin to the table, "and that's exactly why I'd give you anything in my power to give you."

The vein in her neck beat erratically now. He watched it for a few seconds in fascination, enjoying the slight show of emotion while remembering the softness of her skin. He wanted to kiss and taste that skin; run his tongue over it with long, lazy strokes. Dragging his gaze from the smoothness of her neck, he lifted it to her eyes again. They held a hint of suspicion and doubt, so he explained.

“You’re the only woman I ever dated who didn’t want something from me.”

Her full, sensuous lips tilted downward in disbelief, temporarily mesmerizing him. He wanted those lips. Wanted to lick them, nibble on them, and smother them with hot kisses. Wanted them on his body with a deep, endless craving.

“It’s true,” he forced himself to explain even though discussing his private life always made him uneasy. “As a teenager, the girls wanted to ride in chauffeured cars, wanted fancy dates or tickets to sold-out concerts. Most of the women since have preferred job perks, social favors, jewelry or just money. All of them except you.”

He could see by the widening of her eyes that he’d managed to shock her. She blinked but didn’t argue the truth of his words.

He watched her chest rise as she drew in a deep breath. His gaze lingered on the firm mounds beneath the soft fabric of her blouse, remembering the taste and feel of them. When she noticed the direction of his gaze, she huffed in annoyance and looked away from him.

“I’ll call Gabe tonight and have the contract on your desk in the morning,” he said, finally breaking the tense silence. “Now tell me what it will take to get you back to work at Marcum’s.”

Her gaze flew to his again, her golden eyes glittering with determination. Her tone left no doubt about her sincerity.

“There is nothing you can do, say or pay to lure me back to Marcum’s.”

He studied the firm set of her jaw and the tightness of her mouth, recognizing the stubbornness because it mirrored his own. A knot formed in his gut because he knew she meant it. He’d thought for sure he could entice her back to her old job because she’d truly enjoyed it. Now he had to reevaluate.

“You plan to spend the rest of your professional life managing a resort?”

He knew how hard she’d worked to climb the executive ladder; how much she’d thrived on the challenge of a Fortune 500 company. As far as he could tell from financial reports, she wasn’t even taking a salary from Beau.

“That’s my plan.”

He fully intended to change her plan but dropped the subject for now.

“And what about your personal life?”

“What about it?” she asked, voice tight.

“Do you want to get married?”

He caught a flicker of what could have been pain or vulnerability in her eyes, but it was swiftly masked with that damned detached expression.

When she’d disappeared, he’d heard lots of opinions from his tight circle of friends and associates. One told him to find a more suitable lover. One said she’d come crawling back. One believed her guilty of theft despite the proof. Another assured him it was a clever scheme to trap him in marriage.

Part of him hoped she wanted marriage. It gave him bargaining power. But another part of him hoped she wouldn’t be as mercenary as gold diggers in his past. He waited, every muscle and nerve tense, for her reply.

"I'd like to get married someday," she responded without emotion. "I'd like a home of my own with children, if and when I can find a man I'd trust with my future."

Her dig about trust had the knot coiling tighter in his gut. She made it clear he didn't meet her standards, and she despised him for the humiliation at Marcum's.

"Let me guess," he rasped in low tone, anger curling through him. "Your Mr. Perfect would work nine-to-five, have a mortgage on a house in the suburbs and coach little league soccer?"

Her eyes heated with annoyance. "You're such a snob. There's absolutely nothing wrong with the suburbs and soccer."

"Except you'd be bored to death within a year," he tossed back at her.

She doused the fire in her eyes, and her features took on a cool, indifferent expression again. Johnny returned to clear their plates and offer them dessert or coffee. They both declined.

"Are you sleeping with surfer dude?" He asked when they were alone again.

Ciara gave him a blank stare. "What? Who?"

"The tanned, blond retail guy in your office earlier."

"Dane?"

He nodded, watching for any emotional reaction to the mention of the other man.

"I have no idea," she replied.

He quirked a brow, jaw tight. "You don't know if you're sleeping with him?"

After a long-suffering sigh, she said, "I have no idea if he's a surfer, and who I sleep with is none of your business."

"It's my business if you want me to help him set up a shop."

She continued to stare at him. His gaze dropped to the pulse throbbing at her throat. Another soft, heated spot he wanted under his mouth.

“I am not sleeping with Dane.”

“Dating him?”

She didn’t reply but gave her head a brief shake.

“He’s not your Mr. Perfect?”

Her eyes narrowed, but she shook her head again, and some of the tension drained from his body. The thought of her taking another lover had dogged him more than he cared to admit.

