



*Endless
in love*

MAVERICK BILLIONAIRES BOOK 8

BELLA
ANDRE
AND JENNIFER
SKULLY

Endless in Love

~ The Maverick Billionaires ~

Book 8

Bella Andre & Jennifer Skully

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

About the Book

A note from Bella & Jennifer

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Epilogue

Excerpt from *Breathless in Love*

Excerpt from *The Look of Love*

Books by Bella Andre

Books by Jennifer Skully

About the Authors

ENDLESS IN LOVE

~ The Maverick Billionaires, Book 8 ~

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A sexy billionaire and the one woman he can't have...

Dane Harrington is the epitome of power, wealth, and success. The self-made billionaire is used to getting what he wants, when he wants it. And he's well aware he wouldn't be able to get it all done without his brilliant personal assistant, Cammie Chandler.

Cammie is smart, beautiful, and fiercely independent. And before she ever thought she'd work for Dane, the two of them had a steamy night full of sensual touches and passionate kisses. But once he offered her the fantastic position as his personal assistant, they both agreed the only possible way to make it work was if they remained perfectly professional. But no matter how hard they've both tried, neither of them has been able to completely forget their one incredible, sexy night together.

When Dane finally admits the only woman he's ever truly wanted is Cammie, their burning desire becomes too powerful to resist. Can they throw out the rule book that has kept them safe for so long? Or will a love that seems endless be forever doomed?

A note from Bella & Jennifer

Thank you so much for joining us in our journey through the love lives of the Maverick Billionaires! We have been beyond thrilled by how you have taken each Maverick hero and heroine into your heart for the past seven books. Now, we couldn't be more pleased for you to get to know the newest Mavericks – the Harrington family. Like the previous books in this series, regardless of how much money they have in their bank accounts, at the end of the day, each hero and heroine is just like us. They all long for true love, whether they're willing to admit it to themselves, or not.

We hope you fall head over heels in love with the Harringtons! And of course, all of your favorite Mavericks will be in all of the upcoming books, as well.

With love,

Bella Andre and Jennifer Skully

P.S. Please sign up for our New Release newsletters for more information on new books.
<http://www.BellaAndre.com/Newsletter> and
<http://bit.ly/SkullyNews>.

Chapter One

“Now, that’s a lot of pregnant ladies.” Eyes on the women on the sidelines, Dane Harrington’s sister Ava pulled her glossy, dark red hair into an elastic band.

Dane couldn’t tell if that was envy in her eyes. Or terror. Knowing his sister, who was thirty-six and a couple of years younger than him, it had to be terror. She didn’t flinch in boardrooms, and a ferocious game of soccer never alarmed her. But babies struck fear into the hearts of all the Harrington siblings—his two sisters and two brothers.

Golden Gate Park on a Sunday afternoon provided the backdrop for one such ferocious soccer game. The Mavericks set up the collapsible goal nets his sister Gabby had brought, and his brothers, Troy and Clay, finished the chalk lines. Since the lawn wasn’t an official soccer field, they shared it with kids flying kites, dog owners throwing Frisbees, families enjoying a picnic, and sunbathers catching rays on the first sunny Sunday anyone had seen in six weeks.

January had been wet in the San Francisco Bay Area, with storms hitting hard along the entire West Coast. The rain, thankfully, had let up a week ago, and now, at the tail end of January, the turf had dried out, making an impromptu game possible without it turning into a mud bath. Not that Dane was averse to getting dirty for something important.

And today was important to him.

The Maverick ladies sat in deck chairs on the grassy sidelines, ready to cheer on their husbands and significant others. And yeah, that was a lot of pregnant women. Paige Collins was the furthest along, her due date somewhere around the end of March.

Fernsby, Dane’s butler, who insisted on going everywhere with Dane, rolled his ubiquitous tea trolley through the gathering, offering his baked treats and cups of tea.

Dane caught Cammie's eye, and she gave him a thumbs-up. While her hair shimmered red-gold in the sunshine, Cammie's green eyes seemed to sparkle, something he swore he could see even from this distance. Among the women on the sidelines, she formed the Harrington cheering section—along with T. Rex, the long-haired mini dachshund they shared, who'd run to her the moment Dane unleashed him.

His personal assistant for the last twelve years, Cammie Chandler was one of the most caring, loyal people he knew. He felt exceptionally grateful she'd taken time away from her uncle's bedside in the San Juan Bautista care home to make the two-hour drive north to Golden Gate Park. Her uncle suffered with late-stage Alzheimer's, and Cammie had been on family leave for the past five months to be with him.

But Dane needed her input on the Mavericks before he moved forward with his plans. Cammie's impressions were always spot-on. He thanked his lucky stars for the day Clyde Westerbourne sent her to him for that job interview twelve years ago. His work life had been a shambles, with one assistant after another only making his problems worse. All of twenty-two at the time, Cammie had saved his work life from catastrophe.

Ava kicked his shin. Thinking about Cammie, he'd missed Will Franconi kicking the ball and starting the game. Though soccer normally required at least seven players, there were only five Harringtons. Playing in teams of five, the Mavericks probably thought they had the advantage since they could bring in Cal Danniger or Gideon Jones to spell the others—not that Dane had ever seen an exhausted Maverick.

But they didn't know Gabby and Ava were the Harringtons' secret weapons.

Gabby was right there, taking control of the ball, dribbling it down the field, even though she could have kicked it to one of her brothers. But that was Gabby, totally focused on the goal. Youngest of them all at only thirty, she was blond like their mother, while all the males of the family were dark-

haired. Ava, with her red locks, was a throwback to their grandfather.

Both his sisters were holy terrors on the soccer field. And super competitive. Even he found their ruthlessness shocking. They could steal the ball out from under you in a split second. Of all the Harringtons, they were the fastest and wiliest. Soccer wasn't about brute strength. It was about agility and strategy. And they were both excellent tacticians.

Gabby swiftly passed the ball to Ava, just as Matt Tremont made his move, going in for the steal. But he pulled up short, mystified to find the ball no longer there.

Dane and his siblings had played soccer with Gabby since she'd joined her middle school soccer team in the Bay Area, then had gone on to play all through high school. The family had used the game as a way to deal with their parents' deaths in an avalanche while skiing in the French Alps. The blows had continued when they'd learned their parents had squandered their fortune, racking up huge debts. Soccer practice helped them blow off steam and kept the family from imploding. Dane had spent his entire adult life keeping his brothers and sisters together. They were all his best friends, the ones he turned to and counted on, be it critical middle-of-the-night calls or just goofing around.

But now they'd all found their own paths and were doing damn well. Even if each of them had yet to find a partner—or, hell, even a serious relationship. At thirty-eight years old, Dane's life had become about business, his resorts, and expansion.

His team—his family—moved the soccer ball rapidly down the field toward the Mavericks' goal net. While Clay played goalie, Troy and Ava kicked the ball back and forth, but soon Gabby would move in for the kill. Cal and Gideon yelled instructions from the sidelines while Matt, along with Evan Collins, tried vainly to steal the ball. They hadn't a clue it was no use.

Gabby went for the goal. Sebastian Montgomery dove for the ball before it made it into the net, his fingers falling an inch short.

Of course one of his sisters scored first. Dane high-fived his teammates, while the Mavericks stomped the grass like angry stallions.

They were an equally competitive bunch, one of the many reasons they interested him. Since that New Year's Eve gala at Dane's Napa resort, the Mavericks and Harringtons had been feeling each other out over one-on-one lunches, drinks, or dinners. All the proceeds from the fundraiser had gone to benefit Lean on Us, Gideon's foundation for veterans and foster kids. Dane had worked with Cal Danniger and Lyssa Spencer extensively on the holiday gala, getting to know them well. As he learned more about the Mavericks, he discovered a synergy between them he couldn't quite explain. And he envied it.

A couple of days ago, Will Franconi had called him, saying they should all talk.

Dane had suggested the soccer game.

"Sounds perfect," Will said. "Afterward, we'll grab a pint in the city and talk." After a beat, he added, "We feel there's great potential in pursuing some business ventures with all of you."

Dane thought the same thing. His family agreed. The Mavericks would complement everything his sisters and brothers brought to the table.

They got in position for the Mavericks' turn at the ball. Now they'd had a taste of the Harringtons, the Mavericks would be on guard and not as easy to beat.

Dane went for the steal right under Evan's nose. But the man saw him coming, and the ball whirled out of his reach to Matt, who dribbled it down the field. Yeah, the Mavericks were now playing tough.

He'd first met the Mavericks when he anonymously purchased a Miguel Fernando Correa painting from Gideon. The famous artist's work had come into Gideon's hands through an army comrade. After remaining unknown for generations, the painting was now worth millions. Instead of exploiting the windfall, Gideon had used the proceeds to start his nonprofit foundation.

Of course, Dane had heard of the Mavericks long before that. Who hadn't? When Lyssa and Cal came to London with the intention of hitting him up for a donation, he'd revealed the Correa painting upstairs in his study. And told them of his desire to help the foundation in any way he could. He'd brought in more donations and offered his resort for the gala fundraiser Lyssa had planned.

But it was Cammie who'd first seen the magic in the painting, encouraging him to bid on it. He'd upped the bid until there was no doubt the amazing work of art would be his. After he'd enjoyed the painting in his London townhome for a few months, it was now making the rounds of galleries and museums worldwide. Cammie had set up the tour from her uncle's bedside.

His gaze drifted once more to her on the sidelines. She watched the game as avidly as the Maverick ladies, all of them shouting encouragement as their men kicked the ball between them, moving it swiftly down the field, neither Gabby nor Ava able to check their momentum.

If Cammie hadn't pointed out the Correa painting to him, Dane would never have connected with the Mavericks.

She amazed him with her dedication. She'd taken care of her uncle for years after he was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's. Seven years ago, the disease progressed to the point that she'd had to put him in a memory care facility. He'd lived far longer than most Alzheimer's patients. A few months ago, however, it became clear he was close to the end of his journey. Dane had insisted Cammie take family leave when he found her sleeping at her desk. The only person who could

calm her uncle, she'd been traveling back and forth to the care home several times a week. But caring for him and managing her job at the same time was affecting her health.

After these last few months without Cammie, Dane's life was again in a shambles. Which was why he was so glad to have her here today, though he knew how hard it was for her to leave her uncle. She was more than Dane's personal assistant. She was as important to him as his family. She kept him on track. She was right on about ventures he should go for and schemes he should avoid, seconding his gut feelings. She was smart. She was diligent. And so efficient there'd never been a single hiccup in his work life. Until she left. Even with the temps who'd taken her place, he was barely hanging on. Not that he'd tell her. Her place was by her uncle's side right now.

Except today, when Dane needed her.

The ball thwacked him in the head. He hadn't even realized he'd stopped running. Or that Gabby had gone for another steal. But Matt stole it back. On her feet, his wife, Ari, punched her fist in the air, screaming at Matt to go all the way.

The sidelines erupted with cheers when the Mavericks kicked the ball into the corner of the net despite Clay's dive.

Almost lost among the women on the sidelines, Cammie jumped up and down on the grass, waving her hands, throwing out catcalls. Because she was all for the Harringtons. Always had been. Always would be.

That was his girl Friday.

* * *

The tied game roused all the passions on the sidelines, everyone shouting hurrahs for the Mavericks, who'd just put in Gideon and Cal to replace Evan and Daniel.

Lyssa Spencer, her dark curls shining in the sunlight, turned to Cammie. "Dane's sisters are crazy good." Even her eyes, a chocolate brown like her brother Daniel's, seemed to smile.

Having taken her seat again, Cammie ran her fingers through Rex's fur as he climbed once more into her lap. Ava and Gabby were the Harringtons' surprise advantage. "They're pretty good."

Letting out a big laugh, Lyssa gushed, "They're out of this world. They could go pro. I mean, my brothers are no slouches." She put a hand on her belly. "And look at Cal out there. He's crushing it." The pure love on Lyssa's face made Cammie's heart stutter. Cal Danniger, the Mavericks' business manager, though quite a few years older than Lyssa's twenty-six, was still extremely attractive and fit, with a hint of silver in his dark hair.

At more than three months pregnant, Lyssa wore that special motherhood glow. Dane had mentioned that Cal and Lyssa had postponed their wedding until after the baby came in July.

Kelsey Collins, Evan's younger sister, nudged Lyssa's arm. "And let me tell you, those Harrington men are no slouches either." She winked, adding a swoony note to her tone. "Talk about tall, dark, and handsome."

The Harrington brothers were definitely a handsome lot—all over six feet, with thick, dark hair and blue eyes that seemed to see everything inside you. At least, Dane's gaze did. Once, long ago, Troy had asked her out. Naturally, she'd turned him down. Working for Dane, it would have been awkward, even if she'd been interested. She was fairly certain Dane had read Troy the riot act for trying to poach one of his employees. He'd even apologized for Troy's harassment, though Cammie had scoffed at his use of that word. Troy had asked, she'd said no, they'd both been fine, end of story. Clay, of course, had never even thought about dating her. They might be drop-dead gorgeous like their older brother, but no way did she need that kind of complication.

But she certainly wasn't blind. They were *all* drop-dead gorgeous. Especially Dane. Not that she actually *looked*.

“I really thought you would date him, Lyssa.” Kelsey waggled her eyebrows. “He’s such a hottie, with all that thick hair a woman would just die to run her fingers through.” She kneaded the air with her fingers like a cat. “Especially after that trip you made to his London townhouse.”

Lyssa’s gaze rested on Cal, adoration in her eyes as she said, “Dane’s London house is stunning, filled with furniture and artwork that should be in a museum.” She ignored Kelsey’s insinuations about Dane and pointed to Fernsby. “And the house came with its very own British butler.”

Fernsby, now busily passing out his baked treats, had been with Dane for years, long before Dane bought the townhouse in the fashionable London borough of Chelsea. Cammie always suspected that baking was how Fernsby showed his love, though you certainly couldn’t tell from his manner. With the ageless face of a person who neither smiled nor frowned, he could be anywhere from forty to sixty. Wearing his ever-present stern expression, and with his tall frame and cultured voice, he was the epitome of the loyal manservant, always at Dane’s side no matter where, be it the London house, the manor in the English countryside, the Pebble Beach estate, the San Francisco flat, or even the small Caribbean island Dane owned.

But Kelsey didn’t let the subject go. “Come on, Lyssa, don’t tell me you didn’t think about a little—” She fluffed her ponytail of tawny blond-streaked hair and grinned instead of saying exactly what. “—for just a moment during that first meeting with Dane in his fabulous London home.”

Hands on her baby bump, Lyssa’s gaze fastened on Cal as he masterfully controlled the ball. “You know Cal was always the man for me.” Her eyes reflected the dreamy note in her voice. And she nudged Kelsey. “You’re the one who should date Dane. He’s perfect for you.”

Kelsey visibly shuddered. “No way. He’s too rich, powerful, and handsome. I want someone I don’t have to compete with.”

Cammie liked the outspoken Kelsey. From Dane, Cammie had learned that Kelsey and her twin brother, Tony—who couldn't make it today—had appeared in their older brother's life only a year ago. Evan had known nothing about the twins, his mother having left when he was only nine years old. But he'd apparently welcomed them all with open arms, his birth mother included. Cammie was sure there had to be a major story there.

On the field, Dane stole the ball from Cal, and the Maverick ladies erupted in catcalls. Of course, Cammie jumped to her feet cheering. Rex, accidentally dumped on the ground, barked his joy, too, then abruptly ran off to beg Fernsby for a treat.

Kelsey had said she didn't want someone too rich, powerful, or handsome. But she'd forgotten one adjective—perfect. The things Kelsey said about Dane didn't bother Cammie. She wasn't proprietary about her boss. She certainly wasn't jealous. She was just a little uncomfortable with Kelsey talking about Dane as if he were a prize piece of beef. Even if he was. Cammie had done her best not to notice that over the years she'd worked for him. She'd had her uncle to think of, who'd relied on her for so long she couldn't remember a time when he hadn't. And she'd always been there for him.

But even if she had absolutely no designs on Dane—their working relationship was too important—she liked the way he'd introduced her today, not *just* as his assistant, but adding, “I can't do anything without her.”

With all the jeering from the Maverick ladies, Cammie cheered the Harringtons. Staid Fernsby, incapable of even cracking a smile, certainly couldn't do it.

Cammie punched the air. “You go, Dane. Crush those Mavericks.”

Suddenly, she was the target of all the Maverick females, battle light in their eyes, ready to squash the opposition.

Until Kelsey laughed loudly. Then they all doubled over, laughing in near hysteria.

Lyssa held her baby bump. Ari Tremont and Rosie hugged each other, both women as far along in their pregnancies as Lyssa. Paige Collins, Evan's wife, had to sit back down. There wasn't a more polite way to say it: She was huge, beautifully pregnant with twins, and due in a couple of months.

Wistfulness fell over Cammie, even as she wiped tears of laughter from her eyes. They were all so happy. And their children would be so close in age. The two boys, Matt's son, Noah, and Rosie's son, Jorge, both almost seven, were dying to be big brothers. One huge happy family, they were wonderful to watch.

And the burst of laughter they'd all shared made Cammie long to be one of them.

Chapter Two

Even as the women wiped their eyes, ignoring the game for the moment, Rosie Diaz stepped up to Cammie. “We’re so glad you could come today. Dane talks so much about you.”

Cammie smiled, feeling the same thrill that had come over her earlier when Dane introduced her as more than his assistant. “I’m sorry I missed your art show. I heard it was a brilliant success.”

Rosie blushed. Like Lyssa, she and Gideon had postponed their wedding until after the baby was born. She would marry her handsome, blond ex-marine—Ari Tremont’s brother—in the fall.

“Thank you so much.” Rosie’s smile reached almost ear to ear. “I appreciate that.” She was an amazing painter, according to Dane, and Cammie believed him. He was never wrong. As she tucked her beautifully thick, curly black hair behind her ear, Rosie’s smile faded. “You don’t need to apologize. We all know how hard it’s been taking care of your uncle.”

“Thank you,” Cammie said softly, feeling the ever-present twist in her stomach.

This was the first and only time she’d left her uncle since he’d worsened last September. But she’d felt deeply how important it was to meet the Mavericks and their partners, rather than just be told about them. When Dane was considering business ventures, she couldn’t be left out.

Still, it had been a hard decision to leave Uncle Lochlan, even for the day.

He’d first shown signs of something wrong when she was a senior in high school, and it had been terrifying. She’d planned to start college that fall, and yet, she couldn’t leave Uncle Lochlan when they didn’t even know what was wrong. Instead, she’d taken a job with Clyde Westerbourne, a good

friend of her uncle's. That turned out to be the best decision of her life. It eventually led her to Dane—or rather, to her job with Dane.

The Alzheimer's diagnosis had been a terrible blow, but thankfully her uncle's progression had been uncannily slow. The doctors said he was one for the record books. He'd been able to live in his own home, with her help, until seven years ago, when the police found him wandering more than a mile from home. She thanked God every day for Dane's help, and for Ava, who owned retirement communities, elder care homes, and memory care facilities all over the country and internationally. Ava had found Uncle Lochlan a place.

But now his time was finally running out.

Rosie laid a gentle hand on Cammie's arm. "If you ever need even the smallest bit of help, don't hesitate to call one of us. We're always here for people we care about."

The touch, Rosie's smile, and the kindness in her words warmed Cammie's heart. She'd lost her parents in a car accident when she was seven and gone to live with Uncle Lochlan. He was her only family. And now she was losing him.

And yet, here was a slew of Mavericks entering her world.

As the first half of the game ended, the teammates rushed Fernsby, who'd uncapped bottles of water and laid out an array of tea sandwiches for the players' fortification.

Gabby sniffed one of the sandwiches, looked at Fernsby, then smiled ever so sweetly. "I'm sure the sandwiches are totally amazing, dear Fernsby. The only thing that would make them even better is if there were no eggs or butter and the bread was gluten-free."

Fernsby's face morphed into a rigid mask of horror. "Excuse me, dear lady, but it can't be an egg salad sandwich without eggs. Eggs and butter are the mainstays of a life well lived." Then he drawled, "And I won't address gluten-free bread, as it cannot even be called bread."

Gabby shrugged, laughter dancing in her eyes as she got right up in his face. “I think you and I need to have our own little bake-off one of these days.”

Catching Dane’s eye, Cammie shared a smile with him. Fernsby and Gabby had a longstanding rivalry. Vegan and gluten-free for years, Gabby had started her own conglomerate, a franchise of bakeries specializing in vegan and gluten-free products. She managed her own franchise in Carmel. But even after her great success, Fernsby loved his butter, eggs, and all manner of dairy products.

Kelsey leaned close. “Is he just Fernsby? Or does he have a first name?”

Cammie smiled, shaking her head. “If he does, I’ve never heard it. I think he was just born as Fernsby. He’s been with Dane for-like-ever, since Dane bought that first resort.”

That drew her gaze to Dane again as he mowed down one of Fernsby’s tea sandwiches on thinly sliced bread. That was the British way, so of course it was Fernsby’s way.

Seeming to sense her eyes on him, Dane turned, a beautiful smile on his lips that sometimes made her heart race—not much, just a bit. Because, of course, they had rules that kept their relationship purely platonic. They worked so well together, amazing colleagues that they were. One might even say they had synergy. At least, that’s what Dane called it. To her, it was the perfect relationship. Even if there were times she thought—

But no way would she ruin what they had. Her job and her uncle’s care were her priorities. What if she and Dane started something only to have it end badly? The best twelve years of her life would be nothing more than a memory. And if sometimes she found herself nursing a migraine when he began dating a new woman—though she’d never been prone to migraines—that didn’t matter.

Leaning around Kelsey, Lyssa asked, “Did I hear you say the amazing Fernsby has worked for Dane since he bought his

first resort?”

Glad for the new subject, Cammie nodded. “It’s been that long.”

“As I understand it,” Rosie said, “Dane was, what, only twenty-four at the time?”

Cammie wasn’t giving away secrets when she answered, “Yes. He’d worked at that resort for a couple of years after his parents died. But the owners ran into financial troubles, and rather than see it go out of business, Dane pulled together the financing to take over. That was the beginning. Now he owns resorts all over the world.”

All three women smiled at her, as if they hadn’t already known all that. “That’s an amazing story,” Rosie said.

But none of them could know the whole story—how hard Dane had worked to keep his family together after his parents died. “He’s a self-made man,” she told them with pride.

Rosie smiled at Lyssa, then glanced at Gideon. “That’s what these Maverick men are all about. Self-made. And they’re all pretty darned incredible.”

Cammie had to agree. But they were no more incredible than Dane.

In that moment, Dane looked up from an in-depth conversation with Will Franconi, as if divining he was the topic of conversation.

She and Dane were simpatico. Each knew what the other thought. With that look, he thanked her for moving among the ranks of the Maverick ladies, learning all she could. Which was why Cammie had done a lot more listening than talking today. She was gathering intel. And it was obvious to her that the Mavericks’ loved ones had given a thumbs-up to a business link.

As the teams went into action on the field, the women shouted their enthusiasm, screaming for their men to score

points. Again. Cammie was unashamed to yell her support for the Harringtons.

Rex chose that moment to run to her, careening into her lap. Cammie nuzzled him. “You’re such a sweetie. And I’ve missed you.” He’d been running between her and Fernsby for most of the game.

Kelsey leaned in to say, “Is he your dog, then? I thought he was Dane’s.”

Fingers buried in the mini dachshund’s long hair, Cammie quickly said, “He’s actually our puppy. Together.” She smiled. “Well, not exactly a puppy. He’s seven years old.”

Kelsey settled an appraising gaze on her. “I didn’t realize you and Dane were...” She trailed off.

Cammie blurted, “Oh, we’re not like that. No. I work for him, that’s all.” Then she laughed, hoping it didn’t sound uneasy. “It’s just that T. Rex thinks he owns both of us.” She buried her face in the dog’s soft coat, not wanting Kelsey to see the blush that had crept into her cheeks.

What on earth would the Mavericks think if they knew she lived in Dane’s house? Or that she had her own suite of rooms in each of Dane’s homes, so they could more easily work together when he traveled? After all, she was his personal assistant. Not a lot of people, though, would understand there was nothing going on between them.

And if sometimes late at night, wherever they happened to be, she thought about Dane in his suite just down the hall and imagined things that could never be, well, that was no one’s business but her own. They were PA and boss. And good friends. That was all.

In the end, the game was a draw. Cammie wondered if that was Dane’s doing. Or maybe Will’s. Though Dane was competitive, and his sisters even worse, he saw no advantage in trouncing the Mavericks. Ditto for Will Franconi.

The Mavericks and Harringtons jogged to center field, shaking hands and giving hearty claps on the back.

Then Will called, “How about going for that pint at the Buena Vista Café?”

The Buena Vista Café served a famous Irish coffee, claiming to have brought the drink to the US. The Maverick ladies darn near squealed, even the pregnant ones. Cammie assumed there’d be nonalcoholic offerings.

Dane caught her eye, and she felt that familiar thrill up and down her spine. That was another of the things she’d never tell anyone.

Reading the question in his eyes, she nodded. Naturally, she’d go for Irish coffee—nonalcoholic, of course, since she had a long return drive to San Juan Bautista.

When they video-chatted tonight, she’d tell him everything.

Except the things she’d never tell anyone. *Especially* not him.

* * *

Fernsby packed up his tea trolley. He’d designed the contraption himself, with a warming tray, a cooling tray, a battery-powered teakettle, and, of course, a big box fitted below to carry necessities such as serviettes, silverware, and good porcelain. Fernsby never skimmed on anything.

Dane looked at him. “Are you coming with us, Fernsby?”

He used his sternest voice. “Sir, surely you can’t take the dog to a bar.” Then he rolled his trolley away, calling to the animal. “Come along, Lord Rexford, we can’t have your morals corrupted by these wastrels.” Of course, he said it loud enough for only Dane to hear.

His employer’s laughter followed him as he trundled away.

The long-haired dachshund trailed after him, casting longing glances back at Camille. But the little dog was well trained—Fernsby had seen to that personally.

He wasn't a dog person. He wasn't a cat person. In fact, he wasn't even a people person. But the dog, with those sad puppy eyes, had grown on him. As had Camille. She was a hard worker, efficient, no-nonsense. And, above all, loyal. Loyalty was something Fernsby prized very highly. And Dane—he never called him Dane to his face, always sir—had also grown on him during their fifteen-year association. Dane was eminently fair, treating everyone equally, even his personal assistant and his butler. Thus, he'd earned Fernsby's respect. And his loyalty.

He didn't look back, but he felt Miss Gabrielle Harrington's stare right between his shoulder blades, no doubt plotting ways to best his culinary skills with gluten-free and vegan offerings.

Since no one could see, Fernsby allowed himself the smallest of smiles. Her efforts were a lost cause.

When he was finally chosen as a contestant on *Britain's Greatest Bakers*—and vanquished his nemesis Digbert, Mr. Westerbourne's butler, who'd also applied, drat the man—she would naturally have to sing a different tune.

He did, however, respect her unconquerable spirit. She excelled at most things. But she couldn't possibly outdo him.

He admired all the Harringtons. Even if he had his favorites.

After all, that was loyalty.

He turned then, ever so slightly, gazing at Camille and Dane, who stood exceptionally close as the Mavericks gathered their belongings.

Then he smiled, looking down at the dachshund. "Little do they know, Lord Rexford, that the right time for the two of them is almost at hand. You can trust Fernsby on that."

Chapter Three

The Buena Vista Café was a San Francisco icon. Bottles crammed the glass shelves behind the bar, and Irish coffee mugs lined the countertop, ready for the favored libation. Located at Hyde and Beach Streets near Ghirardelli Square, on the first sunny Sunday in what seemed like forever, the bar was filled to capacity.

The waitstaff put together several tables in the tented curbside seating area to accommodate their group. Cammie was sandwiched between Dane and Ava, with Dane's thigh resting along hers, his body heat doing funny things to Cammie's stomach. Something like butterflies. Which meant nothing.

Honking horns and clanking cable cars played a rowdy tune outside the tented parklet, along with raucous voices and boisterous laughter inside. That came mostly from the Mavericks, everyone talking over one another.

Cammie loved the bustle of San Francisco, the happy tourists, the scrumptious food, the salt air, the city skyline, the Golden Gate. Dane had a flat on Nob Hill, but she hadn't been to the city since her uncle worsened. And she missed the hustle. Though Dane's Pebble Beach estate would always be her favorite of his homes.

Gabby bounded in, a pink bakery box balanced on her hands. She'd said she was bringing a few sweets, but the box was big enough to hold a full sheet cake.

When she opened the flap, the Mavericks went gaga at the mouthwatering selection of treats. Noah and Jorge wriggled so eagerly on their seats, they might have bobbed away if Ari and Rosie hadn't been holding them down.

"Those might even look better than Fernsby's offerings." Tasha Summerfield rubbed her hands together, while Daniel Spencer leaned close to whisper something into her silky black

hair, making her laugh, then bat a hand at him. If those two weren't engaged yet, they soon would be.

Dane jumped in. "Don't let Fernsby hear you say that. You'll never get one of his treats again."

Gabby's eyes sparkled. "That's really why Fernsby left right after the game. I told him I was bringing yummy gluten-free vegan goodies, and he fled in horror."

Everyone laughed except the Maverick men, who'd suddenly gone wide-eyed and leery.

"But we're not vegan," Matt Tremont said, tugging on his hair as if he might pull it out were he forced to eat a vegan pastry.

Dane smiled his lady-killer smile, which of course had no effect on Cammie. At least, not that she'd show. "You'll turn vegan and gluten-free," he declared, "after you taste one of these."

He'd always supported everything Gabby did, just as he had all his siblings.

The Maverick ladies nodded enthusiastically. Ari elbowed her husband. "Come on, Matt. Don't be a fraidy-cat." She ruffled her stepson's mop of hair that was as dark as his father's. "You're dying to try one, right, Noah?"

The boy nodded dramatically. "I'm not a fraidy-cat."

Gabby pulled out a box within the box and set it on the table. Flipping her long blond hair over one shoulder, she leaned close, pointing to a muffin. "This one has an herb that's good for the heartburn pregnant women can get. And here I've got some ginger scones that help the digestion." She held up the box for all of the pregnant women to see. "And this pastry here will help keep your feet from swelling. It's savory, with dill and sun-dried tomatoes."

Ari, her hazel eyes alight, said, "I can't decide which one to try. How about we share?" She looked at Gabby. "They won't cause any reaction with each other, will they?"

Gabby smiled. “Everything here is good for you. And, of course, there’s no cheese.”

Rosie, Ari, Lyssa, and especially Paige, the most pregnant of them all, smiled gratefully. Gabby cut the treats into pieces to share, arranging them on plates the waitstaff had brought.

With one taste of the savory pastry, Paige groaned. “Oh my. That is sooo delicious.”

Murmurs of appreciation sounded all around. “Thank you so much for thinking of this,” Lyssa said to Gabby as Cal tried swiping a piece off her plate. She swatted him. “These are only for those of us who are pregnant. You don’t get one.”

Once again, the group burst into laughter.

But the Mavericks were a harder sell. Pushing the bigger box to the center of the table, Gabby introduced the delicacies. “This is a cheese blintz.”

Sebastian snorted. “If it’s vegan, how can it have cheese?”

If he thought he could shoot Gabby down, he was wrong. Gabby Harrington had always held her own around strong men. She simply smiled and said with a slight drawl, “It’s vegan cheese. You have heard of that, right?”

“Isn’t that an oxymoron?” Daniel said in a dry tone.

Gabby wasn’t fazed. “You’d be surprised at the vegan and gluten-free products we have these days. And more are arriving all the time. This one is made with nuts. And it’s delicious.” Her gaze challenged them all.

Even Cammie, who didn’t know them well, understood the Mavericks would never back down from a challenge.

Troy leaned his elbows on the table, clasping his hands. “I’ve got dibs on a cruller, so don’t any of you even think about it. Gabby’s raspberry crullers tingle the tastebuds.” He broke into a grin. “And the fudge glaze is to die for.”

Beside her, Dane was grinning, while Ava kept silent, though a sneaky smile played on her lips. The Mavericks were

going down.

Dane reached for Cammie's hand under the table, squeezing her fingers before he pulled away. He couldn't know what his touch did to her. And she'd made sure he never guessed.

Having been the first to question Gabby, Sebastian had to take the cheese blintz.

Gabby had baked muffins, croissants, crullers, cinnamon rolls, pound cake, zucchini bread, Danish pastries, and more. Each Maverick chose only one, while most of the ladies decided to share. There were no duplicates. Gabby was a smart cookie, not wanting them to think any one treat was a fluke.

Just as Sebastian had been the first to choose, he was also the first to take a bite, his mouth pinched as though he might have to spit it out. But he chewed thoughtfully. And took another bite. Finally, he looked at Gabby, his coffee-colored eyes gleaming. "Gabby, where have you and your delicious goodies been all our lives?" He held out the fork for his fiancée, Charlie Ballard, to try. "You're going to love this, sweetheart." Of course, she did.

Daniel cast a sideways glance at him, as if he suspected Sebastian of trying to pull a fast one.

Then his eyes went wide as he tasted the zucchini bread. "Wow!"

The boys were bouncing in their seats. "Can I, can I, can I?" they cried in unison.

Gabby looked from Rosie to Ari, who both nodded, smiles stretching across their pretty faces. Then she held out the box. "Pick whichever one you want."

Noah chose a frosted cupcake. But Jorge wanted to taste his mother's vegan treats. Rosie gladly shared.

"I never thought I'd say it," Evan admitted, a huge bite missing from his cinnamon roll, "but vegan and gluten-free—

at least the way you bake, Gabby—are amazing. I second Sebastian. Where have you and your treats been all our lives?”

And every Maverick chimed in with praise.

Dane smiled broadly as he took in his sister’s joy. Cammie knew Gabby didn’t lack self-confidence. But these were Mavericks—assured, powerful, assertive men who would obviously balk at her specialty. It had been a test, and she’d passed like a gold medalist racing over the finish line and knowing she’d run her best time ever.

“You—” Matt pointed a finger at her. “—are unbeatable.”

Gabby’s biggest challenge, however, would be Fernsby. And that day was coming.

Two servers arrived, each carrying a massive tray of drinks, hot chocolate for the boys, nonalcoholic Irish coffees for the pregnant ladies and Cammie, and full-bore Irish whiskey and dark roast coffees for the rest.

The Mavericks were soon to learn that Ava and Gabby could outdrink them as well as outplay them.

With her first sip, Cammie groaned. “This is ambrosia.” She closed her eyes to relish the coffee concoction, made with an alcohol-free extract rather than whiskey.

Opening her eyes again, she found Dane staring at her, his Irish coffee in midair. She laughed. “Are you waiting to make sure I thought it was good before you tried yours?”

His eyes as blue as the sunny sky, he smiled and drank. And she could breathe again.

A dab of whipped cream remained on his lips after the first sip. Cammie reached out to wipe it away, as if it were an automatic gesture. But touching had never been automatic between them. So she simply pointed. “Whipped cream.” Dane licked it off, sending shivers through her that she barely managed to contain.

What was up with these weak moments? Maybe it was the months she’d spent away from Dane, making everything as

fresh as the first time she'd seen him.

But she was tough. She had amazing control. Things would go back to normal.

Will Franconi drummed his fingers on the table, breaking the spell. "We've been thinking a lot about your family."

Dane grinned, and Cammie looked away quickly before his smile brought back those butterflies. "We've been thinking about yours a lot too."

The table went silent as a cable car rang its bell on the street. Then, as if by magic, or synchronicity, they all called out in unison, "Merger!"

When Dane once again reached for her hand under the table, she squeezed back lightly, telling him without words that she agreed. They often communicated with gestures, a smile, or just a look. And his smile warmed her, as if it were only for her, even if their rules made anything personal off-limits.

"If we look at the potential numbers," Will began, only to stop when the Harringtons shook their heads as one.

Troy spoke for them all. "We don't need to look at numbers. This is going to work. Big-time."

The Harrington siblings had taken a month to think it through and talk it over, conducting one-on-one meetings with different Mavericks, each side testing the other's mettle.

They all, especially Dane, knew a good thing when they saw it.

Cammie took that moment to check her phone. Her uncle lived in Ava's stylish San Juan Bautista facility. But during the entire soccer game, Cammie couldn't help looking for updates. She trusted Ava's people implicitly, yet she couldn't dispel a nagging fear that without her at his bedside, things could go sideways, and he'd be gone before she could get back.

Ava patted her hand, her lips close to Cammie's ear. "Don't worry. I've got my people with him all the time." She

held up her phone so that Cammie could see a text with a photo of Uncle Lochlan sleeping peacefully.

She should have known Ava would make a special effort. “Thank you.”

She would forever be grateful to Dane and Ava for making it possible to keep Uncle Lochlan with such comfort and oversight. Cammie could never have afforded the care home in San Juan Bautista without their support. Their kindness brought tears to her eyes even now. She’d sold Uncle Lochlan’s house right after the move seven years ago and put all the proceeds toward his support. When that was exhausted, she paid whatever she could out of her salary. Of course, it wasn’t enough. But she would pay them back over time. Every penny.

Dane had stopped by to see Uncle Lochlan last week, and he’d talked with Cammie about this game. “You don’t have to come,” he’d said.

Cammie had immediately shot back, “You think I’d be on board with making such a massive decision without meeting the Mavericks too?”

When he raised his arms, she’d been sure he was about to envelop her in his comforting embrace. Nothing personal, just gratitude that she would do this for him. It warmed her to know how much he valued her input.

Dane was an amazing boss.

She would never leave him. Especially since it would take years to pay him back for all he’d done for her and her uncle.

* * *

He and Cammie were on the same wavelength. This merger was the best thing for the family. But Dane was glad for the simple agreement in her squeeze of his hand.

If her touch shot a bolt of lightning through him, that meant nothing. He needed Cammie for her smarts, her

diligence, her efficiency, her quick mind, and her intuition. Anything else took second place. Even if sometimes...

But now he needed her impressions. Dane wanted this merger for his family. Badly. And he needed Cammie to agree.

His family had good lives. They'd come a long way since losing their parents. He and Ava had to quit college back then, but the sacrifice had been worth it, because together they'd helped their younger siblings achieve their goals. Troy pursued his dream of Olympic diving, Gabby had visions of cooking school, and Clay was their computer geek. Ava, too, had finished business school, getting her degree in healthcare management. Now they never had to want for anything again.

Except love.

After meeting Bob and Susan Spencer at Gideon's New Year's Eve gala, Dane had recognized the potent, cohesive, loving element that parents added to the mix. His family had so much to learn from these Mavericks, not just businesswise, but emotionally.

Their parents had never provided the stability that Susan and Bob did. Partying in the world's hotspots, Dane's parents had left their kids with indifferent nannies, while Dane and Ava had given their younger siblings all the care they could. How often had he begged his mom and dad to take all the kids with them? Yet, every time, his parents had returned alone to Europe's playgrounds and the ski slopes of Vail or Chamonix or the Swiss Alps. They'd been risk-takers, and in the end, risk had won.

It was no wonder his brothers and sisters were still single. They'd never known a parent's love or witnessed real love and commitment.

They'd all been stunted. While they'd reached for the stars in their careers, none of them had ever found the kind of loving relationship Dane saw in abundance at this table. He wasn't sure any of them would know what to do if the perfect partner came along.

He looked at this impressive Maverick bunch, with the recent additions of Gideon Jones and Cal Danniger to the fold. Each had found a love that surpassed anything Dane had ever imagined. When a Maverick looked at his lady, it was as if love enveloped her. It shone out of their eyes. It softened their features. They might be ruthless men in business, but with the women they brought into their lives, they were compassionate, caring, loving, and loyal.

It could only be due to Bob and Susan Spencer's upbringing. It was the love the couple had felt for the lost boys they'd brought into their family, equal to that for their biological children, Daniel and Lyssa. They'd raised this family in a poor Chicago neighborhood when times must have been unfathomably tough. Yet they'd forged an extraordinary bond with their love and raised extraordinary men and women.

He didn't see the Spencers ever leaving their boys behind, even if they'd had the money to travel. And now, they'd moved halfway across the country from Chicago to join the family on the West Coast. They were fixtures in their children's lives. To their foster sons, they weren't Susan and Bob, but Mom and Dad.

Dane also had an unbreakable bond with his brothers and sisters. He could call on any of them night or day, and they would be there, just as he would be there for them. They weren't just siblings, they were best friends.

But there was so much more out there for all of them. The Mavericks had it. And Dane wanted it with every fiber of his being. He wanted it for all of them.

And for Cammie too.

Thank God for Cammie. She was as much a best friend as any of his family. He could talk over any idea with her, tell her anything. She couldn't know how much he'd missed calling her at any hour since she'd been on family leave. Neither the nightly video chats nor the weekly visits he made to check on Lochlan were enough. She had to do this for her uncle, and Dane had to be supportive. But working without her by his

side, it seemed as if he'd lost not only his right hand, but the whole arm. And sometimes it ached like a phantom limb.

With all his woolgathering, he realized Will Franconi had taken over the meeting.

“We actually have a lot of synergy going on,” Will was saying, echoing Dane's thoughts. As if taking roll in class, Will introduced each of the Mavericks. “Sebastian is our media mogul with Montgomery Media International.” He pointed to Clay. “You both have totally different contacts, and yet, what you do converges. That new YouTube platform you've got going is an amazing feat.”

Clay jumped in immediately, not defensive, but wanting everyone to understand. “In reality, it's completely different from YouTube. It's a space for artists, musicians, writers—all forms of artistic endeavor, in fact—to display their work without fear of a hostile environment.”

The new platform was already taking over the web. Clay totally knew his market.

Dane started the next round, looking to Matt. “I see a lot of synergy between Troy's sports empire and Trebotics International. With you being the inventor and robotics guy and the new sports machines Troy has in mind, there's immense possibility in what you two can do together.”

“I've got tons of ideas.” Troy grinned at Matt. “But I need an expert to make them viable.”

Matt was nodding, and Dane could see the interest flashing in his eyes. “We've talked a bit,” he said. “But we really need to put our heads together.”

Dane went on, jutting his chin at Gideon. “Your foundation, Lean on Us, is all about veterans, many of whom are fresh out of the forces.” He pointed at his sister, who sat on Cammie's other side. “And Ava is our expert on retirement facilities. You help them when they're younger. She can offer support when they get older.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” Gideon leaned forward to look at Cal and Lyssa, who were instrumental in running the foundation for him. “Sometimes the older vets don’t even know what benefits they actually have.” He smiled broadly at Ava.

Full agreement sparked in Ava’s eyes. “We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Will took over again. “Daniel’s Top Notch DIY conglomerate has a place in everything we do. As well as The Collins Group, with Evan being our finance guru.”

Dane agreed. “We all complement each other, yet bring something unique to the table.”

Evan popped up with, “And Gabby can feed us.”

As the Mavericks clapped, Dane turned to catch Cammie’s eye. Without a word, they were thinking the same thing. *Don’t let Fernsby hear that.*

Will waved a hand between the two of them. “I see lots of crossover between you and me, Dane. With Franconi Imports, we can add products and foodstuffs your guests at DH International Resorts have never even dreamed of.”

As he lifted his hand in the air, Dane stood to high-five him.

Oh yeah, the Mavericks and the Harringtons together would be a powerhouse.

This was what Dane wanted—synergy, working together, bonding. He could almost feel the magic he, Cammie, and his siblings could create with the Mavericks.

He rapped his knuckles once on the table. “Let’s do it. A partnership.” His family were as gung-ho as he was.

Will punched a fist in the air. “Let’s do it,” he repeated. “I suggest meeting once a month to go over what deals we’re all working on, discuss how they can benefit the group, and what each of us can add to them.” He looked to his brothers, all of them nodding agreement.

“Sounds good,” Dane said. “I see this growing organically. We don’t need to shove ideas down each other’s throats. We’ll work on things that are mutually beneficial.”

“Absolutely,” Will agreed. Then he grinned. “Let’s draw up a partnership agreement.” He directed that at Cal Danniger, who in addition to running Gideon Jones’s foundation, managed many of the Mavericks’ joint ventures.

“I can get that done within a couple of days,” Cal agreed, enthusiasm lighting his eyes.

Will gave him a thumbs-up. So did Dane. Beneath the table, Cammie tweaked Dane’s hand, a *pinch me, I can’t believe this* gesture, signaling her approval of everything he was doing. It was why he’d needed her here.

The sparkle in her eye heated him as she leaned close, a subtle citrusy scent that was uniquely her own drifting over him. “I’m going to take off now,” she murmured.

He held her hand a moment under the table. “I’ll walk you to the car.”

She shook her head. “You stay here. Talk more. Then call me tonight. We’ll discuss it all.” Her smile wrapped around him. “But I already know this is going to be the most astounding alliance ever.”

Chapter Four

In the quiet study of his Pebble Beach house, Dane slid down into the buttery-soft leather sofa, T. Rex nestled against his side. The mini dachshund grumbled in his sleep, as if he were dreaming of hunting squirrels, and Dane ruffled his long hair. Being such a tiny thing, the dachshund needed a big-dog name, so Dane had dubbed him T. Rex. To him and Cammie, the little guy was anything from T. Rex to Mr. T to just plain Rex. Fernsby always called him Lord Rexford.

Before quitting college to take over as the family guardian, Dane had been on his way to becoming a veterinarian. He'd always loved animals, forever rescuing wild creatures—caring for an injured bird, nursing a chipmunk back to health. His parents' deaths ended that dream, and now he had the resorts and a dog who traveled with him wherever he went. Cammie, a whiz at everything, had streamlined the procedure, making it easy for him to breeze through Customs in various countries without even a quarantine.

He tapped out a text to his whiz: *OK to chat?* Cammie was the first person he wanted to talk to about this afternoon's events.

Sitting back to wait, he propped his feet on a hassock. The study was his leisure room, with a massive flat-screen TV, state-of-the-art audio system, and built-in oak bookcases filled with first-edition classics, hardback bestsellers, genre fiction, business books, and whatever else took his fancy—or Cammie's. Floor-to-ceiling windows afforded a magnificent view of the ocean, though now the sky was socked in by fog, with not a single star visible.

It still felt odd wandering around the huge house without Cammie here. Or sitting at his office desk without being able to look up and see her typing away on her computer,

surrounded by her desk and credenza and the files she was working on.

She got back to him in a matter of minutes, as if she'd been anticipating his text: *I'm at your beck and call, Lord Fuzzybottom.*

Rolling his eyes, he laughed even though she couldn't see him. She'd called him Lord this and Lord that since he'd bought the English manor house a few years ago. Bradford Park happened to come with a title he'd never used. Cammie never used the proper honorific, Lord Bradford, but made up funny names instead. He loved that she always ribbed him about it.

On his laptop, he clicked a button for the video chat to Cammie. She answered with a wan smile and drawn features. Seated by her uncle's bedside—Dane recognized the landscape painting behind her—she was as beautiful as ever, despite the weariness marking her face. Cammie Chandler was a beautiful woman, her wavy, rose-gold hair falling past her shoulders, her eyes the color of jade. But now she appeared drained by the long day and the drive from San Francisco back to San Juan Bautista.

He didn't point that out. "Hey there, how you doing?"

"Is that my little T. Rex beside you?" As he angled the laptop's camera, she cooed at the dog. "It was so good seeing you today, you little sweetie." If dogs could smile, Rex smiled at his favorite woman in the world. "I've missed hugging and petting you."

Dane wouldn't have minded trading places with Rex and being the recipient of those hugs. Of course, she'd be horrified at the direction of his thoughts—it was against all their rules—so he turned the conversation around. "Thanks for coming today. I really appreciate it. I promise I won't keep you long. I hope the game and that long drive didn't wipe you out."

She denied the evidence on her face and in her tired eyes. "No. But Uncle Lochlan got restless, thrashing about in the

bed. It took a bit to calm him down after I got back.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. You know how he gets.” She shrugged as if her steadfast loyalty and compassion were nothing more than what anyone would feel or act on.

He could have jumped into the business discussion right then, but she had bigger things hanging over her, and he needed to offer his support. Their relationship wasn’t just that of assistant and boss, where all she did was look out for his needs. He cared for her too.

Though her uncle lived at one of Ava’s premier facilities in the Bay Area, he was at his best when Cammie was nearby. Without her, he was often quarrelsome, even combative. She’d been going to San Juan Bautista as often as she could, but Dane had seen the toll it took on her, and last September, he’d finally told her to take family leave.

Now, with Lochlan unable to recognize her, even unable to walk, and sleeping most of the time, Cammie was on the fence, hating to see him suffer but powerless to let him go. It was obvious Lochlan wouldn’t last much longer. And Dane needed to be there for her when it happened.

He hadn’t told her what a mess his work life had become since she’d been gone or how subpar her temporary replacements had been. Adding that burden to her shoulders might have crushed her. And yet, without his saying a word, a few weeks after she’d left, Cammie had contacted her network of personal assistants, and the next candidates had been far more tolerable. But none of them was Cammie. None of them knew him the way she did, anticipating what he wanted even before he said it.

She sighed. “He’s been comatose off and on for the last few days, hardly responding.”

Dane detected the tremble in her voice. She’d told him none of this while they were together today. Then again, they hadn’t been alone.

And now he gave her the space to get it all out. “The in-house doctor suggested we could stop feeding or hydrating him.” She swiped at her eyes and glanced away from the camera, obviously looking at Lochlan in the bed. “But I won’t do that. He can’t really eat, so I just dribble things in his mouth. And I put ice chips on his tongue. If I give him too much water, it comes back up. But he gets so restless, his legs and arms moving.”

He wished he could be there to at least hold her. “I’m sure Ava wouldn’t starve someone.”

She shook her head, her hair falling across her cheek. “It’s not Ava. But I understand where the doctor is coming from. It’s like I’m prolonging his agony.”

He reached out, as if he could touch her face. “Of course you’re not. You’re doing everything possible for him. Don’t get down on yourself. You’ve taken care of him for years.”

“I know.” She sighed, but he was afraid she didn’t believe him. “I can never thank you and Ava enough for bringing him here.”

“I’ve told you a million times, you don’t have to thank me.” He’d gotten to know Lochlan, too, after Cammie came to work for him, and he wanted the best for the old man.

When Cammie realized she could no longer care for Lochlan on her own, Ava had opened up space in her five-star San Juan Bautista facility, the closest one to Dane’s Pebble Beach estate. Cammie had balked, knowing she could never pay for it on her own, but he’d convinced her that not taking his offer would reduce Lochlan’s quality of life. Maybe that was dirty politics, but he’d needed her to give Lochlan the best, knowing full well she’d regret it for the rest of her life if she didn’t.

Cammie had him deduct a portion of her salary every month, even though Dane didn’t want the money and Ava had a fund to subsidize the care of those in need. He’d never met a

more admirable, caring person in his entire life. Except perhaps Susan and Bob Spencer.

“Ava’s people took such good care of him today,” Cammie told him. “I’m so grateful for that. I talked to her, but will you tell her that for me?”

“Of course I will.” Ava admired Cammie’s loyalty as much as he did.

“It’s been such a struggle for Uncle Lochlan. First, he had to take care of me after my parents died. And then the Alzheimer’s started so early.”

When her parents died in a car crash, Lochlan, her father’s older brother, had taken her in. Unmarried and childless, he was totally unprepared to care for a seven-year-old. Yet he became her surrogate father and raised Cammie to become the amazing woman she was. Dane had lost his parents when he was twenty-one, and though he hadn’t been a child, somehow both of them becoming orphans at a younger age and through tragedy was part of why they’d formed such a strong connection.

The bond had only grown between Lochlan and Cammie when he’d needed more and more care as she grew into an adult.

She’d been lucky to have Clyde Westerbourne, Lochlan’s longtime friend, who became like a father figure to her too. It was Clyde who’d sent Cammie to Dane. When Westerbourne decided to retire to his Caribbean island estate, Cammie couldn’t accompany him, not with her uncle growing worse.

Lochlan reminded Dane of his grandfather, who’d returned from the Second World War a changed man. Dane now knew he suffered from PTSD, but no one had understood that back then, and it was never treated. He’d heard stories of the fun-loving, laughing guy his grandfather had been before the war, but Dane had known only the quiet, withdrawn man he became. Just as the war had changed his grandfather, Alzheimer’s had changed Lochlan. Dane understood how

difficult it was for Cammie, but he was also glad she'd had all the good years with Lochlan before the disease took him away.

She tapped her temple, obviously having had enough of that conversation. "Okay, let's get down to the Mavericks."

"We can let business take a backseat right now." Even though he was dying to hear her impressions.

Cammie snorted. "Are you kidding me? I feel like an emotional mess when I'm not working." Which was why Dane gave her projects to work on even though she was supposed to be on leave. Nothing huge, just enough to keep her mind occupied, like setting up the gallery and museum tour for the Correa painting. "So tell me how the temps are doing," she said.

"They're fine," he said, working his mouth into a half smile. "But it takes three of them to do what you do."

She smiled. How he'd missed her dazzling smile in the months she'd been gone. "It's only because we've worked together so long. And I've watched your business grow."

She'd skillfully sidestepped his compliment, but that smile told him how much she liked knowing she was irreplaceable. He'd never had any compunction about telling her—in fact, he enjoyed it. She kept his life on track. Just as Fernsby kept his houses in order.