While they’d eaten, many of the diners had filtered out of the restaurant. A small number of patrons remained, moving toward the end of the room near a piano bar and a small dance floor. A young man who looked to be college age began to play at a baby grand.

A shiver of reaction coursed through Wyatt as the first notes rang clear and pure. He closed his eyes briefly when a familiar sadness accompanied the melody. Then he stood and reached a hand to her.

“Dance with me.”

Ciara’s features tightened, and the knot in his gut unwound a little. She had no reason to refuse unless she still felt the wild attraction they’d always shared. Seconds ticked by as she looked at his hand with undisguised suspicion.

“I don’t want to dance,” she finally mumbled.

“I’m not leaving without a dance,” he said patiently. He wanted to feel her against him. It had been too damned long and his body buzzed with need. “I can stand here all night, but I don’t think you want a scene in front of your staff.”

Her gaze locked with his again, devoid of emotion now even though her jaw was tight. “Not above a little bullying?” she taunted. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

She rose but ignored his outstretched hand and started toward the back of the room, her head high and spine rigid.

When they reached the dance floor, he slid his right hand to the back of her waist and clasped her right hand in his left. She placed her free hand on his chest. The first touch shot a jolt of pure sensual pleasure through him. Never in his life had a woman's touch revved his senses so completely. He'd always had a healthy appetite for sex, but with her, the need stayed voracious and insatiable. Nothing and no one could assuage the desire he felt for her. The last five months had been hell on his libido.

The pianist played a slow, haunting love song, and Wyatt held Ciara at a respectful distance. He inhaled deeply, dragging in her unique, faintly sweet and utterly enticing scent. The warmth of her body set his on fire. It seemed like years instead of months since he'd held her, felt the softness of her skin, the hot press of her hand against his chest. It seared him through the cotton of his shirt and set his nerves on fire.

He glanced down at her. She stood a few inches shorter than his six feet. Her forehead reached his chin, but she stared blankly over his shoulder. He dipped his face to the satin softness of her hair, inhaling the familiar vanilla scent of her shampoo. It triggered a shudder deep inside him.

She remained stiff in his arms as they slowly drifted around the floor for a couple minutes. Then an energetic man who danced at twice the beat of the music almost collided with Ciara. He tightened his grip on her and drew her close against him. A tremor shot through his body at the feel of her lush breasts pressed to chest. Every inch of him reacted to the closeness.

"Wyatt!" She grumbled a protest but didn't actively fight the embrace.

“No surprise that my body reacts to yours.” He whispered against her ear and felt a shiver course over her. She shifted restlessly in his embrace, and his body hardened more.

When he slid his hand lower on her back and nudged her against his fully aroused body, she emitted a low sound that made him go harder. They moved slowly around the dance floor; bodies brushing against each other as the music swelled to a crescendo that sent another ripple over him. He felt Ciara take a deep breath that crushed her breasts closer to his chest.

As the final notes of the song died, she pulled from his embrace and strode swiftly across the room. He let her go and followed her toward the lobby at a slower pace. She stopped briefly to speak with the hostess. Wyatt caught Johnny and asked for the bill to be charged to his room.

“On the house, sir, boss’s orders,” the waiter replied. He nodded, then handed two c-notes to the young man.

“Thanks for the service. Share that with the pianist.” Johnny glanced at the money and seemed to hesitate. “The boss. She’s special. The staff here wouldn’t want her to get hurt.”

Wyatt admired the younger man’s loyalty to Ciara. It didn’t surprise him that she’d inspired that kind of respect, even in so short a time. They all probably thought he was the Big Bad Wolf.

“Understood,” he said, nodding a curt goodbye.

He followed Ciara out into the lobby and through the short hallway that led to their suites. As soon as he’d closed the door behind them, he caught her arm and spun her flat against the wall. He held her in place with the palm of his right hand splayed on her chest.

He’d cut off his arm before hurting her, but he needed her undivided attention. She wanted to disappear into her own apartment, but he wanted more time. He wanted to shatter her indifferent attitude.

The feel of her heart pounding against his palm, and the fullness of her breasts nearly destroyed his unraveling composure.

“Five months,” he said on a low reverberating growl. “One hundred and fifty-one long days and longer nights when I didn’t know where you were, who you were with, or how you were surviving,” he accused, his voice shaking with months’ worth of pent-up frustration. “If your goal was some kind of perverse payback, then you deserve to know it was a goddamned rousing success.”

They stared at each other for several pulse-pounding minutes while the air around them crackled with sexual energy. Neither blinked, and nothing changed in Ciara’s expression. She continued to stare at him with cool detachment. Only the knotted tension in her body and her wildly beating heart hinted at churning emotion.