"Okay, the Mavericks." He hadn't wanted to sign any contracts with the Mavericks until Cammie had met them. But she'd given him that nod and a wink right there in the café. "What do you really think about this merger of our two families?"

He included Cammie in that comment. She wasn't just his assistant. He wanted her opinion as if they were peers, as if he weren't a billionaire talking to the hired help. What she thought was just as important as his siblings' opinions. The fact was, Cammie had been personally responsible for many of his big deals. He could take her to an exhibition or an art show, and she'd find a way to turn something they saw into an idea

for a profitable business venture or a new feature at a resort. The Mavericks had been one of the few deals he'd found on his own, but only because of their close association with Gideon Jones and his foundation.

Of course, Cammie had brought Gideon's painting to his attention.

He had to tell her, "Come on, my little idea genie, give me all your words of wisdom."

She blushed. "Would you stop with that?" she groused at him.

He snapped his fingers. "It's true. Great ideas come like you've pulled them right out of your magic lamp." He gave her a quirky grin, miming rubbing a genie's lamp. "Like buying Gideon Jones's painting."

As her blush deepened, she made a joke, taking the attention off herself. "What would the Mavericks say if they knew you were Lord Muckety-Muck?" She couldn't truly accept compliments.

"It's Lord Bigwig to you."

She laughed then, the hot color fading from her cheeks. Then she got down to business again. "I'm rubber-stamping what you already know, but this is going to be amazing. The Mavericks will bring new blood to all the family ventures, yours included. Will Franconi said it right—what the Harringtons do complements what the Mavericks do."

"You might be rubber-stamping, but I wasn't about to act on it until I talked to you."

She huffed out another laugh. "But you did act on it before we even talked. You brought up a merger right there at the café."

He shrugged. "You pinched me under the table, giving me permission."

She gaped at him. "I didn't pinch you until after you'd already talked about a merger."

He grinned. “But I could read your mind, and I knew you thought it was a great idea.”

She shook her head at him, as though he were a recalcitrant child from whom she didn’t believe a single word. “Whatever. I liked them. And I liked all the Maverick ladies. They might’ve married billionaires, but they’re all so down to earth. And kind. They didn’t talk to me like I was just your assistant.”

He jumped in quickly. “That’s because you’re not *just* my assistant. You’re my girl Friday and my idea genie. I’d be nothing without you.”

She rolled her eyes at him again. “Oh, will you just stop that?”

He didn’t want to stop. With her uncle so gravely ill and close to the end, showering her with compliments was the least he could do for her.

Even if sometimes, especially late at night, he wanted to do far more.

* * *

The house was so damn quiet after they said goodbye, even with Rex snoring softly beside him on the couch. Dane wished with everything in him that Cammie would come home. Because this *was* her home. The moment she’d decided to sell Lochlan’s house where they’d both lived, Dane had set her up with her own suite of rooms in the Pebble Beach house. He’d wanted to make the transition as easy as possible for her. Searching for an apartment with all the other things on her plate at the time would have been a nightmare. There was the added bonus that it saved her rent and utilities, especially when she traveled so much with Dane anyway.

So he’d cleared out the office space on the San Francisco Peninsula and moved his headquarters to his Pebble Beach estate. He’d had the office there only because it was close to Lochlan’s home and therefore cut down on Cammie’s commute. But Pebble Beach was closer once Lochlan went

into the San Juan Bautista memory care facility. And Dane made sure neither Cammie nor her uncle wanted for anything.

He admitted only to himself that Cammie living just down the hall had been seven years of torture. The need to knock on her door sometimes overwhelmed him, and he'd march to her suite with some crappy idea just so he could talk to her, look at her, smile at her. The worst was resisting her lure when the darkness was so complete he could barely see his hand in front of his face. When he'd lain awake for hours thinking of her.

But of course he couldn't go to her then. He wouldn't. There could be no excuse for an after-midnight excursion. But damn, it was hard.

Cammie wasn't just his assistant. She was his best friend, as important to him as any of his brothers or sisters. Cammie had become part of the family unit.

And yet, late at night, the questions plagued him. What if everything about the way they'd met had gone down differently?

What would have happened if Clyde Westerbourn had never sent her to him as a job candidate twelve years ago? What if, when Dane had met the beautiful young woman on the golf course the day before his interview with Clyde's assistant, when he had no clue who she was... what if there'd been no interview at all the next morning? What if, after that sexy golf game they'd shared, after he'd made love to her in his condo all night long... what if he'd never had to let her go?

What if there'd been no impediments to a relationship?

But there'd been so many impediments. He'd seen his own shock mirrored in her eyes the following morning when she'd walked into his office. The morning after one of the most incredible nights of his life. His one and only night with her.

They'd both had to agree their one-night fling could never happen again.

He'd badly needed an assistant who would take his work life in hand and keep him on track. Not one of the umpteen

secretaries he'd been through could handle it. Fernsby had been ready to desert him if he didn't do something. Then Clyde Westbourne had called, swearing that Cammie Chandler could do the job. Dane had never met her, had no idea what she looked like. He'd actually imagined someone matronly, in her forties or fifties. Because how could a person Cammie's age be such a paragon? All he'd cared about was that she'd totally organized Clyde's life. If Clyde could have taken her with him on his permanent move to the Caribbean, he would have. But Cammie badly needed a good job in the Bay Area, where she could take care of her uncle, who'd been going quietly downhill.

The fact that she and Dane had both been on the same golf course at the same time just one day before the interview was a fluke. They could have exchanged names and changed everything. He would have known immediately that she was off-limits. But they hadn't. Was that a fluke too? Or was it the universe granting them that one night?

The next morning, during that strange job interview, they'd both had good reasons to agree never to indulge their fantasies again. So they'd made their rules. No inappropriate touching. No longing looks. No sneaking away for a night of passion. He honestly hadn't known he'd never experience another night like that with any other woman. Not then.

Over the subsequent years, his belief in the rules had grown only more solid. She turned his chaos into order. He relied on her good sense. She was the one who made sure he added heart to his ventures. They couldn't risk screwing up their perfect work relationship. Romance was out of the question.

Besides, if he ever made a move, ever pushed for anything more, he would totally lose her. And he could not bear to ever lose her.

She'd dated. Of course she had. She was gorgeous, funny, smart, and men flocked to her. But he was so damned glad none of those relationships had come to anything. They were

all jerks who weren't good enough for her anyway. And that one creep who'd let her down so badly? Dane could have pummeled the guy into the ground. Truth be told, he could even have pummeled his brother Troy for asking her out. For God's sake, she'd been his assistant for four years at that point. What had Troy been thinking? Still, Dane didn't like to remember how he'd completely lost his cool that day, accusing his brother of harassing his employees, and a lot worse. Especially when he learned Cammie had turned Troy down.

Of course, he'd only ever wanted to protect her from jerks who'd screw her over. Sure, he had thoughts. But he never acted on them. He didn't even want to. He liked his life just the way it was. He absolutely wasn't one of those jerks.

But sometimes at night—not every night, mind you, maybe once a month, or once a week—with the darkness surrounding him and her room just down the hall, he remembered the softness of her hair, the scent of her skin, the sweetness of her lips.

And he regretted every damned rule they'd set up between them.

* * *

Cammie sat in the chair next to her uncle's bed, his hand securely tucked in hers.

Sometimes it seemed as though he was in a coma, others that he was only sleeping. She put an ice chip against his lips, and he opened his mouth, taking it in. She wished he would open his eyes. She couldn't remember the last time he'd actually looked at her. She talked to him, and sometimes he would mumble an answer she couldn't understand. She'd tell him a joke, and once in a while, he would make a noise that sounded like a laugh. Or she'd tell him she loved him, and he'd grunt as though he had so much more to say. But he never opened his eyes. Somehow that was the worst. She wanted him to see her. Even in his last few days, or even hours, she wanted to know that he'd seen her, that he knew she was here with him.

But it had been such a long time since he'd even known who she was, though somehow, having her close calmed him.

She'd felt guilty leaving him today. But God, it had been good to get out. To see Dane. And how she'd missed Rex. When he'd bounded to her across the soccer field and barreled into her lap, all she'd wanted to do was hug him close and drink in his doggy scent while he slathered kisses all over her face. She missed her work. She missed her suite of rooms in Pebble Beach. She missed Fernsby's cooking. She even missed Dane knocking on her door in the late evening to share an idea that had suddenly come to him. The feeling was something like homesickness. For Rex, for Fernsby.

And maybe most of all for Dane.

Chapter Five

Dane lounged against Susan Spencer's kitchen counter as Fernsby took over the space, providing both the meal and the dessert. T. Rex lay under the kitchen table in the dog bed Fernsby had brought for him. Because Fernsby and the dog went everywhere with Dane.

Especially with Cammie gone and Rex pining for her.

It had been two weeks since their defining soccer game and the roundtable at the Buena Vista Café in San Francisco. After Cal had drawn up the merger agreement, they'd all participated in the signing meeting a few days ago.

Susan and Bob wanted to host a dinner party at their new home in Portola Valley, completely renovated for them by the Mavericks. "Now that you're all in business with the boys—" The Mavericks would probably always be *boys* to Susan. *Her* boys. "—Let's have a party. Though we met at Gideon's New Year's Eve gala, we should all get to know each other better."

Dane had readily agreed, and here they were—Troy, Clay, and Ava chatting with the main group in the living room, while Gabby oversaw everything Fernsby did, much to the butler's consternation. Susan joined them, though she'd ceded control of her kitchen to Fernsby for the night.

Swiping an appetizer off an almost empty tray Fernsby had just replaced out in the great room, Dane squatted by Rex's bed to offer the dog a tasty bite.

"He's adorable." Susan leaned down to pet Rex's head.

Dane stood again, taller than Susan, who was a tallish, kind-eyed woman with a cap of silver hair and a lovely smile. "Thank you for allowing us to bring him."

"He's so well trained." She lowered her voice to add, "We have three new puppies in the family, all of them a year old. We're still in training mode."

Fernsby interrupted with a loud gasp rumbling up from his throat. “Sir,” he belted out, “the dog is getting fat. He waddles. No treats. How many times must I convey that fact to you?”

Dane looked at the outraged man and chuckled. “But you’re making roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. It’s driving Rex crazy.”

Fernsby eyed him balefully. “Lord Rexford,” he intoned, “was sleeping before you disturbed him. He wasn’t even aware there was roast beef nearby.”

Susan gave Dane a sympathetic smile.

Fernsby bent to open the oven door, the scent of Yorkshire pudding and roast potatoes wafting into the air. “The Yorkshires are done,” he declared, taking them out and setting them on the stovetop. The roast beef rested on the counter under a foil tent. “They’re perfect.” Fernsby allowed himself a swift nod of congratulations. He’d made the Yorkshires in a muffin pan, turning them into popovers, with a hole in the center for his rich, homemade beef gravy.

Dane’s mouth was already watering.

“They look absolutely amazing.” Susan gave Fernsby the praise he required.

Then the man looked to Gabby, his mouth stretched into something resembling an evil grin. “I know you want a Yorkshire. With gravy. Lots of it. And butter on your roast potatoes.”

Gabby screwed up her face, lips pinched, eyes squinty. “That is just so gross.” She turned to Susan. “If you let him in your kitchen, he’ll add butter to everything, even if it doesn’t need it. He’s a butter fiend.”

Face devoid of any expression now, nose imperiously in the air, Fernsby said, “Butter and eggs are the staff of life.”

But Dane knew Fernsby had prepared a special meal for Gabby—vegan meatloaf, a baked potato, vegan sour cream to

top. He just liked to rub Gabby the wrong way. The feeling was mutual.

Susan tied on her apron. "I'll help serve."

His tone immutable, Fernsby said, "Dear lady, you go be with your guests. Let me handle this. It's what I do." He put a hand to his chest. "I'm Fernsby!"

Then he handed her a glass of champagne and shooed her away like the Grinch patting Cindy-Lou Who on the head after she'd just walked in on him trying to stuff the Christmas tree up the chimney.

Susan Spencer hooked her arm through Dane's and led him out to the living room, where all the Mavericks were gathered. She whispered, "He's really amazing."

"And he's bossy."

They shared a smile.

The dining table had been set with crystal, porcelain, and silver, two leaves added to accommodate them all. The massive great room held the seven Mavericks, their ladies, and all the family that went with them, including Charlie Ballard's mother, Francine, and Evan's birth mother, Theresa, who hadn't made it to the soccer game. Tony Collins, Kelsey's twin, had come tonight too.

They all rather overwhelmed the small group of Harringtons. Dane wished once again that Cammie could have been here for the celebration. If he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine her next to him, her sweet scent seeping into him, her warm hand on his arm as she pointed out this or that.

He had to shake himself back to reality.

Ava had cornered Will Franconi's wife, Harper. He was glad his family was making the rounds. He hoped they felt the same emotional impact he did.

Dane had spoken with Harper earlier and learned she was a recruiter, handling placements for high-powered business executives. What intrigued him most was her love for her

brother, Jeremy. The young man had been hit by a car when he was a child. Now, at the age of twenty, he still had the mind of the boy he'd been. And he was delightful. Harper had become his guardian when their parents were killed in a plane crash, and he admired how she'd taken responsibility. Much the same as Cammie took responsibility for Lochlan. He hadn't missed that Harper had been just about his age when his parents died, and he'd taken on the role of head of the family.

Troy was engrossed in a conversation with Matt and Ari Tremont. Clay had just stepped away from Rosie to snag an appetizer off Fernsby's tray, and Dane took his spot. "I have to congratulate you again on your gallery showing back in January." All the Harringtons had complimented her on the great show after the soccer game, but Gideon had given Dane more news. "I hear you sold almost every painting. Your art is truly amazing."

Gideon wrapped an arm around his pregnant fiancée, pride gleaming in his eyes. "It was so successful that she never has to crunch another number again in her life."

Rosie had been an accountant, and Gideon met her through his sister, Ari. Rosie and Ari had been best friends since they were girls in foster care.

All the Mavericks had come from troubled backgrounds. Gideon joined the Army right out of high school to take care of his mother and little sister. And yet, for all his loyalty, after their mother's death, Ari had been lost to him when she disappeared into the foster care system. He'd spent years trying to find her. It was an amazing story. Now he'd joined the family, along with Rosie and her son. And Jorge was treated like a treasured grandson, the same as Noah, Matt's boy.

With Susan and Bob, Dane knew instinctively, there was always more love to go round.

Dane moved through the crowd—and it *was* a crowd. He'd spoken with Ari earlier, the kindergarten teacher. She'd met

Matt when she became Noah's nanny. Dane figured it had been love at first sight for both father and son.

He'd also talked with Paige Collins, who was a family therapist. From things she'd said, Dane had a feeling she'd helped bring Evan back together with his long-lost mother and the twins. Obviously, twins ran in the family.

Tasha, Daniel's girlfriend, was a web designer, executing brilliant ideas for Daniel's DIY empire, creating an amazing 3D application for Daniel's customers to design their own kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms, and living spaces, both indoors and out.

Dane was good at getting people to talk about themselves. He gleaned information by listening rather than talking. Cammie often told him that was his superpower, getting people to open up. He supposed it was true, but only because he was genuinely interested. Besides, he wasn't one to talk much about himself.

Fernsby entered then, clapping his hands to gain everyone's attention and saying in his sonorous, cultured British voice, "Dinner is served."

Everyone took seats while Gabby helped Fernsby carry in the plates. He did not do buffet-style, instead plating everything himself and giving everyone a portion of each selection.

Dane managed to sit between Charlie and her mother.

"This all looks so scrumptious," Francine enthused before delicately tucking in.

As they ate, he took the opportunity to tell Charlie, "I've seen your magnificent sculpture at Montgomery Media. *The Chariot Race* is one of the most amazing pieces of artwork I've ever seen."

Charlie and Sebastian met when he'd commissioned her to create the stunning sculpture for his new San Francisco headquarters. Next to her, Sebastian beamed with pride, just as Gideon had over Rosie's art.

Francine Ballard covered his hand with hers, her papery skin slightly cold. “You should see her dinosaurs. Charlie makes awesome dinosaurs. She even has a T. Rex. And I know your little dog is named after that ferocious beast. Maybe you need a big Tyrannosaurus Rex in your yard.”

Charlie laughed. “That might be a bit much for a little dog.”

Dane shook his head. “But that’s why he’s named T. Rex. He needed a big-dog name since he’s a big dog in his own mind. He’d love a big T. Rex.”

“He’d probably pee on its tail,” Charlie said, pretending indignation.

Francine giggled and flapped her hand. “They’re all rusty anyway, so it won’t matter.”

Dane saw a big T. Rex in his future to go along with his little T. Rex. Cammie would love it.

God, how he wished she were here. The need was a sudden ache in his chest, a hole she’d left behind. But Lochlan needed her now more than ever.

The meal was delicious, everyone complimenting Fernsby. He beamed with pride, though no one else but Dane probably noticed that shine in his silvery gaze. For dessert, he’d made his to-die-for mille-feuille.

Matt took a bite and moaned. “This is the most incredible dessert I’ve ever tasted.”

Gabby took her seat after helping to serve dessert. “Maybe we could try it without butter. What do you think, Fernsby?” She held up her vegan, gluten-free peanut butter brownie.

Fernsby gaped. “No butter? Have you gone mad? One must use as much butter as possible. How else do you get the pastry in your mille-feuille to puff?”

He returned to the kitchen in a huff, exiting to peals of laughter.

After Fernsby's luscious dessert—why did that word make Dane think of Cammie, of her smooth skin and her luscious lips he'd tasted only for one night?—they moved once again to the enormous great room to chat over coffee and after-dinner drinks.

Dane joined Susan and Bob Spencer by the grand fireplace. Since it was mid-February, Bob had lit the fire.

"You have a great family here," Dane told them.

"And it's growing all the time," Bob said with a big belly laugh, his gaze floating over his daughters-in-law and their baby bumps.

Daniel joined them, while Tasha chatted excitedly with the pregnant group. Paige placed Tasha's hand on her round mound, and they all squealed with delight when it seemed the babies kicked.

"Tasha seems a little too interested." Daniel eyed her with what could have been longing.

Susan patted his arm. "Don't worry. Your time will come." And that could have been a twinkle in Daniel's eye.

"I want to thank you all for having us here," Dane said. "My brothers and sisters and I are enjoying ourselves immensely."

Daniel clapped him on the back. "This merger will be good for all of us."

He couldn't know how much his words meant. Now more than ever, Dane wanted to be part of this family, not just for himself, but for his brothers and sisters. He wondered if Bob Spencer, with his comment about a growing family, had included not only the coming babies, but the Harringtons as well.

Susan and Bob were the glue that held this band of brothers—and more—together. They'd married young, had little money, and lived in an apartment barely big enough for them and their two children. Bob had been a baggage handler

at O'Hare and Susan a waitress. Yet, when Daniel brought home his friends, all of them in bad places in their young lives, Susan and Bob had taken them in. They'd given each Maverick exactly what he'd needed—love, support, discipline, and life lessons. And these Mavericks had even taken on the responsibility for their little sister, Lyssa, who was just a baby at the time, being ten years younger than Daniel.

And all the while, Dane's parents had been roaming the globe. Dane recalled holidays when they'd been absent because the skiing was too good in the Alps. It was as if the Harrington children were afterthoughts. His parents had never offered the love he and his siblings craved, as much as they'd all wanted and needed it. Maybe Dane had craved it the most.

Their answering refrain when he'd begged? *You always want too much from people, Dane.*

What would his family have been like if they'd been raised as the Mavericks had? Maybe he would have been an uncle by now. Maybe they would have learned how to love instead of fearing and mistrusting it.

He flicked his gaze to his brothers and sisters as they worked the room, talking, laughing. Did they feel what he did—a craving to be part of this family? He wondered, too, about Cammie. After losing her parents so young, after having only her uncle, even as much as she loved Lochlan and was now on the verge of losing him, did she crave something bigger?

As if thoughts of Cammie had conjured her up, his phone rang, her ID on the screen.

Excusing himself, he stepped away to answer, his gut roiling. "Hey, what's up?" he asked even before she could say hello.

Her voice quivered. "It's Uncle Lochlan. His aides are here." She choked back what could only have been a sob. "He's barely breathing, and his pulse is almost nonexistent. They told me that if they turn him, he'll probably go."

“I’m leaving now.” He hated that she was so far away, that he couldn’t be there with a snap of his fingers. It would take him over an hour.

Her voice whispered across the airwaves. “Thank you.”

“You hang in there. Wait for me.”

“I will. I better go now.”

She was near tears, and her pain tore at him like a fist closing around his heart. He had to go. Now. He couldn’t waste a single minute getting to her.

Approaching the Spencers again, he said, “It’s Cammie. Her uncle. I’m sorry, I have to leave.” On the way out, he squeezed Ava’s arm. “It’s Lochlan. I have to be with her in his final moments.”

She pressed her lips together, her face solemn. “You go. Give her our love. Call me later.”

Dane knew she’d check with her own people and was, in fact, already reaching for her phone.

In the kitchen, he found Fernsby with his hands in soapy dishwater, an apron around his waist. “It’s Cammie’s uncle,” Dane said.

Fernsby’s eyes turned a misty gray. “You must immediately go to Camille. Don’t worry about Lord Rexford and me. Gabby can drop us off in Pebble Beach on her way home to Carmel. It’ll be a perfect opportunity for me to give her a few pointers about the health benefits of butter and eggs when she’s driving and can’t hit me,” he said with a straight face.

Dane wanted to hug him. Trust Fernsby to break the tension.

Then he headed out, thinking only of how quickly he could get to Cammie.

* * *

Daniel stood with his parents by the fireplace.

“What a caring family you’ve connected with,” his mother said, that look in her eye when she was wondering exactly how she could help someone in need.

Daniel couldn’t smile after witnessing the anguish written on Dane Harrington’s face. “They were orphaned at a young age. Dane was barely twenty-one and had to drop out of college. Ava did too. The others were still in high school or middle school.”

“You know what I think, honey?” His mother’s gaze roamed over the remaining Harringtons in the room.

This time, Daniel chuckled softly. “I already know, Mom. You’re always wanting to take in strays. Now you want to take in the Harringtons.”

“I barely know Dane, but I can see he’s a man who’s always taken care of other people. Maybe he needs someone to lean on too.”

Tonight allowed him to see the Harringtons in a new light. They might be leaders in their fields, but they were also orphans, without the love of inspiring parents. While they seemed exceptionally close, they hadn’t had Susan and Bob Spencer in their lives. Daniel and his brothers had achieved what they had only because of his parents. They’d taught him how to love. He wondered if he’d have recognized his love for Tasha without their inspiration in his life.

Maybe the Mavericks could bring more to the table than just some good business ventures. Maybe they could bring his parents and a share of the love he’d known all his life. Lord knew his parents had so much of it to give.

* * *

The bed stood in the center of the room, paintings of flowers and landscape scenes on the blue walls. Comfortable chairs sat on either side, and a long bureau held Lochlan’s things, though he no longer needed them and hadn’t for months. Cammie stood by the quiet form, holding his hand. She was exactly where she’d always been, at her uncle’s side.

That's who Cammie Chandler was—steadfast, caring, and loyal.

The pain cracking her features nearly broke Dane.

Though he hadn't made a sound, she turned, the tracks of dried tears on her cheeks. The moment she saw him, they flowed once more, and in the next moment, she was in his arms.

He held her tight as she shook against him.

She put on such a strong front. She *was* strong. That's how the Mavericks had seen her at the soccer game. But inside there was a fragility she hid from the world, growing right along with her uncle's disease. Dane knew how hard this was for her. It was why he'd rushed to her tonight, why he visited every week, why he video-chatted with her every night, trying to take her mind off the agony of watching her uncle deteriorate.

Holding her now, he whispered words she needed to hear. "You are the best niece in the world. You've done everything possible for Lochlan. And I'm not leaving your side while you go through this."

She pulled back, swept a fresh wave of tears from her cheeks, and gave him a weak smile. "Thank you. I don't want to be alone for this."

He cupped her face in his palms. "You're never alone. I'm always here."

Then together, hand in hand, they turned to her uncle's bed.

* * *

At dawn, Fernsby stood in the kitchen window of the Pebble Beach house, Lord Rexford in his arms. Dane pulled the Jaguar into the garage, and Fernsby fed Lord Rexford a bit of leftover roast beef. "You need a treat too," he cooed to the dog. "You feel bad for Camille. As we all do."

After Lochlan Chandler's passing a few hours ago, Dane had stayed with Camille until she'd fallen asleep. But when she woke, she'd sent him packing. That was her way, always needing to show people how strong she was. Dane had respected that. So did Fernsby. But he knew it had been a long night for them both.

He shifted Lord Rexford in his arms. Camille would be coming home soon. It had been a terrible time for her, and Fernsby would treat her gently. Tomorrow, when she was rested, he would call her with his condolences and the words of comfort he could offer. "But it's best she comes back where she belongs very soon," he told the dachshund.

As he heard the garage door close, he gave the dog one final command. "Now it's time to show those two they belong together. No matter how hard it is to get them to see that romance is inevitable. She needs him just as much as he needs her." He kissed the tip of the dog's nose. "We're in this together, Lord Rexford. It's going to take all our skills."

Chapter Six

Cammie stayed an extra couple of weeks in San Juan Bautista. Ava had arranged a room for Cammie's use while she'd cared for her uncle and hadn't kicked her out even after Uncle Lochlan passed. She could never thank Dane or Ava enough for how much they'd both done. She'd known she couldn't put her beloved uncle in an inferior home just because she was too proud to accept their assistance. And she would pay back every penny, even if it took the rest of her working life.

She still ached deep in her belly, but she'd lost Uncle Lochlan a long time ago. It had been years since he'd been the loving uncle of her childhood. The knowledge that he was at peace was her only solace. Wherever he was, his mind was once again clear, and he was himself.

This room had been her home for the last five months, decorated soothingly with a wallpaper border around the ceiling, landscape scenes on the wall, and a comfortable bed fitted with the finest linens and a warm duvet. Sitting at the desk, she went through the necessary paperwork.

She'd held no funeral for Uncle Lochlan. His friends were long gone, all except Clyde Westerbourn, who'd called to offer his condolences. "Oh my dear, I am so sorry. I know how hard this must be for you."

The loss had been only a couple of days old when he'd phoned, and she'd felt the tears rising again. But she didn't let them fall. "Thank you, Clyde. I miss him, but this was truly a release for him."

"This may sound harsh right now, but I hope you see it as a release for yourself too, my dear. You've suffered, watching his decline."

She didn't want to admit it, but Clyde had known her so long. And he'd found Dane for her, the man he'd said would be the perfect employer.

Over the twelve years she'd worked for Dane, Clyde's words had proven to be prophetic.

It was only with Dane's comfort that she'd made it through the night of Uncle Lochlan's passing. And every day since, she'd worked diligently on the estate, wanting the paperwork finished before she returned to Pebble Beach. Her uncle didn't have much, since she'd sold the house and everything in it to pay for his care. But there were still government agencies to be informed and details to take care of.

The harder she worked, the more she was dying to get back to Dane. To get back to work. They'd already bounced around projects and ideas that might be good for the new merger.

Needing a break, she typed a quick text: *Dear Lord Barnacle, have you seen Charlie Ballard's work?*

Of course Dane would have. He'd probably learned all about Charlie's talents while chatting at the signing dinner.

He opened a video chat immediately. "Now I'm a barnacle?" he muttered, his face unshaven, as if he'd only just gotten up, though it was past ten.

She shrugged, suppressing a smile. "You can't help it." Then she rushed on to make her point. "I'm just wondering how we can incorporate Charlie's artwork in some way at the resorts." Then she thought of Ari's background in child development. "And what do you think about Ari Tremont checking out the daycare facilities at the resorts and making sure they're up to snuff?"

"As always, you're my brilliant idea genie."

She hoped his words hadn't made her blush. Dane always filled her up. Someday, she hoped to run a project herself. She hadn't been able to think about it while she had her uncle to care for. And she had to be completely honest with herself—being one hundred percent in control of a project was a little daunting. If anything went wrong, the burden would be on her

shoulders. But one of these days, she'd do it. She just needed to get her feet under her after Uncle Lochlan's ordeal.

What she really needed was to get back to Dane.

* * *

Practically the moment Cammie brought up Charlie Ballard's work, Dane set up a meeting with her. And now, only two days later, he sat on a camp chair in Charlie's studio on Sebastian Montgomery's sprawling estate in the Hayward Hills.

Workbenches filled every wall, along with tool chests and stacks of supplies, barrels of nuts and bolts, and great wooden crates holding metal, ceramic, stone, and piping—anything Charlie could use to create her art. Despite the vast quantity of materials, the studio was the picture of orderliness, everything at hand or easily located.

Which was in complete contrast to the beautiful mess of a woman before him. Tendrils of curly red hair fell from a hastily secured knot on the top of her head. She wore stained overalls over a torn sweatshirt. But none of that mattered when her work was so pristine.

She'd removed her goggles and turned off the blowtorch when he arrived, but even as they talked, she assembled bits and pieces of what would become a...

"I'd like to say I know exactly what you're making." Dane leaned closer to the metal pieces covering the floor, as if that would help. "But I can't tell."

Charlie laughed, a musical sound that reminded him of Cammie. He couldn't stop the errant thought that he wished she'd come back soon. But he had to give her these two weeks. After everything she'd been through, she needed the time.

Charlie eyed the metal surrounding her. "Eventually, it'll be a cowboy on a horse roping a steer. It's a commission for a Texas oilman."

Dane snorted. “Of course he’s a Texas oilman. And his family were probably ranchers way back when.”

Charlie’s eyes twinkled. “How did you know?”

He shrugged. “Only an oilman from a ranching family would want a life-size sculpture of a cowboy and a steer.”

With that same twinkle, Charlie changed the subject. “Have you come here to talk about a Tyrannosaurus Rex for your yard?”

His thinking cap had definitely been on. “Depends on how big.”

“I haven’t seen your estate, but from the little I know of you, I don’t think you want something as large as the dinosaurs at the Flintstone House in Hillsborough.”

He’d passed by the house many times driving up Highway 280 on the way to San Francisco. Some people thought it an eyesore, but he found it charming, with its domed style and all the massive metal creatures populating its yard. “You’re right. Rex might be intimidated by something that big.” He grinned. “He needs something he can look down on and feel like he can vanquish.”

Charlie pursed her lips into a half smile. “I have the perfect thing.” She opened a pair of cabinet doors and waved him over. “These should be perfect for T. Rex. He can lord it over them.”

Dane couldn’t stifle the half laugh, half snort. “What the hell are they?”

She held one of the metal sculptures on the palm of her hand. “It’s a Zanti Misfit.”

He eyed her. “What the heck is a Zanti Misfit?”

Charlie rolled her eyes. “Haven’t you ever watched *The Outer Limits*?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“It was an old episode with Bruce Dern. Zanti Misfits are aliens who land in the desert with nefarious intentions.”

He looked at the creature, shaped like an ant with a huge, garish grin of metal teeth and bulging painted eyes. “That might be a bit too terrifying for Rex.”

Charlie snorted. “If Bruce Dern could vanquish the Zanti Misfits, you can be darn sure T. Rex will too.”

He laughed outright. “Charlie Ballard, you are one very odd woman.”

She smiled, accepting the compliment. “Thank you very much. I’ve never wanted to be normal.”

Then he added, “I need at least five.”

She waved her hand toward the cabinet as if she were a magician. “Take all you want.”

They still might terrify Rex, but Cammie would love them. “Thanks. That’s very generous.”

“I just make them when I need to think,” Charlie explained. “Making something I can practically create in my sleep frees up my mind to brainstorm other ideas.”

“That’s an interesting observation. I feel the same way about golf. It frees my mind to think.” Especially when he played with Cammie. Then, his mind could wander back to their first golf game, to that one night, her skin so sensitive, her touch on him so exquisite, her taste so sweet.

Damn, he needed to slap himself.

He dragged his thoughts back to why he’d asked for this visit. “Cammie and I are excited to talk to you about a new project we have in mind.” He opened his computer on Charlie’s workbench. “It was her idea, so I’d like to include her, if that’s okay with you.”

“Of course.”

Dane brought up the video app. Cammie answered, her face lighting up the screen as if she’d been waiting all day for

his call. Dane suspected she was glad to step away from her uncle's estate management.

"Hey, Charlie." Cammie waved.

Charlie fluttered her fingers. "I'm so sorry about your uncle."

Cammie blinked, as if she needed to hide the tears that suddenly pricked her eyes. "Thanks so much. I miss him, but I'm glad he's not suffering anymore."

"I understand completely." Charlie would understand more than most, since she took care of her mother, Francine. She'd settled her in a Los Gatos facility, which happened to be one of Ava's. The small bedroom community sat at the base of the Santa Cruz Mountains, and Dane knew Charlie was over there regularly. Of course, Francine could have lived with Charlie and Sebastian, but she claimed she wanted her independence.

Dane started the conversation. "Since it's your idea, Cammie, why don't you tell Charlie what you had in mind?"

Cammie huffed a breath. "It wasn't really my idea. I just posed a question, and you ran with it."

They'd brainstormed, tossing ideas back and forth, but using Charlie's work at the resorts had come from Cammie. She didn't even realize that she truly was his idea genie, no matter how many times he told her. Cammie's touch was pure magic.

She jumped into the proposal. "We'd love to have you create a sculpture for the lobby of each of Dane's resorts. Some of them have courtyards, some are marble entryways, some are open air. But we thought greeting his guests with an accent signifying the location of each particular resort would be amazing. A bald eagle for the Montana resort. A Joshua tree for the desert. But really, it should be whatever you feel is appropriate."

Charlie's mouth dropped open.

Cammie rushed on. “We wouldn’t expect this to take precedence over your other commissions. But if you’re interested, we’d like you to work us into your schedule whenever you can.”

Something unfurled in Dane’s belly when she said *we*. They were a team. They always had been. But now, it felt as if she was finally taking partial ownership of the things they did together.

“Wow.” Charlie put her hand to her mouth. “That all sounds incredible.”

“The other thing we’d like you to consider,” Cammie went on, “is putting together some art classes. Since metalwork is your specialty, we’d create a workshop in some of our resorts where you could teach. The building could be whatever size you need, with room for your materials, as well as other types of art like painting, pottery, and so much more.”

The way her mind worked stunned him. They’d talked in general terms, but she’d dreamed up an extraordinary idea with more specifics than he could have imagined.

Cammie’s ideas just kept flying. “You could visit a different resort once a month, or whatever fits your schedule, and give a class, showing other people how to do what you do.”

Charlie’s face flushed, and with a beaming smile, she jumped off her stool, waving her arms. “I’d love to fly out to your resorts once a month. I can even take people shopping for junk. That’s what I use for raw materials. I love junkyards and flea markets. Then we can bring back the treasures we find and make art.”

She lunged at Dane, as if she wanted to hug him. “This is just amazing. Thank you so much for thinking of me. Sebastian will go wild.”

Dane held out his hands. “Don’t thank me. This was all Cammie.”

Charlie hugged the computer screen. “Thank you, thank you. I will absolutely love doing this.”

Cammie beamed. He hadn’t seen her eyes sparkle like this in months. His heart wanted to leap right out of his chest, and he, too, could have hugged the computer screen. He could have hugged Charlie as well, for making Cammie so happy.

When Cammie was happy, he was happy.

* * *

The next day, Cammie and Dane had a three-way video chat with Rosie. Once again, Cammie laid out their idea.

“You two stagger me.” Rosie’s eyes shone as brightly as Charlie’s had. “You really want my artwork in all the rooms of your resorts?”

Dane explained, “If you’re willing to take on the task. Nothing has to be completed right away, of course. We can make prints from the originals, so you don’t have to paint something for every single room.”

Laughing, she put her hand on her stomach. “This little one would be a college graduate by the time I finished an original for each room.”

“We wondered if you’d like to teach classes at different resorts too,” Cammie said. “Just one a month, or whatever you’re comfortable with. We’d like to offer an art program for our guests who want to learn.”

Tears shimmered in Rosie’s eyes, and her voice wobbled. “You’re both just freaking amazing. I’d love to do it. The art *and* the classes.”

“As long as it doesn’t interfere with your next show,” Dane assured her.

“Would you mind if I used some of those paintings?”

Dane nodded heartily. “The originals would all be yours. We’ll just use prints. That’s what will make this thing unique.

They'll be in your show, and we'll promote them as being an eventual feature in the resorts. Two-way marketing."

"Wow," Rosie exclaimed. "I'm totally in. Thanks so much for this opportunity."

When Rosie left the meeting ten minutes later, after talking logistics, Dane smiled at Cammie. "I'd say that went really well."

The brainstorming had brought back her natural glow. Her smiles came more readily. Her enthusiasm shone in her eyes. "Exceptionally well," she said, clasping her hands as if she couldn't contain her excitement. "I'll set up a meeting with Ari. We can tackle her about reviewing the resorts' childcare facilities."

Dane loved that Cammie was completely on board with the projects, doing most of the talking without even realizing how much ownership she was taking.

Cammie was back in the game. And soon, she'd be back physically as well. Back in his office and back in his house. Right where she belonged.

Chapter Seven

The call with Ari Tremont two days later went as well as the others. Cammie felt her strength rebuilding, her confidence coming back after all the months—all the years—of watching her uncle literally fading away. She felt in her element now, trading ideas, watching the projects grow. More than anything, she needed to get back to work.

Ari was all in, even suggesting that Noah could help too. As well as Rosie and Jorge. Seeing how the boys played together in the different resorts would help them evaluate what worked and what needed more attention.

Dane once again stayed in the meeting after Ari signed off. Cammie loved their online chats, which gave her a chance to gaze at him without a qualm.

“She’s really on board with this.” He leaned back in his chair and stretched, his hands behind his head, his chest broad across the screen.

Excitement welled up inside Cammie. “This will be great.” She loved the work they were doing, talking with the Maverick ladies, bringing to life these amazing ideas. With Dane encouraging her to do all the talking, it felt as though she could actually be in charge of these projects. “Do you want me to set up the interview with Tasha?”

He nodded. “You have my schedule. Just let me know the time.”

They needed an interactive website for the resort conglomerate that would drill down into categories, then into each individual resort. “I hope Daniel can spare her. I know she does a lot of work for him.”

“I’m sure Daniel won’t mind,” Dane said with a shrug.

“Good. Because I also wanted to talk to you about some ideas I had involving Harper Franconi.”

Dane was staring at her, the features of his handsome face softened, his sapphire eyes mellowed to the color of cornflowers.

“What?” Her voice sounded natural, but her heart beat with unexpected trepidation.

“I feel like I’m rushing you into coming back. I’ve involved you in all of this Maverick stuff, but you’re still grieving for your uncle and hip-deep in his estate.”

For a moment, she felt as if she’d choke up. But she banished it. “I would tell you if I couldn’t handle this. But really, these projects help me keep my sanity.”

He eyed her skeptically. “You’ve been running at a hundred and ten percent. And now you look tired.”

Her hands flew to her cheeks. She’d been working with Uncle Lochlan’s bank just before the meeting. Time had flown, and she hadn’t had a chance to put on makeup. But Dane would accept nothing less than the truth. “It’s just that I received his death certificates today. I expedited them.” And paid a fee to do it. The certificates made her uncle’s passing all the more real.

“I’m so sorry.” Dane’s voice held so much compassion she wanted to weep. “I know how hard this must be for you. That’s why I want you to take more time.”

She blinked, staving off her emotions. “The best thing I can do is work. And come home.”

Home. With the suite she’d decorated herself, Pebble Beach felt like home.

Being with Dane felt like coming home.

Was it really all that bad if sometimes she lay awake in her king-size bed with Dane just a few steps down the hall and let thoughts of him take over? During the day, she was efficient, dedicated, knowing exactly what he needed right when he needed it. But the nights were hers, and sometimes she simply wanted to close her eyes and remember his hard muscles

beneath her fingertips, his silky chest hair against her cheek, his lips on hers, his tongue teasing her. It should have been torture, but she relished those private moments, those private memories.

But she couldn't afford them now. "I'm coming home in just a few days. The first week of March." It wouldn't be long. "Right now, I have too much time to think."

After a long slice of silence, he said, "Even if it's for my own selfish reasons, please come home."

Their work was his reason. It wasn't as if it was about *her*. Despite everything Dane said, she knew he was tired of the temps.

She'd lived with these fantasies about Dane locked deep inside all this time. She'd go on living with just that—fantasies.

Because she knew the rules. Better than anyone. Maybe even better than Dane.

* * *

Fernsby ticked off the day in early March on his secret calendar hidden deep in the pantry. Thank heaven. Camille had returned. He stepped into the entry hall just as Lord Rexford rushed her, barking, jumping, ecstatic. Smiling at the display of affection, Dane set down Camille's bag.

Only Camille could be away from home for five months and need only one suitcase.

If he were a different man, he might have hugged her. But he wasn't the hugging type.

In his sternest voice, disregarding Dane altogether, he said, "Thank goodness you're back, Camille. Your employer has been absolutely impossible for the last five months. He simply cannot function without you."

Dane scored him with a glance. "Aren't you overstating things a bit, Fernsby?"

Nose in the air, Fernsby droned, “You know my policy is always to tell the truth.” Then he added, “Sir,” in his deepest intonation.

His employer made a move for the bag, but Fernsby got there first. “I will escort Camille to her suite of rooms.” He grazed a look over Dane. “She needs time to adjust.” Then he turned to Camille. “Shall I unpack for you?”

Dog in her arms, Camille laughed that most delightful laugh of hers, a laugh that should have brought a man to his knees in worship. Dane, however, wasn’t on his knees. When would the man learn?

“No, Fernsby,” she said sweetly, for Camille was always sweet. “I can unpack for myself. Honestly.”

He headed up the stairs with her bag, which weighed almost nothing, and left the two alone in the marble entryway.

Only then did he permit himself a smirk. His thoughts pleased him. “Let’s get cracking, you two.”

They’d dawdled enough. They were meant to be together. And he would make sure it happened.

It was what Lochlan had wanted just as much as he.

* * *

In the late afternoon, when Cammie finished unpacking, she took a moment to sit on the bed and drink in the sense of home she’d longed for over the past five months. How she’d missed this place. She’d chosen everything in the room—the flowered border around the ceiling, the seafoam walls, one of them a darker teal that complemented the rest. The seafoam bedspread with splashes of teal. A lounge chair in the corner where she could read comfortably or use her laptop to do some paperwork. The only thing she hadn’t chosen was the stuffed teal-colored Tyrannosaurus Rex Dane had brought her the day they’d decided on the little dachshund’s name. As a puppy, he’d almost fit in her hand.

She treasured that stuffed dinosaur. Sometimes, lying in her bed, knowing Dane was just down the hall, yet as unreachable as if he were on the other side of the world, she hugged the dinosaur to her as if it were Dane himself.

Of all her suites in all of Dane's homes, this was her favorite. When Dane had it remodeled for her, he'd had the contractors add a kitchenette, with a small refrigerator, a two-burner stove, and a microwave. He'd even purchased an electric kettle for her herbal tea. She could make anything she wanted.

But of course, she'd always gone downstairs for dinner, and now, with her belongings put away, she returned to the house's main level.

The door to Dane's office stood open. Unlike the office space they'd had on the Peninsula, with an annex for her and a waiting room outside his corner office, this was one expanse of Persian carpet, wood paneling, and oak bookcases. The office was large enough that their competing phone conversations didn't drown each other out. While Dane liked his massive oak desk, Cammie had chosen a smaller desk and credenza set, situating it where the late afternoon sun streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

The estate stood on a bluff overlooking the ocean. The long, winding drive curled through the golf course belonging to one of Dane's resorts. Although his property was walled off, an errant golf ball occasionally scaled the walls. The sprawling house had everything—a master chef's kitchen for Fernsby, with his suite of rooms next to it. The formal dining room seated twenty-four, because Fernsby thought it was a good round number. Dane threw amazing dinners, though often he held parties in the San Francisco flat because it was more central to many of his business associates. They rarely used the formal living room except for get-togethers, but they often played chess or gin rummy in his study or lounged in the home theater to enjoy a classic movie or something new on a streaming service or to binge a TV show. Dane used the

workout room daily. She did, too, but always at different times.

A door at the end of the hall led to a shower room, sauna, cold plunge, and spa, then out to the Olympic-size pool. When they golfed or played pickleball, they used the resort's facilities. Beyond the back gate were hiking trails through Pebble Beach and down the cliffs to the beach below. She often went out for a walk, sometimes all the way to the other end of the beach, where the Frank Lloyd Wright house stood on the bluff.

Her memories prompted her to say, "Of all the places in the world where you own real estate, this is my favorite." She gazed out at the sun sparkling on the waves, the dots of surfers riding the crests.

Dane swiveled his desk chair to look at the view. "Me too. I never get tired of looking at the ocean."

"Neither do I." But she was looking at his profile.

Turning back to her, he mused, "The San Francisco flat is kind of amazing, though, with its view of the Golden Gate and Alcatraz out in the bay."

She suddenly felt nostalgic for all his homes, places she hadn't been in more than five months. Just as Lyssa Spencer had said, the London townhouse was exquisite. The English manor house captivated her with its twenty acres of grounds. His Caribbean island was a sanctuary. But still, Pebble Beach won, hands down. This was where she felt most at home.

This was where she could heal after the long months of caring for Uncle Lochlan. After the years of watching his decline and being able to do nothing about it. This was her refuge.

Here with Dane.

He stood. "Come here. I want to show you something." He held out his hand, pulling her to the long, latticed windows.

Below them lay the pool and, beyond that, the beach and hiking trails. A rock garden filled with succulents ran beneath the windows, leading down to the pool patio.

“What?” She’d never get tired of the view, and how she’d missed it. He wanted her to see something special, but she couldn’t pick out what it was in all this splendor.

Dane pointed among the succulents and rocks. “Do you see them?”

Cammie was so very aware of her hand still in Dane’s warm, comforting grip. And finally she saw... something. “What are they?”

“Charlie Ballard’s Zanti Misfits.”

“They look like weird bugs. With big bug eyes.”

Dane laughed. “That’s exactly what they are. Bugs. From an old episode of *The Outer Limits*.”

Cammie gasped. “Uncle Lochlan loved that show! We often watched reruns. Now I remember the Zantis.” She craned her neck. “Charlie has got them down pat.”

“I was going to have her make a T. Rex, but she gave me these guys instead. Rex loves barking at them.”

She chuckled. “A big Tyrannosaurus Rex would have terrified him.”

Squeezing her hand, he said, “That’s what I finally decided.”

She looked at him, smiling. “I love them.”

“Thought you would.”

She wondered if he’d chosen the Zanti Misfits as much for her as for Rex. Probably. It felt like she was finally home again.

“Where is he, by the way?” Rex was usually wherever they were.

Dane rolled his eyes. “Fernsby is baking.”

That said it all. And now she needed to work. “Let’s talk and see where we are.”

Though she would have loved to stand there holding hands with him all day, it was impossible. She backed away from the window, then rounded the desk and pulled out the chair in front she always used when they discussed plans or swapped ideas. The indents in the plush Persian carpet were still there, as if Dane hadn’t moved the chair in five months.

“I was able to finish most of Uncle Lochlan’s estate issues. There’re a couple of minor things left, but it’s pretty much done.”

As he took his seat, his eyes softened to a sweet blue flame. “I know how that stuff can consume you to the point that you can’t even grieve. Then, all of a sudden, you wake up months later and realize you’ve never even cried.”

“Thank you for understanding.” He was thinking about his parents and the difficult estate issues he’d had to deal with. Thank goodness Uncle Lochlan’s estate was so much less encumbered. If they had a different relationship, she’d have walked around the desk to hug Dane, giving him comfort, taking comfort for herself.

But they didn’t have a different relationship.

He laid his hands on his desk. “That’s why you should still take it easy. Don’t jump into everything immediately. In fact, don’t start work for a few days. Just lie by the pool, read, take long walks. You need recuperation too. This has been traumatic.”

He didn’t want her to come back to work? She’d thought he understood what she needed. The agony of the past months suddenly welled up in her. “I need to work. It’s the only thing that helps me through the grief.”

“But I can’t help worrying about you.”

She felt almost militant. “I’m perfectly capable of coming back as your personal assistant.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “You’re right. About everything. I don’t know anyone else who could go through what you have and come out so well on the other side. But I won’t stop you from doing what you need to do. I love all your ideas. I want to hear more about them.”

His words deflated her. She actually sagged in the chair, and her grip on the armrests relaxed until her hands simply hung there. She hadn’t even been aware of holding on so tightly. “I didn’t mean to shout. I guess I’m still a little emotional.” God, she’d almost lost it. But there was one more thing she had to add, then they never had to talk about any of this again. “I’m going to step up my payments to you for Uncle Lochlan’s care.”

“Cammie, you don’t need to worry about paying anything back.”

She held up a hand, stopping him. “You and Ava made his last years so much better than they ever could have been otherwise. I can’t thank either of you enough. I need to return all that to you.”

His head slightly bent, he waved a hand. “Fine. Good. I understand. But there’s no time limit. You don’t need to make yourself crazy taking care of it.”

She shook her head, her hair falling across her face. She refused to get emotional again, so she said calmly, “I’m not being crazy about it. I just need to pay my way. I can’t have this hanging over my head.”

He could have said more, but instead, probably because of her earlier outburst, he nodded. “All right. Do what you have to do. I get it.”

“Thank you.” She appreciated his acceptance. If he’d gone on, she might have lost her cool again.

The debt was another good reason she lived in his house; she had no rental expenses. And now everything she paid him could go toward the debt rather than ongoing care.

With that off her chest, she could get to the good stuff she'd been thinking about. No more dwelling on bad things. "Remember what we were discussing about Harper?"

"Sure." He nodded, his fingers steepled as he leaned back in his chair.

For a moment, she was struck by how terribly handsome he was—his dark hair, his aristocratic features, his sometimes soulful blue eyes that could read her mind. How she missed this, sitting with him, talking, even just looking at him. The sense of finally coming home stole her breath all over again.

She had to force herself back to reality. In the end, they'd postponed the video meetings with Tasha and Harper. Dane had been right to tell her to slow down with the work stuff. She'd needed to plow through the rest of the estate issues so she could come home. And it had taken her only a few more days.

Leaning forward, she crossed her knees and rested her forearms on her thighs. "Harper's been dealing with her brother's special needs for something like thirteen years. She has great expertise." Jeremy was a fine kid. She'd seen that at the soccer game. But because of his accident, he was different from other boys. That fact provided challenges for Harper.

Dane's gaze rested on her. "Isn't that why we discussed adding specialized activities at some of the resorts?"

"Yes." Her excitement grew to the point she felt jittery with it. Or maybe that was just being alone with him after so many months. "But instead of adding focused events to existing resorts, what if we created resorts designed specifically for kids with special needs?"

She'd been thinking about it for days, the idea blossoming in her mind, and now everything burst out.

"We could have classes and sports events and physical therapy and games. We can ask Harper, 'If you could have had anything you wanted while you raised Jeremy, what would it be?' There are things you and I could never even dream of. We

could have activities for the parents too. Not just family activities, but things they can do on their own, like date nights. Therapy for them as well. Because it must be hard. And we could provide resources to tap into each child's unique abilities. Tasha could design special interactive games. Charlie and Rosie could give art classes. We could have shows featuring the kids' work."

Dane stared at her as if she were a mad scientist. Maybe she'd been gone so long, he'd forgotten what she looked like. Finally, head still cocked, he said, "Have I ever told you how amazing you are?"

"I—" She stopped.

"The way your mind works endlessly is fascinating. I mean, you've just been through a terrible ordeal. And yet, somehow, you're still my idea genie, coming up with incredible plans." When she opened her mouth, he held up a hand. "I know work is how you manage your grief. But I still believe that no one but you could conceive an idea like this at a time like this."

Her heart turned over and tapped out a new rhythm in her chest. "Do you really think it's a good idea?" Her voice came so softly.

His smile lit her up. "It's a freaking out-of-this-world idea. I love it. And I want to do it."

This was the kind of project she'd love to sink her teeth into—building a prototype resort from the ground up. It was important work, and she wanted to take a big role in it, shoulder more responsibility than she'd ever had—with Dane's oversight, of course.

She was eager to dive in. "Then, if you have no objection, I'll put together an idea document. We'll have something to brainstorm with and talk to Harper about."

He shook his head as if she still stunned him. "Of course."

"Unless there's something else that's more important?"

He huffed out a strange laugh, and she wondered if she was pushing too hard. But he said, “There’s nothing more important. Go ahead and get your feet wet with this.”

“It’s a dream project. We could expand this all over the world.” Her whole being felt lighter than it had in months. It was being home. It was working closely with Dane again. It was this new resort that could do so much good for so many people. “This is what all your hard work and learning have been about. Now you have the experience to build this, to do it the best way possible.”

“But it was your idea,” he said.

“It’s *our* idea,” she stressed. “Stemming from all the talks with the Mavericks and their loved ones.”

She could have rubbed her hands together with glee like a little girl. All she really wanted to do right now was work on this incredible project with Dane. Yes, there were all the day-to-day tasks that would still need to be accomplished, but she thought of all the hours they’d spend, heads together, making plans, creating something miraculous.

It hit her that she longed for all those hours together a little too much. A little too desperately.

Coming off five months of family leave, that might be a very dangerous thing.

Chapter Eight

She was smart. She was courageous. She was efficient and conscientious. She was also funny under better circumstances. And she constantly surprised and amazed him. Even as Cammie worked through her uncle's estate, her beautiful mind was brainstorming, coming up with an idea so brilliant, so exciting that Dane's heart pounded in his chest.

Or maybe that was just having her sitting across from him again, her scent filling the room, filling his head, filling him up.

He'd missed her. More than he could say. And he loved that she appreciated the Zanti Misfits. They seemed a fitting homecoming.

But she stared at her hands a long moment before looking at him again, as if an errant thought had been running through her mind. "I know it's my first evening back, but it's been a long day. Would you mind if I had dinner in my room?"

"Of course not. I'll have Fernsby bring up a tray when you're ready."

"Thank you."

He sensed a vulnerability about her. As if the last five months had suddenly taken their toll. She'd been on duty with her uncle the entire time, never getting enough rest. Then she'd pushed through settling the estate in record time.

If he could have, he would have rounded his desk and pulled her into his arms.

Instead, he watched her go.

Damn the rules that kept him from holding her the way she needed to be held. That kept him from giving her the comfort he desperately wanted to supply.

They'd lived under the same roof for seven long years after she sold Lochlan's house and put the proceeds toward his care. Providing her with a suite of rooms in all his homes seemed like a win-win for both of them. He needed her. She was the order in his life and the heart in his work. When starting a new venture or project, she was instrumental in moving him to consider how he could help people. He'd come to rely on that. To rely on *her*.

That's why he'd wanted to help with Lochlan's care—to pay her back for what she'd done for him. But once the house proceeds were exhausted, she'd insisted on paying what she could, which was a good portion of her salary. Both he and Ava would willingly forgo any further payment, but accepting that wasn't in Cammie's nature.

The fact that she lived with him was an even greater reason for the rules they'd drawn up that long-ago day. Because, damn him, he couldn't forget the satiny feel of her skin beneath his fingers, the sweet scent of her hair as he buried his face in its silkiness, the ambrosia of her kiss.

The damn rules were the only things keeping him from marching down the hall and begging her.

Except for the fact that if he pushed, she might pack her bags and leave him.

* * *

Cammie typed feverishly long into the night, barely touching the tray of food Fernsby had brought. Rex, in his doggy bed, lifted his head every so often to gaze at her.

Since the soccer game, she'd considered the talents of all the Maverick women. This merger wasn't just about the billionaires. Their wives, fiancées, girlfriends, and family were an integral part of the Maverick group. She'd shared her thoughts with Dane, and he'd jumped on her ideas, wanting to talk to each one.

Brainstorming ideas had gotten her through those last dark days with her uncle. The video chats had kept her spirits from

plummeting after he died.

Now she had work to get her through. She'd already started a document, adding to it after every meeting, but tonight she dropped in all the ideas floating through her mind. And they just kept coming. God, how badly she wanted to be more than just an assistant on this new resort project. Could she actually run it? With help, yes. But that was the rub—she still needed help.

The thought didn't dampen her enthusiasm, and with every new concept, she wanted to run down the hall to Dane's room and tell him.

Which, of course, she couldn't do.

It was even harder not to think about that night. After all this time, she should barely be able to recall it. Yet she remembered each detail so vividly. His taste, his touch. The things he did with his lips, his mouth. The way he'd stolen her breath with that very first kiss.

"Stop thinking, Cammie," she growled at herself through gritted teeth. Rex popped his head up, looking around as if a real dinosaur were outside the window.

It was deep into the night, long past midnight, when she finally closed the document, the page count coming in at twenty. Rex had finally climbed onto the bed and curled into a ball, waiting for her, opening his eyes occasionally to gaze at her, pleading.

The last thing she did before shutting down her computer was to send Dane her list.

* * *

Dane looked up from his desk as she entered the office the next morning. "Lord Buttoff?"

For just a moment, she felt light and carefree. "I'm sorry. I thought that was your official title. Am I wrong?"

Laughing with her, he jumped up from the desk to grab her shoulders. "God, I love you." Humor still threaded his voice.

Until he seemed to hear the words he'd said. For a moment, they stared at each other. What the heck?

Then he rushed on. "I mean, I love your ideas. They're brilliant. Every one of them. We've got to do it all. That's what I meant."

If she didn't know better, she'd think Dane was fumbling. And Dane never fumbled. He was always smooth in business. He was smooth with women of all ages. The man was a charmer.

She didn't want to think about *why* he might have fumbled. "Of course I knew what you meant. We've been working together for twelve years. We both know the rules."

They both knew they needed those rules, because their one-night stand, even if neither of them ever said it, had been too perfect for words.

* * *

While each Maverick had his own center of operations, they occupied a shared office space in Sebastian's San Francisco headquarters for their group ventures. Will sat at the head of the conference table, surrounded by his brothers. He never thought of them as foster brothers, nor did he think of Gideon as Matt's brother-in-law or Cal as just their business manager. Well, except for that blip when he and the guys found out Cal was dating their sister. But that was only natural, right? Now they were all family.

It had been more than a month since the dinner party at Mom and Dad's, and they'd scheduled this morning's meeting to discuss possible ventures for the two groups to organize together. It was time to get things rolling. Though they'd all talked individually, Will wanted everything out in a group meeting before Dane Harrington arrived.

"He's been talking to Charlie," Sebastian said. "He wants to commission her sculptures for each of his resorts. And..." He leaned forward as if the proposal was too incredible to be believed. "He wants her to teach classes for his guests."

“He said the same to Rosie.” Gideon shook his head as if it were a marvel. “He wants her to create paintings for his hotel rooms.”

Matt sat back hard. “That’s one hell of an undertaking. How many freaking rooms does he have in each of his resorts?”

Eyes wide with surprise, Gideon shook his head. With Gideon’s being a war veteran, Will hadn’t thought anything could surprise him. “Not originals. Limited-edition prints. And he wants her to put the originals in her next few shows.”

“Wow,” was Evan’s only exclamation, but that said it for all of them.

“He wants Ari to check out the childcare accommodations at his resorts,” Matt added.

“He’s talked to Tasha about an interactive website.” Daniel drummed his fingers on the table.

Dane and Cammie Chandler had also spoken to Harper. “I’m not sure what to make of it,” Will said.

Cal leaned his elbows on the table. “He was great planning that gala with Lyssa.”

“Paige had lunch with Ava Harrington,” Evan divulged. “She likes her. Ava wanted to pick her brain on how to add more mental health sessions at her care facilities. Even for the families of her residents.”

“I had drinks with Troy.” Matt steepled his fingers. “He’s got some great ideas for a new generation of workout machines. I could really get into designing that stuff.”

“I’ve already talked to Clay about how we can combine forces—his video platform with the media I have going,” Sebastian said. “And enhance both.”

It was exactly what Will hoped to hear. He’d known this was the right thing to do. Otherwise, he would never have signed the contract. But it was good to know the agreement

hadn't been a bunch of worthless paper. This would bring real results. Dane Harrington was a man of his word.

Sebastian said what they were all thinking. "This is freaking awesome. But what the heck, man? When are we going to do the great deals with Dane?"

"Not just this piecemeal stuff," Matt added. "But something with meat." He curled his hand into a fist.

"Something challenging," Evan added.

The timing was perfect. The idea had come to him as Harper talked about her discussions with Dane and Cammie. He tapped the end of his mechanical pencil on his notebook. "I've been giving it some thought. And here's what I think we should propose."

* * *

Dane didn't arrive alone. The ideas were mostly Cammie's, so of course she had to be there. That was never a question in his mind.

As Dane and Cammie prepared to leave for the San Francisco meeting, Fernsby had appeared. "Sir, I should go."

Dane had said as sternly as the butler himself, "Fernsby, you're not going. You're staying here to take care of Rex."

The man had stubbornly gone on. "I can make tea. And I've been baking."

That got Dane's attention. "What did you bake?"

Fernsby didn't smile. He never smiled. But his eyes glinted. "You'll find out when I bring it into the meeting."

So Fernsby had come along too.

Over the three weeks since Cammie had returned, they'd worked tirelessly on the proposal, refining each of her ideas, researching, adding details, taking to Harper and other experts. And today they would present their plan to the Mavericks.

His brothers and sisters were already approaching the Mavericks with their own ideas. Ava had lunch with Paige. Troy met with Matt. Clay had gone to Sebastian. Plans were already in motion to bring each of their specialties together. He'd talked extensively with each of them during late-night calls, discussed the details, and they'd all signed off on the first special needs resort.

Now, he and Cammie just had to convince the Mavericks. He had full confidence that Cammie could pull it off. She didn't even need him. That's how committed she was. Even if the Mavericks had no interest, the resort would happen. It was the most ambitious project of his career. And over the past three weeks, it had become the most important.

Dane had barely taken a seat facing the Mavericks, with Cammie beside him, when Fernsby rolled in his tea trolley.

"Gentlemen and lady." He nodded to Cammie. "I have tea, coffee, water, juice. What is your pleasure?"

For a long moment, the Mavericks were too stunned to answer. Then suddenly they were all calling out their orders. With each cup he served, Fernsby offered his plate of baked goods.

Of course he'd made all Dane's favorites, and without even asking, Fernsby served him a Bakewell tart, while Cammie received a butter tart.

Sebastian turned to Evan, a frown pulling at his eyebrows. "Why don't we have someone like him?" They'd all experienced Fernsby at the soccer game, but here, in the office, his service could truly be appreciated.

Will stroked his chin. "Fernsby, what can I pay you to work for me instead of Dane?"

Fernsby tipped his nose, almost as though he smelled something bad. "A very kind offer, sir. But you can't afford me."

Each of the Mavericks could afford him ten times over. But none had a comeback.

Cal bit into a Bakewell tart and groaned.

Daniel glared at him. “Jesus, you’re with my sister. We don’t need to hear what it’s like when you’re in bed.”

Cal’s lips twitched with a smile as he continued making what Dane considered a rather sexual noise. “I first tasted Fernsby’s specialties in London,” Cal said between lascivious groans. Then he smiled. “Ah, London, the best trip of my life. Changed my entire world.”

Daniel damn near growled. “You’re going to need to eat that outside, then. Or I might have to beat the crap out of you. Again.”

Dane hadn’t been there, but he’d heard all about that infamous fight when Daniel had learned Lyssa was pregnant with Cal’s baby. They weren’t married. No one had even known they were seeing each other. But Dane had seen a spark between them when they visited him in London.

“Yeah,” Will said. “You totally lost your mind that day, Daniel. We had to wash the blood off the deck at Mom and Dad’s. And I never got to eat my steak.”

“I still have the emotional scars,” Cal said with a straight face.

Daniel narrowed his eyes. “You deserve them for seducing our little sister behind our backs.” His face stretched in a rictus of a grin, teeth bared. “But since she adores you, I’ve had to be magnanimous and forgive you.”

Sebastian got in on the fun. “Can we get back to important things, like how damn good these tarts are?” He turned to Fernsby. “You’re freaking amazing.”

Naturally, Fernsby didn’t crack a smile, not even a slight lift of his eyebrows. “That’s very kind of you, sir, to appreciate my baking.”

Cammie glanced at Fernsby, smiling. “Fernsby has applied to *Britain’s Greatest Bakers*. He’s waiting to hear back.”

Fernsby inclined his head slightly, as if he were royalty. Then he bowed his way out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“I remember hearing something about that when we were in London,” Cal said, indicating Dane with a jut of his chin.

“He’s been trying to get on a baking show forever,” Dane explained.

“He really has a shot this time.” Cammie backed him up. “The tarts are amazing. The best I’ve tasted yet.”

All the Mavericks agreed. Then Will rapped the table. “Okay, Dane. You’re putting in a major effort with all our women, trying to get them to work with you. But what we want to know—” He waved a hand at his brothers. “—is when *we’re* going to work a deal with you.”

Chapter Nine

It was the opening Dane had been waiting for. “We have a proposal for you.” He looked to Cammie, the most important team member. “Why don’t you tell everyone what we’ve been thinking?”

“Well...” She sounded a little nervous, and Dane urged her on with a smile. “The idea came to us after talking with Harper. We’d like to create a resort for people with different abilities. Not *disabilities*, but *different* abilities,” she stressed. “No matter where a person is on their path, they always have something special to offer. We want to create an environment where their specialness can blossom.” She grew more eloquent as she described what was essentially her project. “We think of it along the lines of St. Jude’s. None of our guests will have to pay. Everything will be fully funded by donations. It’ll be a place for parents as well as children. We’ll have learning, we’ll have relaxation, we’ll have games. We want to foster teamwork through sports, and perhaps one day a month, we’ll have a big competition.”

During her pause, Dane added, “The difference between us and the St. Jude’s model is that our resort won’t be doing research or anything medical. Everything will be therapeutic.”

Cammie took over again. Damn, but she was amazing, captivating the Mavericks.

“We want them to have sun, sand, swimming, and fun, so a location near water.” She put a hand to her chest, taking ownership. “I like the feel of a lakeside resort.” Her confidence increased as she presented all their ideas. “We’re not distinguishing by age. Some guests will be young, some in their teens, some adults. Parents and caregivers will have a place for their children or charges to go where they can all interact with each other, do fun things, like flying behind a speedboat with a parachute.”

“Parasailing,” Sebastian supplied for her.

She pointed a finger. “Right. This will be a place where they can live their best lives for a week or two. But we recognize that parents need to be taken care of as well. In many cases, they’ve been through hell, and we’ll offer a host of activities to help them relax as well as their kids.”

Will thumped the table and raised his hands in the air like a gold medal winner. “How did you know that’s exactly what we were going to propose?”

Cammie smiled, almost shyly. “Maybe it’s all coming out of the discussions that Dane and I had with your significant others. Especially Harper. She and her brother are an important part of this.” She waited a moment as Will nodded.

“And you’re all an important part as well.” She indicated them all with a sweep of her hand. “We’re going to need all of you to find ways to help fund this and to use your expertise in bringing it to fruition. Everyone here has something to offer. That’s why we think it’s a perfect project for this newly merged group.”

Every man in the room glowed with enthusiasm. They were into this. And while Cammie gave Dane part claim to the project, it was really all her. She turned him speechless with her ability to spark the Mavericks’ interest. He was so damn proud of her. She had everything together, even after the ordeal she’d been through with her uncle.

Daniel didn’t need to fake his eagerness. “Lake Tahoe would be perfect for this. There are beaches for sports, the lake for swimming and kayaking, and woods for hiking. And in the winter, there’s snowshoeing, skiing, and a ton of winter sports.”

Holding up her hand, Cammie said, “But we wouldn’t want to be right on top of the big casinos or ski resorts. Our place needs to be relatively on its own.”

Daniel tapped the table. “I know the area well. Let me think about it, look around, see what I can find. And in the

meantime, we can make our plans for building.”

“I’m sure we’ll find the perfect place.” Color bloomed in Cammie’s cheeks. She was loving this—the planning, the suggestions, the buy-in.

Gideon jumped in. “This is a good use of the foundation’s extra cash too.”

“We’ve got several ongoing projects,” Cal added. “But as Gideon says, we have funds that aren’t allocated yet. I don’t want to take away from what our veterans and foster kids need, but there is surplus.”

Grinning, Gideon bopped him lightly on the arm. “We’ve got all these foster kids needing summer jobs, and even during holiday breaks.” He looked at Dane, then Cammie. “They could be like camp counselors. It would be great experience for them. It might even help some of them find a path in life.”

Under the table, Dane touched Cammie’s hand. The whole was bigger than the sum of its parts, ideas coming up they hadn’t even thought of on their own.

“We’re glad you guys are on board,” Dane said. He was as grateful to them as he was to Cammie. “This project has heart.”

“You’re making us look at what’s needed in this world,” Matt said. “And how we can use what we’ve been given to make it a better place to live.”

“Your brothers and sisters are all on board too?” Sebastian asked.

“Absolutely.” Dane tapped his temple. “Troy is already thinking about sports equipment. Gabby’s planning menus.”

“Don’t forget Fernsby’s baking.” Cal chuckled, showing his priorities.

“We have you to thank for this,” Will said. “Living with Jeremy, I should have seen the need long ago. But you both asked questions that made us think. It takes a team with fresh blood to look at things from a new perspective.”

A team. That's what they were. Even as Dane wanted more, this was the beginning. He and his family and Cammie were the fresh blood the Mavericks needed. And vice versa.

"It's synergy," Dane said. "That's what we've got."

There were nods of agreement all around.

"We'll start talking to our contacts about donations," Evan said.

The Mavericks gave a rousing huzzah, filling the room with their voices and their enthusiasm.

With his uncanny sense of timing, Fernsby entered the room once again, his ubiquitous trolley refreshed with carafes of coffee and hot water for tea.

As the group enjoyed a celebratory round of Fernsby's goodies, someone's phone rang with a shrill rotary-phone ringtone from ages ago. All eyes went to Evan, the only one in the room who hadn't put his device on silent. As he answered, his face turned pale. "What? But it's too early." A panicked note rose in his voice. "Okay. I'll meet you there. Have Theresa take you. Everything'll be okay." He slammed his phone down on the table with a smack that could have cracked the screen.

"Paige?" Matt asked, worry lines etching his forehead.

For a moment, Evan seemed incapable of speech. Until finally he got out the words. "She's having contractions. I have to get to the hospital. Hopefully, my mother will have driven her there by the time I arrive."

"Maybe you should call for an ambulance," Sebastian suggested.

Evan shook his head so hard his glasses wobbled. "And have Paige scold me for overreacting? No way. She'll say, very calmly, 'It's just two babies, sweetheart.'" He did a very good imitation of Paige's gentle, musical tones.

"Then have your driver take them," Matt said. "Don't make Theresa do it."

Evan's voice rose slightly, with either panic or powerlessness. "The driver is here with me."

"Guess you need to hire two drivers," Daniel said unhelpfully.

"Call Susan and Bob," Cal advised.

It was almost laughable. All these powerful men deliberating about how to get Paige Collins to the hospital.

Fernsby tapped his silver spoon against the coffee carafe, the room going as silent as a church when the priest steps up to the pulpit. "If I might interject." He didn't pause for objections. "It appears to me, sir—" He bowed slightly to Evan. "—after having met Theresa Collins at the dinner party a few weeks ago, that she's a very capable woman. I'd even go so far as to say she's unflappable. Experienced in these matters, I'm sure she will safely convey your wife to the hospital in record time."

Only Fernsby could be the voice of sanity in that room. And it worked.

Will jumped to his feet. "He's right. Now let's get the hell out of here and down to the hospital ourselves."

They raced out like a stampeding herd of horses, almost bowling Fernsby over on the way.

* * *

Dane and Camille remained in the now quiet room. "Maverick generation two-point-oh on the way," Dane said.

Camille nudged him. "Noah and Jorge are generation two-point-oh. This is generation two-point-one."

Fernsby recognized the smile lurking on Dane's lips and saw an opportunity not to be missed. "I suggest you two speed to the hospital as well. Your Maverick companions will need calming influences, so it's your duty to accompany them." He inclined his head, though he felt like cheering. "I will take care of everything on the home front, sir."

After sending them off, he looked down at Lord Rexford, sitting at attention on a chair just outside the conference room. “My dear Lord Rexford, this is an astonishingly flawless scenario. The two of them together, witnessing the birth of new babies. Oh yes, that should get at least one of them thinking.”

He rubbed his hands gleefully, then patted Lord Rexford’s behind, urging him off the chair.

“Even I couldn’t have planned this one better.” He allowed himself a smile, since only the dog was there to see.

* * *

The hospital waiting room was so packed with Mavericks and family, it was almost claustrophobic. There certainly wasn’t room for anyone else. The chairs had been moved haphazardly, the magazines on the side tables splayed open, and grooves paced into the utilitarian carpet.

The Spencers had arrived soon after their sons. Cammie didn’t need an introduction to recognize the matriarch of the family. Susan hugged Theresa Collins tightly. “We can’t thank you enough for being there.”

Theresa glowed with pride. “I was only glad I could help. Paige didn’t even tell me at first. She thought it was just a false start.”

“And that’s why she needed you.” Susan smiled, her cap of silver hair slightly mussed, as if she’d rushed out without time to brush it. Misty-eyed, the two moms talked as if Susan were Evan’s birth mother. Though Evan and Theresa had reunited, Susan was Evan’s mother in all respects but blood, just as she was mother to all the Mavericks. The odd thing was that Theresa didn’t seem to resent it.

Despite the tumult, Susan turned to Cammie, who was, naturally, seated next to Dane. Smiling, she headed across the waiting room. Dane was already rising to his feet, and Cammie stood with him.

“You must be Cammie Chandler.” Susan took Cammie’s hand in both of hers. “We’re so sorry about your uncle.” Her kind eyes brimmed with sympathy as Bob Spencer echoed her.

“I really appreciate that. Thank you.” Cammie gave the older woman’s hand a squeeze, with an added smile for Bob.

“We’ve heard so much about you from Dane.” Susan smiled up at Dane. “Thank you both for being here today to celebrate our newest arrivals.”

“We wouldn’t miss it.” Dane leaned down to give her a hug. All the Mavericks were prone to hugging.

Kelsey rushed in then, throwing herself at her mom, Theresa. Soon after, her twin brother, Tony, arrived—an Evan replica with the same maple-brown hair and hazel eyes, even the same smile, though he was ten years younger. Despite Evan having discovered his long-lost family only a year ago, they seemed amazingly tight-knit and completely welcomed into the Maverick fold.

Cammie and Dane took their seats again, out of the melee. Cammie leaned in to say softly, “They both seem very nice. The Spencers, I mean.”

Dane nodded. “They’re incredible. I wish...” He trailed off. He wished he’d had parents like them? Cammie suspected that was part of his attraction to the Mavericks—not just their business prowess, but the family as a whole.

Though individually everyone seemed to talk in hushed voices, the room felt loud. The disinfectant scent reminded Cammie of all the hours, days, and months she’d sat in her uncle’s room. Yet this was so different. This was life and love and happiness.

Dane, as if sensing her thoughts, took her hand in his. “You okay?”

She didn’t deny her feelings. “It’s nothing like Uncle Lochlan’s last days. This is—” She sighed. “It’s just plain beautiful.”

The sudden smile on his face would light up a stadium. “Yeah. It’s a beautiful thing.”

She shot him a cheeky smile. “I’d have thought you’d be squirming in your seat,” she said softly so no one overheard. “I mean, it’s babies, after all.”

He looked down his nose with feigned affront. “I like babies.”

She snorted. “You’ve never even been around one.”

“I like them.” He shrugged. “In theory.”

She laughed at him.

During the wait, Cammie went out twice to a nearby café to get food for the conclave. Dane had been about to order in, but she wanted to stretch her legs. Everyone thanked her, grateful for the sandwiches and wraps, sodas, and chips she passed out.

“Too bad we don’t have Fernsby as well. Or, more specifically, his tarts,” Cal said.

Lyssa, leaning against him, turned dreamy. “Fernsby’s tarts. The best ever. And they can lead to so many other wonderful things.” She tipped her face up to kiss him.

Cammie felt a little dreamy just looking at them. She whispered into Dane’s ear, “We’d better not let Gabby hear that.”

Dane snickered. “Who will win their competition is one of life’s greatest mysteries.”

It was just after ten in the evening when the doctor came through the double doors. The whole gang, including Dane and Cammie, had stayed the entire time.

The doctor smiled widely, her dark eyes bright as she announced, “We have two additions to your family—a boy and a girl. Mom and babies are doing well. We’re just cleaning everyone up, then you can see them.”

“Oh my,” Theresa exclaimed, hands flying to her mouth. “That was fast. I was in labor with the twins for almost twenty-four hours.”

The doctor beamed with pride. “It all went like clockwork.”

Susan hugged her husband, Bob, tears streaming down her face. Kelsey and Tony hugged their mom. And the Mavericks clapped one another on the back in congratulations as if they’d all had something to do with the birthing.

Leaning into Dane, Cammie murmured, “Now the wait is over, we should take off. We all can’t fit in the birthing room.”

Dane held her in her seat with a look. “Not yet. I want a glimpse.”

Chapter Ten

Well, well, well. The man was full of surprises.

Cammie had never known Dane to be sentimental, but he avidly watched Paige as she lay in bed, a blue-swaddled baby in her arms. Evan, the proud father, held a pink bundle, gazing down with what could only be called total adoration.

For a moment, Cammie's stomach tilted at the beautiful tableau. Not only for the Collinses and their new family, but at Dane's enchantment as he took them in. The sight brought a tear to her eye. And it made her tremble with a vivid memory of *that* night, a moment when he'd put his hand on her breast, sleekly naked, infinitely sexy, and looked up at her as if *she'd* enchanted *him*.

She zipped her memories shut. This wasn't the time or place.

Evan, or one of the Mavericks, must have pulled a few strings, because the whole clan overflowed the birthing suite, where usually only two or three visitors would be allowed. Thank goodness the room was huge. Painted a soothing powder blue, it could have housed three new mothers, but for now only Paige occupied it. Bean bags and easy chairs sat on the floor, and puffy clouds drifted across the blue ceiling.

Cammie and Dane remained on the periphery out in the hall, like twin Scrooges looking through the frost-laced panes of Bob Cratchit's house on Christmas Eve and wanting to go in.

As if he felt the same thing, Dane curled his fingers around hers. "It's unique and amazing, don't you think?"

She had to agree. "Yes." It was unique for them both.

Dane had never been around babies or children. Neither had she. This was a first. And it was awe-inspiring. But

sharing this new experience, she relished the warmth of Dane's hand around hers far too much.

Bob and Susan Spencer got first crack at the new family, with hugs, kisses, tears—most of them Bob's. The man was a big softie.

As they stepped aside, Theresa moved in to tenderly kiss Evan's cheek and her tiny granddaughter's forehead, then bent to Paige and the baby in her arms.

It was so loving, Cammie felt like crying too.

Will took his turn at the bedside, smoothing a finger over the baby's hairless head. Then he turned a stern face on Evan, reminding Cammie of Fernsby. If one looked up the definition of *stern* in the dictionary, it would show a picture of Fernsby.

"You're on indefinite parental leave to be with your wife and babies," Will said. "When you're ready to come back, you let us know. But don't make it too soon."

Harper stepped to Will's side, her words for Paige. "I'm not going to let you come back too fast."

Ari, now at the bedside, Matt's arm around her, gave Paige a few instructions that were obviously for Evan too. "We're going to hold you guys to a pinkie swear that you'll take three months, maybe even six, just to be parents." She put a hand to her chest. "This bonding time is very important for the babies." Both Evan and Paige listened earnestly to her, their expert in child development.

Evan nodded resolutely. "We will. But it'll be hard not to be a part of this family."

Sebastian snorted a laugh. "Just because you're not working doesn't mean you're getting out of coming to the barbecues. And dinners. And whatever other events we feel like throwing. You just won't be working yourself to the bone. You'll be looking out for your family."

Evan bowed his head in agreement.

Rosie stepped in to kiss each newborn on the forehead, then placed a loving kiss on Paige's cheek. "Take this time," she said. "They grow up so fast." Then she looked at Evan. "The business will be here when you come back."

Paige wiped away a tear. "You're right. All of you. Thank you."

The rest of the women, as if they were of one mind, gathered round Paige. Ari put out her pinkie finger. "Pinkie swear." All of them hooked pinkies in a circle. "We want you to take care of yourself while you're caring for your babies. Anything you need, we're here for you."

Paige rubbed away another tear. "Thank you. I love you all so much."

Then Susan took over. "We'll let you get some rest now. It's been a long day." She glanced across the bed to Evan, and even from the doorway, Cammie recognized her joy and love. "And a long day for you too." She gave Evan a loving smile.

The Mavericks separated into couples then, and Cammie had a feeling the pregnant ladies would receive tender foot rubs tonight. It was so sweet—Gideon kissing the top of Rosie's head, Matt with his hand on Ari's burgeoning belly, Cal with a sweeping gaze of love over Lyssa's features. Noah held his hand out to Ari, looking up at her with the love only a seven-year-old child could feel. Gideon hefted a sleepy Jorge into his arms and gathered Rosie's hand in his. Charlie laid her head on Sebastian's shoulder, Daniel nuzzled Tasha's hair, and Will wrapped an arm around Harper.

Then Jeremy raised his voice above all the others. "Nobody told me the babies' names."

A chorus of laughter filled the room because none of them had thought to ask.

Evan kissed the baby wrapped in pink. "This is Savannah."

Paige resettled the baby in her arms. "And this is Keegan."

Cammie whispered into Dane's ear, "Welcome, Maverick generation two-point-one."

* * *

The silence in the car as they drove felt comfortable, especially as Cammie's scent filled the air. For the first time since she'd come back—or maybe the second, third, or fourth time—Dane acknowledged how much he'd missed her.

Their working relationship had always been exceptional. She ran his life smoothly. Even more, her brilliant ideas fueled his work. They fueled *him*. Thus the need for the rules. And the reason that, even as he lay only steps away from her at any of the houses or flats or condos they shared, he never actually crawled into her bed.

And he wouldn't now. But still, this five-month ordeal had gotten under his skin. Just as that tender scene in Paige's birthing suite had been a topsy-turvy moment. In the past, he'd offhandedly thought babies were cute and children could be adorable. But witnessing the love lighting up that room, the joy of each and every man, the sweetness of the women, Dane felt his innards slip-sliding. Seeing the pride on Evan's face as he'd looked at his newborns and the reverence with which he'd gazed at his wife, as if she was the first woman ever to have given birth, Dane's priorities had turned into a mishmash. His heart had flipped over in his chest at the gooey, love-swept glances among all of them in that room, knowing in his gut they would return home tonight to reaffirm their love.

He wanted what these Mavericks had. He'd mused over it at the soccer game, and at the signing dinner, he'd gazed at Susan and Bob and the clan they'd brought together. He wanted his family to experience the same phenomenon.

Cammie touched his hand. "You're so quiet." Her soft laughter caressed him. "Did seeing the new babies scare you to death?"

Dane couldn't laugh. He could only answer truthfully. Even if he held back the genuine depth of his feeling. "I have

to admit I was a little jealous.”

Her touch vanished like a phantom into the night. “Jealous? But you haven’t had a serious relationship since I’ve known you.”

He shrugged. “Maybe I’ve just never found the right woman.”

He’d dated, but they’d been more like flings than relationships. No woman had erased the memory of that one night with Cammie. Was that what he was searching for? A woman who could make him forget how amazing that night had been? A woman who could surpass it?

“I like them as a family,” he tried to explain. “They’re a powerful force because they’ve created such a cohesive unit.”

“But so have you. With Ava and Troy and Clay and Gabby.”

He shook his head slowly, barreling down the highway toward Pebble Beach, toward the home he shared with her. He had only one answer to offer. “We don’t have anyone like Susan and Bob Spencer. We never had an example of how it should be between a couple who totally love each other. Who want to raise a family together.” Parents who didn’t leave and who didn’t feel their children’s love was a burden.

She sat silently for a long moment, as if she had to recall the scene in the hospital room—Susan, Bob, the love, the tears, the joy. “I get it. It’s like me and Uncle Lochlan. We were so close, and I loved him so much. But I still miss my parents. I miss my mom even more now that I’m grown up.”

Dane no longer missed his parents. But he missed what he’d never had—parents like Susan and Bob.

Then she added breathlessly, “That’s why you wanted this merger. It’s more than just the business ventures. Even more than the respect you have for them. It’s Susan and Bob and the family they’ve created.”

He couldn't quite admit that to her. Not now. He was still too raw with the emotions that swamped him as he'd watched that special family in that joyous room with those beautiful and much-wanted new babies.

He told Cammie the first lie he ever had. "I'm really not sure. I need to think about it more."

That part, at least, was true. He had to sit with these feelings.

And with the new feelings Cammie's return had brought up in him.

* * *

The weekly family barbecue was held at Sebastian Montgomery's Hayward Hills estate. Charlie Ballard's fabulous metalwork was all over the property—burbling fountains, wind spinners, a magnificent blue crane standing in a pond, sculptures of woodland animals, mythical creatures, and ancient beasts, some large and in-your-face, some small and barely visible unless you looked carefully.

The family gathered around the terraced pool deck out back. It was amazing that these rich, powerful men still held weekly barbecues with their family. They were like normal people rather than billionaires who could have rented an entire country club and catered the whole affair. It was this side of the Mavericks that drew Dane, Cammie knew, even if he hadn't fully admitted it.

Since the babies were only two weeks old, Paige and Evan had asked everyone to wash their hands. Once that was done, the bundles of joy were passed around like they were the most miraculous babies anyone had ever known.

This family barbecue was different, since all the Harringtons had been invited—*family* being the operative word. Sadly, only Ava and Gabby could make it this time, while Troy and Clay had jetted off to events they couldn't miss.

Cammie smiled to herself, because they weren't exactly jet-setters. The two were always working on new deals. Troy was giving the keynote at a conference for young athletes. As an influencer, he was often a guest speaker, not just because of the company he'd started, but for the Olympic gold medals he'd won diving. He never missed an opportunity to encourage fledgling athletes. Clay, of course, was off looking for new talent he could introduce to his exclusive video platform and for sponsors and patrons of the arts.

Flagstone terraces led down to a sparkling infinity pool, and the scent of barbecuing meat wafted in the air. Will and Sebastian manned the grill, the other Mavericks watching the proceedings and making snide comments about the quality of the cooks.

Dressed in shorts and deck shoes, Dane stood with them, drinking a beer, laughing, and getting in a few good-natured digs too.

His tanned, muscular legs drew Cammie's glance despite herself.

Noah, Jeremy, and Jorge raced back and forth on the grass, playing with the dogs. Tasha and Daniel had rescued shepherd-mix puppies abandoned in the woods near Tahoe's Fallen Leaf Lake. Tasha had kept one, the only female, whom she'd named Darla, while the two males, Flash and Duke, had gone to live with Noah and Jeremy, respectively. Though the dogs were about a year old now, they still hadn't grown into their gangly paws, and they rolled around on the grass, play-fighting like three-month-old puppies. T. Rex, of course, had to be right in there, rolling with the big dogs. Since, of course, he believed he was a big dog.

Fernsby hadn't joined the festivities today. He was supposedly working on another masterpiece for when he secured a spot on *Britain's Greatest Bakers*, something that would wow the judges. Something that was sure to surpass anything Clyde's butler, Digbert, could make. The baking

rivalry between the two butlers was legendary, almost as legendary as the one between Fernsby and Gabby.

Sitting on a lounge, Cammie sipped a margarita and listened to the ladies' conversations around her. Gabby, wearing a flowered tankini, stretched out in the sun, her eyes closed, drinking in the spring sunshine. Ava, who'd positioned herself so that only her legs below her one-piece were in the sun, kept up with the women's running commentary, nursing her margarita.

Mid-April could be rainy in the Bay Area, but today, nature provided a lovely sunny day. Half the women wore swimsuits, the other half shorts, but Cammie, having dressed at Pebble Beach where it was cooler, had chosen light leggings. Though it wasn't hot, merely warm, she sat in the shade now, watching as Savannah, Paige's little pink bundle, was passed from arm to arm, receiving kisses and hugs while she slept peacefully.

Under a big umbrella on the opposite side of the pool, the two grandmothers, Susan and Theresa, cooed over a burrito-style blue bundle, sweet little Keegan. With arthritically gnarled fingers, Francine Ballard chucked the baby under the chin. She sat on her walker, decorated with pink and blue crêpe paper wrapped around its handles and down the bars leading to its wheels. The sight sent a pang through Cammie. She wished Uncle Lochlan could have known Francine. She was a beautiful soul, always smiling despite her infirmities.

She tuned in to the conversation around her as Paige said, "Bob and Susan are so involved. It's been a blessing." She patted Lyssa's arm. "They've practically moved in with us."

"But didn't you hire a nanny?" Ari asked, her head tipped to the side, probably wondering how she would manage when her new baby arrived.

"We did." Paige shrugged. "But Susan just seems to know everything."

Lyssa added, "She truly does."

Gazing across the flagstones at the men crowded around the barbecue, Bob Spencer included, Paige smiled. “Bob is adorable with the babies. He seems to find them endlessly fascinating, like they’re some mystical miracle he’s never seen before.” She shared a meaningful look with Lyssa. “You’d think he’d never had children of his own.”

The ladies laughed together, obviously knowing Bob much better than Cammie did.

Even as they all talked, Dane separated himself from the men and headed to the table where Susan, Theresa, and Francine fussed over the baby. He smiled, then chuckled as he caressed a soft baby cheek. The women seemed as spellbound by him as they were by the sleeping child. He made them laugh, he made them blush, and he charmed them. But that was Dane. He could charm anyone.

Then, in the most amazing gesture, he held out his hands to Susan, and she lifted the baby into his waiting arms.

Cammie marveled at the tenderness softening all the aristocratic planes of Dane’s face. Just as on that day at the hospital, his curiosity and attentiveness surprised her. As he held Keegan in his arms, rocking slightly side to side, she swore he was a natural. As if he could be a father. It was usually women who got the urge to have a child, but looking at Dane now, it seemed as if he might actually be thinking about fatherhood himself.

In that moment, the adorable baby in his arms, Dane looked up at her. And smiled.

Cammie’s heart kicked over in her chest. What had he said in the car? That with all his dating, he hadn’t found the right woman? Maybe he was ready to find that woman now. It seemed impossible, yet the evidence was right before her eyes. How good he looked cuddling the baby so tenderly. How manly. How utterly endearing. She couldn’t help smiling back at him.

Though she would have gone on watching forever, Gideon joined them, holding out his arms, and Dane handed over the child. Was that reluctance on his face? The way he looked at the baby boy almost with longing?

Or maybe she was imagining it, and Dane was just being polite.

Yet she couldn't forget that image of tiny Keegan in Dane's powerful arms.

Chapter Eleven

“What’ll you ladies have? We’ve got hamburgers, hot dogs, and ribs,” Sebastian called, filling a platter with meat. “And for you, Gabby, there’s a vegan patty, along with a gluten-free bun.”

Gabby sat up, sliding her legs off the lounge, and raised her hand. “You guys are fantastic. Thank you. But can I have one rib too?”

Utter silence fell over the pool deck. The only sounds were the children and dogs playing on the lawn.

“But—” Ari sputtered. Then she dropped her voice to a whisper. “The ribs aren’t vegan. They’re meat.” She almost bared her teeth as she said the word.

Gabby smiled, answering her in the same whisper, loud enough for all the women nearby to hear. “I know.” Then she grinned. “I’m vegan most of the time. But once in a while, I can’t resist a barbecued rib. Even if I have a stomachache the next day.”

Ava laughed. “You’re only doing it because Fernsby’s not here to see you.”

Gabby shook her finger at Ava. “Don’t you tell him. He’ll think he’s won the war.” She raised her voice. “And don’t you tell Fernsby either, Dane.”

Dane put an offended hand to his gorgeous chest and mouthed, *Who, me?*

Cammie had very occasionally seen Gabby indulge. And only when Fernsby wasn’t nearby.

A few minutes were spent by everyone picking and pouring condiments, adding potato salad and green salad, then taking their seats again to enjoy the barbecue. Cammie couldn’t resist a rib either, and it was definitely yummy.

She licked her fingers clean one by one—because, really, a napkin never worked—and looked up to find Dane’s eyes on her from his perch on the edge of the picnic table by the grill. He raised an eyebrow. She raised one back at him. Then he held up a margarita glass, tipping it side to side, asking if she wanted another. She shook her head. When he held up a plate with a hot dog, she shook her head again. He shrugged and took a big bite, closing his eyes and making faces as if it were the absolute best thing ever. She laughed.

They could say so much without a single word.

Ava’s voice tore her away from Dane’s antics. “I’m so happy for all of you,” Ava gushed, her hands outstretched, her empty plate now on the table beside her.

She was always enthusiastic, her gestures expansive. Cammie could see her confidently taking charge of a boardroom full of men just as easily as she wore the eye-catching royal blue one-piece that wowed unattached men. Today, she’d pulled the waves of her thick hair, the color of dark cherries, high on her head in case she decided to swim.

“But I’m not jealous,” Ava said airily, a glitter in her amber eyes. “I wrote off relationships a long time ago.”

Engrossed in watching Dane, Cammie must have missed a major part of the conversation, because she had no idea how it had reached this point.

Harper, leaning forward with curiosity, asked Ava, “So you’re not looking for love?”

As she shook her head, Ava’s hair glinted in the sun. “It’s worked out so well for you all. I mean, look at your guys.” She waved a hand at the male tableau zealously manning the barbecue as more meat sputtered and spat. “They’re a dazzling bunch.” Then she smiled gently with either sadness or relief. “But love has never worked out for me. I didn’t make good choices in men.” She shuddered dramatically. “So I’m done. And I’m totally okay with that.”

Though Cammie had known Ava Harrington for twelve years, they'd never shared confidences about relationships. And Cammie had only a couple of past relationships that were serious enough to even talk about. She had no clue about Ava's bad choices. But she did wonder if Ava was protesting a little too much, as though she wasn't as okay with it as she said.

But the ladies really got into the discussion. "Yeah," Charlie agreed. "Men can totally suck." She looked at Sebastian, though he obviously didn't suck at all.

Ari laughed. "And we certainly don't want you to think that everything was a bed of roses with this lot." She hooked a thumb over her shoulder at the barbecue crowd.

Cammie longed to hear their stories. She wanted so much to know them better.

"I mean it," Ari insisted. "Matt was so overprotective of Noah that he watched me like a hawk in case I did anything wrong."

Tasha rolled her eyes. "And they're all so bossy."

"You should have been there when Daniel tried to knock Cal's block off after he found out we were dating." Lyssa heaved a huge sigh in Daniel's direction.

Rosie added dryly, "I believe there was something about Daniel also finding out you were going to have Cal's baby...?"

Lyssa flapped her hand casually in the air. "Okay, there was that."

"I had to whack some sense into Daniel for that one," Tasha revealed with a disgusted shake of her head. "He couldn't accept you were a grown woman and not just his little sister anymore."

"I've got you all beat," Paige said, her smile almost smug. "Because Evan was married to my sister. I think you'll all agree it was a total disaster for both of them."

“I hate to speak ill of anyone,” Harper said, spreading her fingers. “But your sister...” She left it hanging, and all the women seemed to know exactly what she hadn’t said.

There must be a heck of a story there, but Cammie wasn’t comfortable enough to ask.

“But look at you two now.” Rosie’s dark eyes twinkled. “Two adorable babies. And everything worked out beautifully.”

Paige looked at her husband with the other Mavericks. “Yeah,” she said with a tender smile. “It’s all worked out so perfectly.”

Even after hearing their stories, Ava crossed her legs on the lounge chair, her arms folded over her chest, a smile that could have been a grimace on her face. “But you all picked men with potential. While my decision-making has been extraordinarily bad.”

Cammie hoped she’d go on. Ava had been so good to her. Maybe Cammie could help her by being a good listener. Except that she might be required to reveal her own secrets... and *her* mistakes took the cake. She could only imagine the look on Ava’s face—on all the women’s faces—if she were to say, *My biggest mistake was a one-night stand with your brother right before my job interview with him.* It wouldn’t matter to them that she hadn’t known who he was when she’d slept with him. In fact, that might be worse.

Closing her eyes for the briefest moment, she could almost feel his touch on her skin, the softness of his hair beneath her fingers, the caress of his lips on her throat, her breasts, her belly. Everywhere.

Lord, that night had been the absolute best. Even if it was a total screwup.

But Dane wasn’t her only screwup. She’d made two other extremely bad choices, far worse than what she’d done with Dane, and like Ava, she was never letting that happen again. Though Dane was the only worthwhile one in the bunch, she’d

had to let him go for Uncle Lochlan's sake. The job with Dane was her and Uncle Lochlan's lifeline. As glorious as that night with Dane had been, as incredible as the memories still were, she would never have sacrificed Uncle Lochlan's well-being.

Besides, both she and Dane had dated other people. Clearly, if they were meant to be, they'd never have dated anyone at all. And since she'd fallen for another guy as hard as she had, even after Dane, he couldn't be the one. No, she simply sucked at picking men, as badly as Ava claimed she did. *Sometimes you just aren't enough for the man you yearn for, and it never turns out the way you hope it will.*

Ava kicked Gabby's foot where she lay on her lounge. "What about you, darling sister? You're awfully quiet there." Ava gave her a dastardly smile. "Let's hear all your secrets."

Gabby smiled and drew her thumb and forefinger across her lips, zipping them shut.

Which made all the ladies laugh.

Kelsey swayed back and forth, Savannah sighing sweetly in her arms. "Oh my gosh, I think she's smiling."

"I'm pretty sure that's just gas," Paige said dryly.

"Then I guess that means I need another margarita," Kelsey said with a laugh, handing Savannah to Cammie.

For a moment, she felt paralyzed. Gideon wandered over, Keegan in his arms, and brushed a kiss against Rosie's ear. Matt came with him, standing behind Ari's chair, his hand on her shoulder, her hair, her arm.

Evan arrived right behind them. "Like, would it be possible to hold one of my kids for a minute?"

Kelsey, who hadn't yet left for her margarita refresh, said, "No, you can't. Stop asking and go away." With so many Mavericks around, the joke was that Paige and Evan never got to hold their own children.

Chuckling Savannah under the chin, Kelsey grinned up at her older brother. "Don't you think they look just like Tony

and me?”

Holding Savannah, Cammie couldn't see any resemblance at all. But then, she couldn't see Evan or Paige in the babies either.

Kelsey threw an arm around Evan's shoulders. "Come on, big brother, you can get me a margarita."

With Savannah in her arms, Cammie couldn't seem to let go, couldn't pass the baby on to Tasha beside her. She'd never thought about being a mother. Her whole life had been consumed by Uncle Lochlan and her job. And Dane.

He'd joined the kids on the grass, where Rex was getting bossy with the big dogs. Picking up a soccer ball, Dane spun it on his finger, enticing Jorge and Noah into learning how to play soccer.

Gideon handed Keegan off to Rosie. "I'd better get over there and teach Jorge how to play the game. Or he'll just learn the Harrington way."

Ava shot him with a finger gun. "You wish."

Gabby laughed. "Maybe Ava and I need to show them how to do things the right way."

Matt held up his fingers in the sign of the cross. "Hell, no. We're not letting you two near them."

With a snort, Ava said, "You're just afraid they'll learn so many hot moves they'll start beating you."

Matt grabbed Evan's arm. "We need to take charge."

And the whole troop of Mavericks descended upon the field.

"They'll never get over it." Charlie laughed. "Almost getting beat down by two women."

All the ladies laughed knowingly.

Bob headed out to the grass, too, and Susan called, "Just be careful of your back, Bob. And wear your sunscreen."

Holding the sweet-smelling Savannah in her arms, Cammie watched as the men played with the boys.

Dane hunkered down to their level, explaining something about the game, the two boys listening avidly. Then he stood, dribbled the ball between his feet. Even from her lounge by the pool, Cammie heard Jorge say, "Let me try," closely followed by Noah's, "Me too. I want to pass the ball to Jorge."

"They're both so lovable." Gabby pulled her silky blond hair on top of her head, holding it there for a moment to cool off her neck.

Both Rosie and Ari smiled.

But Cammie thought the truly lovable one was Dane.

He played with the boys, the Mavericks joining in, all of them just a bunch of big kids. Sometimes he stood on the sidelines, gabbing with one or two of the guys. He was so natural with everyone. Then they'd all rush back into the fray.

Savannah made a sound, and as Cammie looked down, she was sure that was a smile, not just gas. The baby was so tiny and so beautiful. She smelled like sweet milk and baby wash. Something clenched deep inside her, and a barely discernible need began to grow. It wasn't just about the baby. It was more. It was this life she saw before her, a life that all these Mavericks had. Love, camaraderie, the ability to share all this love with one another.

Without thinking, she raised her gaze to Dane. All the guys were getting in their two cents, teaching Jorge and Noah this move and that play. But it was Dane the two boys looked to, Dane they listened to, perhaps because he was the new man in their sphere. He taught them with patience, gave them his undivided attention. As though he were a father.

He was so good with animals, babies, and small children.

And she wanted that. Maybe because she was alone now, because she'd lost Uncle Lochlan, because he no longer needed her, she had a sudden vision of a future she'd never

before imagined. The truth was, she wanted the Maverick life. She wanted marriage and love and babies.

God help her, she wanted that life with Dane.

Breathing in the sweet baby scent, she wondered if she'd been lying to herself. She'd tried to be with other men. She'd even found a special man and told herself he was the one. But maybe that was just another lie she'd made up. Maybe it was the only way she could keep her hands off Dane. And keep her heart safe.

Dane raced down the field with the boys, shouting encouragement, clapping his hands, urging them on.

The Mavericks were out there, but all she saw was Dane. It didn't matter that she could never have him. It didn't matter that she sustained herself with memories of their one night, of his kiss, his taste, his touch. It didn't matter that she sucked at choosing men, same as Ava. She knew all the reasons she and Dane couldn't be together.

And it was twelve years too late anyway. Whatever happened that night was so far in the past that, in Dane's mind, it could be only a distant memory. She couldn't risk losing the life she'd made for herself. She couldn't risk another change after losing Uncle Lochlan. She couldn't risk the possibility of losing Dane as her best friend. That's what he was—her very best friend in all the world now that her uncle was gone. Even as she craved the lives of these wonderful Maverick ladies, she couldn't risk losing what she already had.

It was safer to stay where she was, with the perfect working relationship, the perfect friendship.

All she could do was watch Dane on the grass with the boys. All she could let herself have were memories of his kiss, of his hands trailing her skin, of his male scent filling her head, and his body filling her up. That would have to sustain her.

But as she held the darling baby in her arms, as she bent to kiss the sweetly scented skin, she simply could not stop her

gaze from drifting to Dane once more. He seemed to be having the time of his life with the two boys, and fear curled in her belly. Fear of the day when he realized how much he wanted to be a father. Fear of the day he'd go in search of the perfect woman to be the mother of his children. Fear that woman could never be her.

It all hit her in a single sucker punch—the baby in her arms, Dane doing fatherly things with two little boys, the memories of their one night, the loss of what might have been. If she'd been alone, she'd have curled into a tight ball, terrified of her future.

Instead, she stood too fast, feeling a wave of dizziness, suddenly afraid for the child she held. Pasting a ridiculously cheerful smile on her face that felt like a caricature of her real self, she thrust the child at Paige. “You should get to hold your baby too. We've been monopolizing the twins.”

Paige took Savannah happily as all the women gathered round, smiling and clueless as to why Cammie had to surrender the tiny pink bundle. Paige kissed her child's smooth cheek, closed her eyes, and breathed in deeply of that sweet baby scent.

It was almost Cammie's undoing. She didn't dare cast another glance in Dane's direction. All she could do was run for the house, where she could hide inside, take deep breaths—or scream and cry—until she found herself again.

Chapter Twelve

Dane was aware of Cammie every moment, even as he showed the boys how to dribble the ball, as he ran with them, encouraged them, even as he stood on the sidelines watching them scramble for the ball. Maverick generation two-point-oh.

Still keeping her in his sights, he said to Matt and Gideon, “You’ve got a couple of future powerhouse players there.”

Matt laughed. “We have to bring out the younger generation to have any chance of beating your sisters.”

Gideon folded his arms, gazing at the boys. “Yeah, your sisters are unbelievable.”

“A more ruthless couple of players I’ve never known,” Matt agreed, still grinning.

“They started really young. Gabby played in middle school. We all helped her train.” He breathed in deeply, his eye on Cammie holding one of the babies. The pink swaddle must be Savannah. And Cammie looked so damn good.

He wondered if her job had been holding her back from her true calling—being a mother. Or maybe it was all the years of caring for Lochlan, when she couldn’t dream of anything else.

With Sebastian close behind him, Will joined them just in time to ask, “That was after your parents died, right?”

Dane nodded, turning once more to watch Jorge and Noah, with Cal and Daniel calling instructions and Bob imparting words of wisdom. “It was more than just training for Gabby. I guess you could say that’s how we all vented our feelings. And there was a helluva lot to vent after our parents died.”

“We all grieve in different ways,” Will said. “Whatever works.”

Dane couldn't say why, but something broke loose then, a tiny piece of himself. Maybe it was watching the boys. Maybe it had been feeling the delicate weight of a child in his arms. Or maybe, most likely, it was the sight of Cammie holding a baby as if motherhood was the only thing she'd ever wanted. And never had.

"Ava and I were still in college when the avalanche killed our parents." It had been an avalanche in so many ways. "She was a freshman, and I was a junior. I wanted to be a veterinarian," he said with a wry smile. "But we both had to drop out." He hardly remembered those days, except for his love of animals. As a teen, he'd volunteered at an animal rescue, fostering injured birds, squirrels, a skunk, and once even a rattlesnake who'd lost its rattle.

"Man, that's really tough, losing your parents as well as having to give up your dream," Gideon said. The man was probably remembering all his losses before he'd finally found his sister, Ari, again. And then Rosie.

Will slapped Dane on the back. "So you actually raised your whole family as well."

Dane shook his head, glancing at the group of women by the pool, Ava talking animatedly, her hands sweeping through the air as if she was making a proclamation, Gabby tranquilly basking in the sun, eyes closed but taking it all in. And Cammie, who listened. She always listened, gathering information, a quiet voice and a thrilling mind.

He told the guys the truth. "Ava did far more than me. She's really smart. She got her healthcare management degree in night school while she worked full time at a nursing home. We made it through, and yeah, we did it together, but I never would've held up without Ava."

And he would never have found his focus if it hadn't been for Cammie.

"It's the women in our lives who keep us sane." Sebastian threw a glance at Charlie, then juttled his chin toward Susan.

“Without them, we’d be nothing.”

The herd of Mavericks surrounding Dane erupted in a loud huzzah of agreement.

Dane had to add, “Your mom is awesome.”

Then he ran back in to help the boys, feeling almost as if he were fleeing the revealing moment on the sidelines. He’d never divulged so much to anyone in his life. Except Cammie and his own family.

But that’s what Mavericks did. They talked. They shared. They confided.

What if he confided how badly he wanted his assistant back in his bed? How he dreamed of her at night? How he closed his eyes, and her scent filled him up? How he still felt the softness of her hair against his fingers, the taste of her on his tongue, the silken tightness of her body around him?

Somehow his need had amplified with Lochlan’s passing. As if now there was nothing truly holding them back. Even the rules seemed superfluous. They’d been there to protect her job, mostly for Lochlan’s sake.

Or, hell, maybe it was just the fact that she’d been gone for five months, and he’d missed her.

Cammie had never given him a single signal that she wanted more. If they got too close, if there was a moment when sexual tension seemed to vibrate in the air around them, if he looked at her mouth and thought about leaning close enough to kiss her, there were the rules. And he would never do one damn thing to ruin the relationship they had or make her run away. Having her in his life was more important than a single night in her bed.

But now, the beautiful sight of her with a baby in her arms terrified him.

She’d had a couple of close calls with men—at least one he knew of for sure. Or maybe it was more accurate to say it had been a close call for *him*. In the end, though, none of her

relationships had lasted. And as badly as he wanted her to have the life she deserved, he'd never been so damned glad of anything in his life.

But how could he compete with a woman's desire to have a child?

"Da-ane," Noah cried, turning his name into two syllables. "You missed the ball."

Sure enough, Dane had let the ball roll right on by.

"Sorry, guys, let me get it." He ran for the ball, kicking it back to the two boys. Then, inevitably, inexorably, Cammie drew his gaze once more.

She stood, handing the baby to Paige. Even as she smiled, Cammie turned and walked up to the house. Maybe he was the only one who saw that by the time she reached the three top steps, she was running.

How thoughtless he'd been. He hadn't even considered how hard it would be for her to see this big, beautiful family and not think of how she'd just lost her uncle. Damn, he was an insensitive idiot.

He called to the boys, "Okay, you two keep practicing with that ball. I'll be back in just a sec."

He tried not to run off the field, but as he closed in on Matt, he said softly, "I just saw Cammie go inside. I think she might be feeling bad about her uncle. I'll just check it out."

Matt rested a hand on his shoulder. "You're the best damn boss I've ever known." Then he looked at his wife, her hand on her pregnant belly, and he smiled softly. "Except maybe for me when it comes to Noah's nanny."

All Dane could think about was getting to Cammie.

* * *

Cammie stood for a long moment in the hallway powder room. She patted her cheeks, checking the mirror to make sure there was no sign of tear tracks. She hadn't exactly cried. Her eyes

were just a little misty and her nose a little runny. But she was fine now. In control of herself again.

An outside door slammed, and self-consciousness flushed her cheeks. How long had she been gone?

She opened the bathroom door.

Dane was in the hall. “You okay?” His voice was raspy with something she couldn’t define.

Before she could open her mouth to say she was fine—even if she wasn’t—he enveloped her in his powerful arms.

Lord help her, he felt so good she wanted to weep.

“I saw you rush inside.” His breath against her ear sent a delicious shiver traveling down her spine. “Maybe bringing you here was too soon,” he murmured against her hair. “You’re still mourning your uncle. I’m so sorry. I didn’t even think of that. I just thought it would be good for you to get out and have a fun afternoon by the pool.”

She couldn’t tell him this had nothing to do with Uncle Lochlan. She still missed him. She always would. But she couldn’t tell Dane that her emotions had been all about imagining the child she held in her arms was his, a child they’d made together. As she’d stood in the bathroom, mist in her eyes, she’d envisioned walking down the aisle and taking his hand.

She could never tell him that. She couldn’t tell him she wanted so much more than just being his PA. She had no idea how she could ever get it, and yet, she didn’t know how to go on without it.

The thought just made her hug him even tighter. Until she could feel the beat of his heart as if it were her own.

He rubbed her back, whispered soothing words in her ear. She could barely hear them as hopelessness washed over her. He was holding her only because he was a compassionate man providing comfort to an employee who’d recently lost her uncle. Literally, he hadn’t made a move in twelve years.

Maybe he didn't think that night had been as good as she remembered it.

A terrible thought struck her.

If he was as into me as I am now willing to admit I'm into him, he would have made a move long ago.

She'd been overwhelmed with concern for her uncle, taking care of him, making sure the last years of his life were as good as she could make them. But Dane had no such compunction. If he'd wanted her at all, wouldn't he have shown her in some way? There'd been moments when she'd felt the tension, the need, the desire. When everything in the room had stilled and they'd leaned a little too close, and she'd thought maybe... But it never happened. And then she'd remember the rules. He'd never even tried to break them.

It could mean only one thing. That Dane *wasn't* into her.

She hadn't made a move either, true, but she had big reasons. Other than keeping his work life on track, what reason did Dane have? Just the women he liked to date.

At that thought, she wanted to slip out of his arms, but Dane held her tight.

It had been so long since she'd been held like this—his arms enveloping her, his back strong against her fingers, his heart beating against her ear, his deliciously musky male scent making her dizzy. She couldn't bear to move. Couldn't bear to push him away.

Yet her mind drifted back to all his women over the years. She'd died a little inside every time. She'd waited, even prayed, for each relationship to end, as awful as that was. She truly wanted him to be happy. She'd consoled herself with the thought that he hadn't seemed overjoyed to be with any of them. And she'd dated, too, had even had two serious relationships, one before Dane, one after. But now she knew deep in her heart, deep in her soul, that neither had been the one. When Arlo Doyle had cheated on her—how long ago had it been? Seven years. It said a lot that she had to think about

how long. She could see now that her despair had been all about the fact that Arlo had lied, not that he might have been the man she would spend the rest of her life with.

Because there had never been anyone for her but Dane.

That made her want to cry again, real tears this time, not just misty eyes.

One tiny sob, little more than a hiccup, escaped her.

Dane's hold on her grew only tighter, overwhelming, tempting. She never wanted it to end.

* * *

Every part of Dane's body lit up with the feel of her in his arms. More than his next breath, more than his next heartbeat, more than the rush of blood through his veins, he wanted to kiss her.

And that made him the world's biggest ass. He was supposed to be consoling her, not relishing the feel of her body against his, her scent swirling around his head, her breasts against his chest.

For God's sake, she'd just lost her uncle. Yet here he was getting horny all over her when she was still grieving.

Somehow it was like the day he'd gone ballistic on Troy for asking her out. He'd actually wanted to pound his fist into his own brother's face. That's how crazy he'd been. How totally inappropriate. Just like now.

Luckily, no one had ever mentioned the Troy incident again, though he was aware it had become family legend, the one and only time their big brother had lost it. The problem was, Dane did things without thinking where Cammie was concerned. Thank God his family hadn't understood the real reason.

But if he thought of her in another man's arms the way he was holding her now, he'd go crazy. He admitted to having one or two daydreams of pounding on a few of the jerks she'd dated. Especially the last one, seven years ago. He'd wanted to

wipe the floor with that ass and throw him out with the trash. How dare the man hurt Cammie?

But he hadn't beaten up anyone. He'd pretended he didn't know the full extent of her heartbreak. Because he knew the rules. And if he broke them, he could lose her.

But holding her like this, feeling every inch of her against him, he knew without a doubt that this was where his mind and his body wanted to be. Just like that night twelve years ago...

She lay beneath him as he tasted her like she was the sweetest ambrosia. She was more beautiful than any woman he'd ever seen. Her hair was like silk, her skin like satin, and her taste like fire. She moaned as he pushed her to the peak. He wanted her right there, right on the edge, trembling, begging him with her sighs and her moans and her cries. And only then would he take her fully, burying himself inside her, staying there endlessly...

Before he could kiss her in the here and now, before he could taste her the way he craved—so badly his guts ached with the need—Cammie stepped away, blowing the daydream to bits.

Chapter Thirteen

During the days after the barbecue, Cammie did her best to shake off her thoughts and feelings. To ignore how badly she'd wanted Dane to kiss her right in the middle of that beautiful hug. Otherwise, wanting something she could never have would make her crazy. Her desire would drive her to despair. And she absolutely would not be that kind of person. She wouldn't spend her life mooning over something out of her reach.

She'd learned that lesson when her parents died. No matter how much she hoped and prayed, they never came back.

The new resort project provided the perfect panacea. Especially when, a week later, she and Dane were seated side by side at the conference table in the Pebble Beach office, going over her endless lists.

He sat back abruptly, folding his arms over his broad chest—an action so tempting she had to look away. “You’ve got fabulous ideas. But we need to figure out how to get from idea stage to completed project. Let’s fly to the island, where there won’t be any distractions. We’ll spend a couple of days throwing out ideas and brainstorming the whole thing.”

Outside the office’s floor-to-ceiling windows, the ocean lay before them, the morning fog finally burning off and the sun sparkling on the waves. Though spring had rolled in, it was still cool, and a dip in the ocean would require putting on a wetsuit. Dane’s Caribbean island was exactly what she needed—warm waters and hot sand, where she could lounge around in only a sundress all day. They could even lie on the beach while they brainstormed, recording their discussions on her phone for later transcription.

“Brilliant,” she said.

It would be the first time the two of them had been alone in a very long time. Then she had to laugh at herself. They

wouldn't be alone. Fernsby went everywhere with them. And she wouldn't think about Dane sleeping on the other side of the lanai. Just like she didn't think about him sleeping down the hall right now in the big house. She hadn't allowed herself those thoughts since the barbecue. That way lay heartache.

Instead, she thought almost constantly about the resort. She loved everything they'd come up with. Could she handle managing the project? Yes, maybe she could, even if she had to ask for Dane's help, since he'd done this so many times. She'd even relish the chance, though she wasn't quite ready to jump in without backup.

But there was plenty of time to think about that. They were still in the planning stage. She picked up her phone and scrolled through her contacts as she spoke. "I'll make arrangements with your pilot. When do you want to leave?"

Dane grinned as if they were going on a romantic holiday for two. Which, of course, they weren't. "ASAP."

After informing Dane's pilot, she called Fernsby about food preparations.

Dane's island was one of the many specks of land dotting the Caribbean. Too small for a resort, its amenities consisted of two huts on opposite sides of the island. One served as the living quarters, with three bedrooms and a common area, including the gorgeous lanai overlooking the beach and the ocean, with a marvelous view of the sunset. The second hut contained the kitchen and a living area where Fernsby stayed, doing all the cooking and bringing food over in a golf cart.

He could have stayed in the main house, but the first time Dane offered that, Fernsby had looked down his nose and drawled, "I prefer my privacy, sir."

Cammie had never actually seen his room in the cookhouse, as they called it, but knowing Fernsby, it would be laid out with precision.

The island wasn't large enough for a runway, so a helicopter flew them over from Martinique, where the plane

had landed.

As always, Fernsby efficiently handled the distribution of goods and suitcases to the two huts, then doled out instructions. “I will prepare food for you for the week, sir, and bring it over later today.” He set T. Rex’s carrier in the golf cart.

Cammie held out a hand. “You can leave him here.”

Her words were met with a frosty admonition. “Camille, you two are here to work. I’ll take the little tyke with me since he can be such a nuisance.”

Rex wasn’t a nuisance at all. But with the quarter mile between the two huts, Fernsby would miss the dog. Even if he would never say so.

The weather was glorious, the sun warm but not too hot. The ocean air wafted through her room as she unpacked, the constant rhythm of the waves a balm to her soul.

Before leaving home, she’d arranged for a cleaning service to open up the island house, put fresh linens on the beds, and dust. No one had been here in all the months of her family leave.

Outside her room, the screened-in porch wrapped around the house. She could leave the two sets of French doors open all night long if she chose. She laid her teal T. Rex against the pillows. As odd as it might be, she always packed the dinosaur. Because its teal color made her happy. Because it reminded her of Dane.

His room was far closer here than in the big house in Pebble Beach. It would be easy to step outside her French doors and walk the length of the veranda to where his doors, too, would be open to the night air.

And Fernsby was on the other side of the island.

Of course she wouldn’t do it. She never had. She never would.

God, how she dreamed of it, though. She wanted it more than ever.

But knowing now how badly she wanted love and a life together to blossom between them, a rejection if she made a move would make the loss only more poignant.

Unbearable.

* * *

Half an hour later, Cammie pulled a sundress over her head, the stretchy smocked bodice fitting tightly over her chest. Sundresses and bathing suits were all she wore on the island. Dane liked his board shorts, his long legs tanned and muscled. And when he threw his shirt off for a swim? She had to count her breaths so she wouldn't hyperventilate.

Dane was already pouring champagne when she stepped out of her room straight into the living room.

"I don't think I can work if you give me champagne," she said as he handed her a glass.

"We worked the entire flight. Now we need a break. We can start again tomorrow." He tapped his glass to hers with the tinkle of crystal.

Fernsby arrived only minutes later, his golf cart laden with food he unloaded into the small kitchen's refrigerator.

Dane stared in wonder. "Did you make all that this afternoon?"

With a hint of disdain, Fernsby said, "I am always prepared, sir." He pointed to the fridge. "You'll have cold salmon on a bed of asparagus, green salads, fruit salads. You'll also find a fish pie with instructions on how to reheat it."

Cammie's mouth watered. She loved Fernsby's fish pie.

"There's also shepherd's pie, cold cuts for lunches, and a selection of fruit for breakfast." He clapped his hands. "If you need anything, please do call. Otherwise, just work away to your *hearts*," he said with emphasis, "desire." Then he

stretched his lips in what could pass for a smile, at least for Fernsby, who never smiled.

“Fernsby, you are brilliant,” Dane said.

“Of course I am, sir.”

“There’s enough food here to feed an army, let alone two people.” Dane put a hand to his chest. “So why don’t you just take some time off, for however long we’re here. You can come up with more recipes for the baking competition that will pound Digbert into the sand.”

Fernsby drawled, “You’re so kind, sir. But that man doesn’t give me a single worry. He uses *frozen pastry*, for God’s sake.” Then he trundled off in his golf cart.

“How does he do that?” Cammie asked with wonder. “Taking care of everything with barely a moment’s notice?” She smiled, then huffed out a laugh. “He really needs to write a book. *How Life Should Be Lived According to Fernsby*.”

Dane added dryly, “Don’t mention it, or he’ll start writing it while we’re on the island.”

She put a hand on her waist and cocked her hip. “Tell me, do you know anything about his life before he came to work for you?”

They both looked at the dust settling in Fernsby’s wake. “I thought about putting a private investigator on him. But then I tossed the idea. It’s better that Fernsby remains a mystery.”

She had to agree.

* * *

They’d worked straight through for two days, to their hearts’ desire, as Fernsby put it, and they’d accomplished so much. Today, the morning dawned bright and beautiful. Dane had a need for something different, perhaps a round of golf on the nine-hole course he’d had built on the island.

So far, spring had been rather cool in the Bay Area, and Dane relished the heat of the Caribbean. He hadn’t come here

while Cammie was on family leave. Somehow the sea and the sun were so much more relaxing when she was with him.

He'd lain awake last night with more of his crazy thoughts, like padding along the lanai to her French doors. They'd be standing open. Cammie loved the scent of the ocean and the breeze that blew through during the night. He thought incessantly of blowing through the doors himself, just like the breeze. The thought had been so inviting that his body clenched tight. She was so close. And yet, so far away, as the saying went.

His fantasies seemed so much more potent after that hug in Sebastian Montgomery's hallway, after the crazy need to kiss her almost got the better of him.

With thoughts like that running rampant through his nights, maybe coming to the island hadn't been the best idea. Especially with Fernsby a quarter mile away. Because now nothing stood between them.

Nothing except the rules.

For two days, he'd repeated that to himself. *Remember the rules.* Even if he'd started to hate them.

But as much as they kept her safe, they kept him safe too. Kept him from making a mistake, kept him from pushing her away by asking for more than she could give.

Over a breakfast of toast and fruit, he suggested, "Let's play a round of golf." It had nothing to do with how much he liked watching her swing a golf club in those sexy little sundresses of hers. Or they could go down to the beach, where he liked watching her in those sexy swimsuits just as much.

But then he'd have to slap himself for his thoughts.

Those errant thoughts were also why he used the Pebble Beach home gym at a different time than she did. Watching her in her tight leggings and skimpy workout tops drove him just a little bit mad.

“Great idea.” Cammie gave a little fist pump. “I haven’t golfed in months.” Then she added with a smile, “We always do our best brainstorming while I’m beating you.”

“Beating me?” he scoffed. “We’ll see about that.”

Even as *he* was beating *her*, she’d have her recorder going, and the brainstorming transcript would magically appear a few hours later.

A most irreverent thought occurred to him. What if he touched her? What if he kissed her? What if it was all on that recording?

The idea made him smile. Even as it heated him up.

Of course it was just another of his many daydreams.

The island wasn’t big enough for eighteen holes, but Dane had eked out enough land for nine. Right after breakfast, they hit the course and tossed around ideas.

“I like Daniel’s idea of finding something in Tahoe,” she said behind him as he lined up his ball. “We’ll have the sand for volleyball games and the lake right there for swimming. And what do you think about putting in a nine-hole golf course as well?”

“I love the way you think,” Dane agreed as he whacked his ball and overshot the hole by a wide margin. His mind wasn’t on this game, but on that long-ago golf game. Twelve years ago, to be exact.

He’d gone out that day to hit a few balls and ease the tension out of his muscles. He’d needed to get away from his office mess. Where better to go than the golf course he owned, especially since he had a condo there where he could shower after the game? He hadn’t known who she was when he’d spotted her. He’d been playing alone. She’d played alone too. Then they’d been playing together. He’d been about to introduce himself when she’d held up her hand. “No names,” she’d said in the sexiest damn voice that seemed to curl around his insides. “That way, I’ll feel more comfortable playing cutthroat.”

No names. A mystery woman.

And cutthroat she'd been. So had he, even as he drove himself crazy every time he got near her. He remembered the way she smelled, some citrusy scent that mesmerized him. Just the way her fruity scent mesmerized him now, like the fresh mangoes they'd had for breakfast.

With his very first sight of her, his heart had tried to beat itself right out of his chest.

“And we'll offer all the necessary facilities, a physical therapy room with all the equipment, as well as providing therapists,” she was saying.

But he was thinking how physical that game had become. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the way her body moved. He'd damn near salivated. That little wiggle when she stood in front of the ball lining up her shot. The graceful movements of every muscle as she swung. How badly he wanted to put his hands on her and feel her body's moves with each swing.

“Do you think we should have a big hall with family-style dining—long tables where everyone sits together?” She stopped for a moment to look at him, flushing as if his thoughts were written all over his face. Just like they had been that day. She rushed on, “Or maybe we should have more intimate dining. Tables for two and four or six, where people can talk more easily than in a big group.”

That word. *Intimate*. He thought of how intimate they'd gotten after that golf game. Even as he knew he shouldn't think about it at all. Even as it did things to his body in this moment.

“We should have both,” he said. He wanted both, business and pleasure. With her.

“Yeah.” She nodded, turning back to the ball. “We need both.”

He never should have hugged her at Sebastian's house. Now his body remembered the feel of her against him. While she was grieving for her uncle, he'd been having lustful

thoughts, making him a complete ass. Even as he admitted that, he couldn't stop looking at her in that too sexy sundress, couldn't stop thinking about touching her, kissing her.

Just the way he'd been thinking that day during their first sexy, mind-blowing golf game.

* * *

She couldn't concentrate. Her thoughts were scattered all over the place. She was throwing out ideas that were already on their list, for Pete's sake. They were supposed to be talking logistics—geology reports, engineering drawings, how to start building. But her mind wouldn't work properly. It was how close he stood, how good he smelled, how hard his muscles were as he swung.

Just like that other golf game.

She tried to sound coherent. "We need a full gym and workout area. And a massage therapy room." Her nerves were jumping. Every time they'd played golf since that day, her body had tingled with the memory of that night. Her body tingled now with the memory of his touch, his kiss, his scent.

"We need a pickleball court too," he said.

She laughed, the sound a little strangled. "Of course we need a pickleball court."

She remembered how he'd stood there that day, setting up for a shot, the sun making his hair gleam blue-black, his body so tempting she'd wanted to lick him like an ice cream cone. She'd been at the golf course only because Clyde had said her jitters were making him edgy. He'd told her to get some exercise to burn off all that nervous energy. She'd had that interview the next day with one of Clyde's associates, whom she'd never met. And Clyde had made her swear she wouldn't research the man beforehand. That had been a big mistake.

But Clyde had insisted, "I don't want you to have any preconceptions." Despite Clyde having told her the job was in the bag—he'd obviously been singing her praises—she

couldn't count on anything. And she'd gone out to the golf course to play and relax.

Then *he* had come along, a man so handsome, so sexy that she'd forgotten all her nerves about the job interview. In fact, she'd forgotten the interview completely. There'd only been him.

She'd challenged him with that no-names thing and playing cutthroat. She just hadn't imagined exactly what *cutthroat* meant. He'd made wisecracks, sidling close to her, saying things like, "Do you really want to take your shot that way? Maybe you should try it this way." Then he'd stand right behind her, less than a breath of air between them, and guide her hands on the club. His sexy, slightly sweaty male scent had made her dizzy. It had been so hard not to let him throw her off her game. Hot and cold shivers had run up and down her spine. At some point, she'd leaned back, felt him against her, all of him.

The game—and the games—continued, touches that weren't necessary, his breath against her hair as he whispered how good her stroke was, what a good grip she had on the shaft of her club, all those innuendoes making her crazy as much as they made her laugh. Everything was so much sexier without names. He was a seductive stranger she'd never have to see again.

"We should have single rooms as well as family cottages," she said, her voice too sexy, too husky as her memories made her hot and bothered, ready to turn around and jump him. Just the way she'd wanted to that day. "And we should also have dorm rooms the kids can share, as if they're at school."

Did she even make sense anymore?

Yet everything had seemed to make so much sense that day. He'd enchanted her with his touches, his whispers, his hard body, his sexual innuendos. And when she'd won the game—had he let her win? She'd never asked—he'd said, "This calls for champagne." He'd had a condo right on the

golf course and *not* taking up his offer had never been an option. She would have followed him anywhere.

His taste had been exquisite, his lovemaking so beautiful it still made her ache late at night. He'd made her forget the lover who'd broken her heart as if the man had never existed.

"We need to have the best chef," he said.

She laughed. "You're always thinking about food." The champagne and appetizers had been exquisite that night. And he'd been exquisite, knowing exactly how to touch her.

"I'm always thinking about life's pleasures." His smile reached deep down inside her to all those memories, to all that pleasure he'd given her, to the taste of him on her tongue, the feel of him inside her.

She'd never known such dazzling sensations as those he'd given her that night.

What would have happened if she hadn't walked into the interview the next morning and discovered that Dane Harrington, her potential new employer, was the very man who'd made such beautiful love to her the night before?

Chapter Fourteen

Pleasure. “We want our guests to have the best of everything,” Dane insisted.

He realized now that she was the best he’d ever had. Her taste had made his mind reel, her skin had been as soft as rose petals, and the lyrical sounds of her ecstasy still played in his mind every night.

He found himself close to her now—close enough to sense the heat of her body, the sweetness of her shampoo, the citrus of the lotion she always wore. “We need to offer leisure time for the parents, like a couple’s massage followed by a romantic candlelit dinner in their suite. So they can learn how to be lovers again.” He painted the romantic picture he dreamed of with her.

She smelled so damn good. He shouldn’t want this. He shouldn’t need this. It could be so bad for them.

But it could be so damned good.

He put his finger beneath her chin and tipped it up, forcing her to look at him. “What do you think?” His voice was so low it couldn’t even be called a whisper.

Her eyes were wide, her breath coming fast, and her scent carried the sexual musk of that night. Even as his mind shouted a warning—*bad idea alert!*—his body and his heart didn’t care.

She was so close. Her lips were so pretty and plump, begging for his kiss.

With just the tip of his finger beneath her chin, he touched his lips to hers. The sweetest, lightest touch.

She made a sound, almost a moan.

He trailed the tip of his tongue along the seam of her lips. Tasted her. Tempted her. Just the way he had that night. With

the tiniest gasp of air, her lips parted for him.

Nothing had ever been so good as when his mouth closed over hers. When her tongue touched his, and the kiss became a slow, sweet devouring of each other. Delicious little moans rose up her throat, sounds of pleasure that were as sweet as her taste. He wanted to haul her against him, feel her body plastered to his. And yet, he wanted this, just her lips, her mouth, her tongue, her taste still filled with the luscious fruit they'd eaten that morning.

* * *

She wanted to curl her arms around his neck and climb his body until she could wrap her legs around his hips, to hold him there, tight against her, the feel of him hard against her core. He tasted like heaven. He tasted like the sweetest treat she'd ever known. He tasted of desire and sexy, steamy nights.

He tasted of twelve years of craving.

And he tasted of rules that shouldn't be broken, of everything she wanted and everything she couldn't have.

As if he'd stolen every last breath from her, she had to step back just to drag in a lungful of air before she drowned in him.

They were both breathing hard.

She'd been so deep in those memories of that day. When there'd been no need to resist. When there'd been no need for rules. When there'd been nothing but the feel of him, the taste of him, the scent of him.

But that day had been left behind long ago.

* * *

He wanted her. He also knew how easily he could push her away forever. Needing something or someone this much always brought disappointment.

But he had to fix it. Right now. Before she left him because he'd overstepped. "I'm so sorry. That was totally inappropriate."

She rolled her lips together, swallowed, her eyes too wide, too stark. Finally, she said, “I’m sorry too. It breaks all the rules.”

Who had thought up their idiotic rules? Was it him? Was it her? But the rules were the reason the two of them had been able to work together for so long in the most symbiotic relationship he’d ever known.

She spoke again, saying things he didn’t want to hear but needed to anyway. “Our rules matter. We can’t change them now, especially not when we’re in the midst of the most important project of our careers.”

He wanted to argue. Something in him said the rules just didn’t ring true anymore. She’d needed the job to give her the wherewithal to care for Lochlan.

But Lochlan was no longer here.

Didn’t that mean the reason for the rules no longer existed?

“I mean, we can’t throw it all out now.” Was that desperation in her voice? “I mean, it would be throwing away everything we’ve worked so hard for.”

Would it be so bad to let themselves go?

“I mean, the rules enabled me to help my uncle. And they made everything about our relationship work. I mean...” She finally stopped.

I mean. She kept saying that, as if she was trying to convince herself as much as him. And he saw then, without a doubt, that if he pushed, she absolutely would run. She needed her rules. As sweet as that kiss had been, the rules were truly what kept them together. And if he blew them up, he might blow up his life and this crucial relationship.

You always want too much from people, Dane.

Even as his throat wanted to close around the words, he had to force them out. “You’re right. You’re right about everything.”

In a voice that threatened to tear them apart, she said, “We’ve been here for three days, and we’ve got a ton of material. Why don’t we head home, where I can collate all of it and put together our presentation for the Mavericks?”

Metaphorically, she was running, even if he hadn’t destroyed the rules.

* * *

How many times did she need to go over all the reasons why an affair with Dane was a really bad idea? Over and over, obviously.

Even that didn’t work when she thought about his lips on hers, his taste filling her mouth, filling her entire being. His scent was like a drug to her senses. No man had ever been as potent for her. Even as she packed her bag, alone in her room, the scent of him still mesmerized her, and his kiss still steamed her up.

So she *had* to go through all her reasons. Again.

It would end badly.

They would lose their friendship.

She would lose her job.

Nothing would ever be the same between them once it was over.

Her life would change irrevocably, and she couldn’t stand another change. Not now. Not right after losing Uncle Lochlan.

But still, she couldn’t help craving one more kiss, one more night, one more moment of pleasure.

A pair of silk panties in her hands, she had the most awful thought. Dane hadn’t even fought her when she’d said they shouldn’t forget the rules. And he’d been the first to apologize. *So why did he kiss me in the first place?*

On the heels of that, another horrible thought rammed its way in. Was *she* the one who’d kissed him first? Was that why

he'd immediately apologized? Oh God, she couldn't remember how it happened.

She could only remember wanting him, being in his arms, kissing him.

It was only a kiss, yet it tore her apart. Without Dane, without this job, she had nothing. She didn't even have her uncle anymore.

No, the best thing for her was to forget about that kiss, forget about that long-ago night, forget about him with the kids at the barbecue, with a baby in his arms. She might want all that, and she might want it with Dane, but it was never going to happen. At least it wouldn't happen the way she wanted it.

And her beautiful, comfortable, secure life could turn into a hot mess.

* * *

While they waited in Martinique for his pilot to ready the jet, Dane set up the Maverick meeting in San Francisco for the next morning. "Are you sure we're ready?" he'd asked Cammie as she busied herself on her laptop.

"I'm sure we will be," she'd said without looking up.

He had nothing else to do. Because Cammie wasn't speaking to him. Not in an angry, *I never want to speak to you again* way. Cammie wasn't like that. This was more of an *I can't believe I kissed you and I don't know what to do about it* way.

He was just as shell-shocked.

That kiss reminded him of every single moment they'd spent in his condo on the golf course that night. Not that he'd ever forgotten a single moment. But now the memories were fresh with the taste of her, the scent of her, his need for her.

He just wasn't sure what to do that wouldn't ruin the good thing they already had.

But he had the hours of the flight to think about it.

And to think about her.

* * *

They flew home overnight, working some of the time, sleeping some of the time. After preparing a special treat for the morning's Maverick meeting—the plane had a sufficient galley kitchen—Fernsby watched Dane's and Camille's every waking moment with a hawk's eyes.

Of course they didn't notice his scrutiny; they were too busy ignoring each other. *What's up with that?* he thought, just like an American.

But he wasn't American. He was British. The British were always more reserved, especially when they were being devious. And he was totally (another Americanism) devious.

Something had happened on that island. SOMETHING BIG. He thought the words in huge capital letters.

He could have clapped with glee, but of course he didn't. Things were finally moving in the right direction. FINALLY. Again in huge capital letters.

He'd brought food to the island, much of it already prepared, so they'd have all the meals they needed and could just forget he was there.

But something hadn't worked the way he'd planned.

"Just get on with it, you two," he muttered under his breath. He wanted to rail at them. But he'd just have to work harder. A good butler's work was never done.

Then a brilliant plan came to him, which was not unusual. Quite often, he was filled with brilliant plans. He was a mastermind, if he did say so himself.

He almost wanted to buff his fingernails on his lapel. Because this was one of his most brilliant ideas yet. And it would work.

* * *

It was almost the end of April, and the Mavericks were eager to hear Dane and Cammie's plans for the resort. They all wanted to get a move on. So the following morning, Will and his best friends and brothers sat around the big conference table for the meeting. All of them except Evan. Will knew Evan would never last three months, never mind six, but at least he was taking the time now to bond with his children.

Matt was telling the story, with wide gestures and a resounding voice, of how he'd taken Ari and Noah to see the babies. "I swear, Mom and Dad made an edict that Evan and Paige needed a date night." He dropped his voice as if they were in a conspiracy. "Secretly, I think Paige was horrified at leaving the babies alone for one evening. After all, they're only a month old." He laughed. "But you know Mom. She told them they needed to reconnect over more than being peed on and changing dirty diapers."

Of course that's how Mom and Dad would be, the ultimate grandma and grandpa. They were in seventh heaven over the twins, as well as the three new babies on the way.

Will had a sudden vision of Harper, hands on her belly that was huge with his child. He wanted it. Badly. He just wasn't sure the time was right for her. But when it was, he'd be overjoyed.

"And I swear," Matt went on, unusually long-winded, "Paige was all, 'But-but-but...'" He smiled. "And Mom simply held up her hands, saying, 'It's nonnegotiable, and I don't want to hear any excuses.' You should've seen Mom. And you can't argue with her, because she's always right!" Every Maverick at the table chuckled. They knew their mother well.

So true. Mom had known Harper was right for him, and she hadn't allowed him to make a mistake that would scare away the love of his life. Will would be forever grateful for that.

The conference room door burst open. Dane should have been there, but instead, Will—and all his brothers—were

delightfully surprised to see Fernsby rolling in his tea trolley with another mind-boggling delicacy. The man must spend every waking moment in the kitchen.

Cammie Chandler and Dane followed, but not a single Maverick cared about them.

“Do you travel with that trolley, Fernsby?” Will asked.

The man looked down his nose. “Of course, sir. A butler is always prepared. I keep it in the trunk of the car, which we left at the airport.”

Then he began pouring coffee and dishing out another of his creations.

Around a mouthful of delicious cake covered in warm custard called a jam roly-poly, Sebastian said, “Okay, so is there a butler registry, like Butler-dot-com or something, where we can find someone just like you?”

Dane laughed. “There’s no one like Fernsby.”

Fernsby, with as straight a face as ever could be, said, “There’s no one on this planet who can handle bosses who are too big for their britches the way I can.”

Each and every Maverick laughed himself sick. Fernsby was so right—they were all too big for their britches, as their mom often told them.

Mom and Fernsby would get along great.

* * *

Cammie ran through the slide deck demonstrating their ideas, from a pickleball court to basketball hoops to activity rooms, along with art classes for painting to metalwork, and even a dance studio. Her tummy had done flipflops on the drive from the airport when Dane had said he wanted her to take the lead, claiming most of the ideas were hers.

And now she found she couldn’t look at him. As if one look would make her stumble.

Or remind her of that island kiss, and then she'd become completely flustered.

She concentrated on the conference room full of Mavericks, all seated at the big table, their arms folded. The blinds behind them were pulled to cut the glare on the large display screen from the sun shining through the windows overlooking San Francisco Bay. She was glad they'd dressed informally, making her feel better about the fact that she and Dane still wore casual clothes. When they'd been heading to the Caribbean, she hadn't thought to take business attire to change into.

As she clicked through the last slide, Sebastian breathed in deeply, letting it out in a long sigh. "Don't you think we're asking a lot of these kids—dancing, painting, metalworking?" He might have been wondering how much time Charlie would have to devote to teaching special kids how to create art out of scrap.

But Cammie had an answer. "Our guests will rise to the level of their capabilities. We talked to Harper." She glanced at Will. "She feels that these kids need to be given all the opportunities their contemporaries have available to them."

Daniel looked at the practical side. "So how much land do you think you'll need for this, if we're building from the ground up?"

Cammie nodded, grateful for the question. She wanted these men to know she'd thought of everything. "We don't necessarily need to build from the ground up. We want to be in Tahoe—that was a great suggestion, thank you." She tipped her head to Daniel, giving credit where credit was due. "But as the Maverick Group is committed to its environmental policies, there are a few long-vacant old resorts or casinos with lakefront property that might work, with existing roads, power, and water." She clicked to a slide with a chart showing square footage for every activity area they'd talked about adding to the resort. "If we can do it all on the same level, the footprint could be a lot. But there's no reason we can't have a multilevel

facility and still have room for outdoor activities. Our main objective is to be on the waterfront with the forest at the back, making hiking trails available to our guests.”

“What about skiing in the winter?” Matt wanted to know.

“Rather than having our own slopes, we could work out deals with ski resorts for day trips.”

Matt nodded his approval.

“So how much money do we need to start?” Gideon asked.

Cammie didn’t hesitate. She felt good about the material, confident in her presentation. “The lowball figure would be two hundred million to start, if we do this in stages. But to do it right, we need at least five hundred million.”

Not a single Maverick choked or guffawed or batted an eyelash, not even Cal, who was the Mavericks’ business manager. With the billionaires, it could be all pie-in-the-sky, but Cal was down to earth. “We’ll sure as hell have our work cut out for us.” He paused, looking at the square footage slide a long moment. “But it’s doable.”

Cammie smiled and finally looked at Dane. She saw pride gleaming in his eyes. Little did he know it had taken every ounce of confidence she possessed to run the meeting. But she’d really done it.

“We’ve already started opening doors,” she told them. “We left a message with Clyde Westbourne to see how he can help.”

Cal whistled. “Westbourne. Great man. He helped us with Gideon’s foundation.”

“And I’m sure he’ll want to help with this too.” Then she added smoothly, “We’d welcome any additional ideas or comments you have. This is a group project. We need your input.”

Will sat back in his chair, holding a pen between his fingertips. “I believe I speak for all of us. You’ve done the work.” He flashed his gaze around the room, and the

Mavericks let him be their mouthpiece. “And we like all of it. If we have something to add, we’ll let you know, but you’ve got an amazing start here. Obviously, there’ll be massive fundraising for this. But you two have such a mind meld, we don’t want to get in your way.”

“Cal and I will look at how the foundation can help,” Gideon said. “But you know you can call on us if you need anything.”

She wanted to clap. She wanted to cry. They’d done it. The Mavericks were in. And finally, she could look at Dane again.

She felt that mind meld, as if they didn’t need words.

And it told her he was extremely proud of her.

Chapter Fifteen

Dane had planned on three days to go through the entire project with the Mavericks, to discuss it, take suggestions, make changes, think it over, but the group had decided in less than two hours. It wasn't even much past eleven a.m. The whole thing was kind of crazy.

But then, it wasn't crazy at all. Cammie had done an exceptional job, polishing their presentation on the overnight flight from the Caribbean. He'd gotten some good shut-eye, but he wasn't sure how long she'd slept, though it had certainly been long enough for her to be sharp and ready for whatever the Mavericks threw at her.

That was why she hadn't spoken to him much on the flight—because she'd been working, perfecting.

It couldn't have had anything to do with that kiss.

“Great presentation,” Will said, rising to shake Cammie's hand, then Dane's.

Fernsby's trolley was empty. Ah yes, that was probably why the Mavericks were letting them go: The cake was gone.

Back at the car in the parking garage, Dane had left the air on—the car had a special climate control—since Rex was sleeping inside.

Fernsby stored his foldable tea trolley in the trunk and turned, regarding them with his staid British façade. “I've flown halfway around the globe with you today, sir.” Did he even recognize what a huge exaggeration that was? But Dane didn't stop him. “So please don't ask me to drive another three hours down to Pebble Beach. I need my rest.” He sniffed loudly as if Dane should have known this. “I'll take the dog to the flat with me while you two play tourist for the rest of the day.”

Fernsby didn't fool him. He adored the dog, and taking Rex was no hardship. Both he and Cammie had seen Fernsby sneaking dog treats to Rex, though the butler claimed it was Dane who gave out way too many.

Cammie jumped in. "We can't play tourist. We've got a lot of work to do."

Fernsby eyed her with a look that could have flayed the flesh from a lesser human's bones. His voice when he answered held its usual stern tone, though slightly more tender, perhaps because of Cammie's loss. "My dear Camille," he said softly. "You two have worked like dogs," he said with an exaggerated drawl, "for the past three days. You must take some recuperation time."

When Cammie opened her mouth, he wagged a finger. "You are still grieving, my dear." Was that compassion in Fernsby's eyes? "Make no mistake about that. And now I am ordering you to go out and enjoy the most beautiful city on earth."

"I thought London was the most beautiful city on earth," Cammie said, not exactly arguing with him.

Fernsby looked at her as if she were incredibly misguided. "Home is where the heart is," he said simply. With that, he crammed his tall frame into the car, slammed the door, turned on the engine, and expertly backed out of the parking spot at high speed.

Thank God the two of them weren't still standing by the trunk. In a flash, Fernsby and the car were a distant memory.

"He's so bossy," she said, hands on her hips.

Dane merely smiled. By some miracle, he had exactly what he wanted—free time with Cammie. Taking her elbow, he guided her to the carpark stairs. "Let's get a coffee and talk about what we'd like to do today. After all, Fernsby gave us an order."

She harrumphed like an old lady. And Dane smiled deep down inside.

* * *

They found a little café just outside the garage entrance, and the scent of freshly ground coffee almost made her swoon.

She staked out a table while Dane ordered espresso for himself and a latte for her. He always knew exactly what she wanted. She watched him charm the barista, laugh with the other customers, and make the young woman in line behind him look to see if he wore a wedding ring.

He was just so... likable. Sexy. Drool-worthy. And the perfect boss.

But right now, she wanted to squeal her delight like a child who'd just won a stuffed animal at a carnival. She couldn't have been happier with how well the meeting had gone. She'd answered every question as if she knew what she was talking about. Which she did. She'd put together the slides, found example photos, worked out square footage, looked at cost estimates. The Mavericks hadn't looked to Dane for answers. They'd listened to *her*. And now she overflowed with triumph.

The feeling was momentous. As she'd talked, she'd realized she wanted this project with every fiber of her being. It was the project of a lifetime.

She could do it. Sure, her nerves could get the better of her every once in a while. But she'd worked with Dane on so many projects. She had all the contacts they needed. He came to her often enough, asking who they should call about this and who they needed for that. If she let this project slip through her fingers because of a few nerves, she'd regret it forever.

She wouldn't let fear get the better of her.

When he finally returned to their table, setting the perfect latte in front of her and pulling his seat close to hers, she managed to say the words she absolutely had to.

"You know I love working with you, Dane. It's been totally great."

Something like panic flared in his eyes, and he pressed her hand tightly. For a man who always knew the right words, Dane actually stammered. “No, wait—please, let me—”

She cut him off. “Just hear me out, okay?” She pushed through her nerves, pushed through her memories of all the bad days with her uncle, pushed through the grief and the moments where she’d felt powerless to help him. “I’ve been your assistant for twelve years.” She pressed her lips together when unbidden tears wanted to rush to her eyes. Maybe it was her uncle. Maybe it was all those good years with Dane. Or maybe it was the night that started it all.

Dane grabbed her hand, held on a little too tightly. “Cammie, please.”

She reclaimed her hand to say what she had to. “I’m ready for a promotion. I don’t want to be just an assistant on this project. I want to manage it.”

He sat back, hand dropping to his lap, staring at her as if she’d never shown him this side of herself before.

Maybe she hadn’t.

Then he puffed out a snort. “Now why the hell didn’t I think of that?” He shook his head, something like wonder widening his eyes. “Of course you’ll do the best job. Everything we talked about in that meeting was your idea.” He tapped his temple. “In fact, I think the original idea was yours.”

She couldn’t remember anymore. It didn’t matter. Because, miracle of miracles, he’d agreed. “I might need some help.” She was stepping out of her comfort zone, but she needed to do this. “But I’m ready to try it.”

He pointed his finger at her nose. “You’re my idea genius.” *Genius*. Before she’d always been his idea *genie*, as if what they did together was magic. But now she was already promoted. To *genius*.

“You can bounce things off me,” he said. “Just the way I bounce things off you. But you can do this.”

She might never be one hundred percent in control of her nervousness. But was anyone—except Dane? She'd settle for ninety-nine. "Thank you. We'll absolutely do our normal idea exchange."

They always would, because she would never let anything get in the way of what they had together.

* * *

Cammie left to use the powder room.

That moment had stretched on endlessly, when he'd believed she was going to quit. Her beloved uncle was no longer her responsibility. Which meant she didn't need this job, because she could now work anywhere. The rules he'd always thought protected her had protected him from losing her. And now, she didn't need either anymore—not the job, not the rules. And not him.

But his heart rate was under control once more. He could breathe again. Cammie wasn't leaving.

Dane wished he could be his own punching bag. How stupid could a man be?

Cammie had worked for him for twelve years without a single promotion. And because he was thoughtless and selfish, he'd been holding her back all along. He'd kept her in the place he wanted her to be instead of helping her get to the place she needed to be. She was his idea *genius*, not his genie, as if she conjured things out of smoke. She was so intelligent, so competent. She even told him when he was going in the wrong direction, sometimes knowing it before he did. She was his right-hand woman, not just his girl Friday. She wasn't a *girl* at all, but a resourceful, thoughtful, caring, loyal woman.

And he was an ass for not giving her this chance before.

The moment she returned to the table, he took her hand. "I apologize."

"For what?" she asked, as if she couldn't see how he'd held her back.

“I’ve given you raises, but I should’ve realized that wasn’t enough. You’ve always taken on more responsibility, doing whatever new task I asked of you. We just never acknowledged it. You’ve always directed my projects. And I’ve always listened to you.”

She shook her head, staring him down. “Don’t rewrite history, Dane.” Then she patted his hand as if it were Rex’s head. “This is different. This is me calling the shots. I’ve never asked to do that before. But I want it now. So please don’t apologize. You had no idea it was important to me, because I didn’t even know I wanted it. Maybe I had to get through the ordeal with Uncle Lochlan.” She shrugged. “But now I know what I want. And thank you for the promotion.” She put her hand to her heart. “Thank you so much.”

“Of course you’ll get a raise commensurate with your new title of project manager.”

“Thank you.” She didn’t turn him down. He wouldn’t have let her.

He still could have smacked himself. Why hadn’t Fernsby forced him to open his eyes? “You need to know I’m in awe of you. And I can’t wait to see everything you come up with along the way. Because it will all be astounding.”

Her smile turned him inside out. He should have done this years ago. Just so she’d smile at him exactly that way.

* * *

Cammie’s cheeks flushed at his praise. Something wanted to bubble up inside her. Excitement. Maybe even joy. Certainly pride. Because Dane hadn’t *given* her the promotion. She’d *asked* for it. She’d taken her own personal bull by the horns and wrestled it to the ground, telling Dane what she should have told him years ago. She wanted a project, and what better project than a resort for special needs kids? It was almost like a calling. And she was going to do the absolute best job ever.

But she smiled so Dane wouldn’t know the overwhelming effect his words had. “Now that’s out of the way, let’s talk

about our plans for the day. We've always done our best brainstorming while we're outdoors—golfing, hiking in Pebble Beach, or wherever.”

Just as she had on the island, she remembered that fateful golf game. All their golf games. But she also remembered the long hikes when she'd felt so in tune with Dane. A walk around San Francisco would be the next best thing.

“Why don't we go to the windmills in Golden Gate Park?” she suggested. “It's the perfect time of year for the tulips.” She chuckled at herself. “I always seem to think about visiting the windmills when the tulips are out of season.”

“Deal.” Their coffees finished, they headed out, and Dane pulled her hand around his crooked elbow. “I'm glad we both wore our walking shoes.”

Since Fernsby had taken the car back to the flat, Cammie booked an Uber.

They were picked up by a massive SUV. Once they were ensconced in the back seat, she enjoyed the drive across San Francisco, with a brief detour around Alamo Square and the Painted Ladies, those gorgeous Victorian houses, then through Golden Gate Park past the Botanical Gardens.

They climbed out of the car to find the tulips still blooming in the Queen Wilhelmina Garden at the Dutch Windmill. Hand over her mouth to cover her gasp, she clutched Dane's arm. “Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?”

Looking at her, he said softly, “Yes, I have.”

For a moment, she was struck speechless. But of course he wasn't talking about her. He might not even have meant a woman. He was probably thinking of Kew Gardens in London or the Tuileries in Paris or a Pebble Beach sunset.

The tulips flowered in a burst of color—red, yellow, white, pink—all against the backdrop of the Dutch Windmill.

“Let's sit,” she said. She would beg if she had to. “And just contemplate.”

They found a bench amid the flowers, the perfume of sweet, growing things filling the air. “Doesn’t it make you feel serene?”

In the oddest gesture, Dane laced his fingers through hers and held her hand. Usually, it was a squeeze or a touch, but he didn’t let go. “It’s the perfect place for reflection.”

Cammie dropped her voice to a low note. “Thank you for coming here with me.”

She’d been pushy about the promotion, but he’d acquiesced with such chivalry, taking blame for never before giving her a project to manage. But how could he have known when she’d never said what she wanted?

He smiled down at her. “Fernsby damn near ordered us to go out and enjoy the day. So I say no work, no brainstorming, just enjoying. What else can we do when Fernsby lays down the law?”

Her heart fluttered at his touch, his smile, and the thought of a day just being with him. But she giggled. “He just wanted to practice baking for the show without us hanging around.”

Dane laughed with her. “So true.”

Once they had their fill of the sweet air, Dane stood, pulling her with him. “There’s a place I’d like to go. It’s maybe a mile and a half walk. But I haven’t been there in years, and I’d like to see it again.”

She tipped her head, having no idea what he could be talking about.

“It’s called Portals of the Past. I’ll tell you about it when we get there. You game?”

Lord, to be with him, she was game for anything. Thank goodness she wasn’t wearing heels.

They strolled the sidewalk, few cars passing them. The more popular part of Golden Gate Park was on the other side of Nineteenth Avenue with the Japanese Tea Garden, the

Academy of Sciences, and the de Young Museum. They didn't talk about the job or the resort, or even her uncle's passing.

Instead, falling into the smile on his beautiful lips, she waited for something... momentous.

Dane asked, "When you were a little girl, did you wear your hair in pigtails or braids?"

Chapter Sixteen

Cammie laughed so hard she had to put her hand over her mouth. “Neither. With my red hair...” She flicked her curls. “I would have looked like Pippi Longstocking.”

He blinked. “Who’s Pippi Longstocking?”

The inane conversation was delightful, even making her heart flutter. “She was the nine-year-old heroine in a series of children’s books I used to read when I was a kid.” Then she turned the questioning back on him. “What about you when you were a little boy?”

With a straight face, he said, “My hair wasn’t long enough for pigtails or braids.”

She slapped at him playfully. “I didn’t mean your hair. What did you like to do?”

He held her hand as they walked, nonchalantly, almost as if he didn’t notice what he was doing. But she felt the warmth of his palm and the strength in his grip. “I was all about animals. I had a pony. Later on, a horse. And if there was ever an injured animal out there, I found it.” He tapped his chest as if he was proud. “And made sure I healed it. Then I released it back into the wild,” he added with a flourish.

She knew he’d wanted to be a vet, that he’d been in his third year of college, with veterinary school in mind. He’d never made it.

“What was your favorite pet?”

He tipped his face skyward. “There are so many to choose from. I had a wild turkey with an injured leg. I found her when I was hiking and walked right into a flock of wild turkeys with all these chicks. Turkey chicks are called poults—and they were so damned cute.” His eyes shone when he looked at her. “She was their heroine, hobbling off in the opposite direction, squawking and shrieking, trying to draw me away from the

poults while the other female led them to safety. She thought I was some sort of predator, and I admired her heroism.”

When he looked down at her, she could almost see the little boy in his face, the young child chasing after a turkey so he could heal her leg.

“I caught her, took her home. I thought I could fix her.” His voice rose as if he still remembered his hopefulness. “But she’d been born with a deformed leg. She liked to wander around the yard, even though my parents complained—at least when they were home—about the poop on the grass.”

“Did you at least clean up the poop?”

His eyes still glittering, he shook his head. “You can’t just clean up turkey poop, let me tell you, especially when the whole flock joined her. Now that really drove everyone crazy. But she was great, even ate out of my hand.”

“What did you name her?”

“Stumpy.”

She stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. “Stumpy? That’s just plain mean.”

Dane’s smile shone down on her, as warm as the sun on the top of her head. “She always came when I called, so she must have liked it.”

“You’re terrible,” she complained, walking again. “What happened to her?”

He shrugged. “One day, the whole flock just moved on. I’m not sure why. Could have been a predator that drove them away.”

“Did you miss her?”

“For a while.” He sighed. “I hoped she’d come back. But she never did. Sometimes you just have to accept that the things you love don’t always come back to you.”

She thought how incredibly sad that was.

But then Dane smiled. “I figured she’d gone on to enjoy life elsewhere. That’s what I hoped for all the animals and birds I rescued. That they moved on to a better life. If I didn’t do that, it would have been too depressing.”

She suddenly wanted to hug him. Because, really, how many men could there be who just wanted their protégés to move on to a better life?

Just like her, with the way he’d so readily agreed to give her the project and a promotion. But that was Dane.

They reached Lloyd Lake, where Dane stopped at a spot with a clear sight line across the water. With him standing behind her, his body close enough for her to feel his heat against her back, his whisper sent a sweet little quiver down her spine.

“Over there.” He pointed. “See it?”

The structure reminded her of a columned doorway from Roman times, standing by itself on the other side of the lake as if it might lead to another world.

Dane murmured, “It was the front entry to railroad tycoon Alban Towne’s Nob Hill mansion. It’s all that was left after the 1906 earthquake. Just the entryway. It was moved here as a reminder of all that was lost that fateful day in San Francisco, when our fair city burned to the ground after the great earthquake.”

She felt his heat everywhere along her skin, the timbre of his voice resonating deep inside her. She wanted to lean back, to lay her head on his shoulder and look at him. But all she could do was whisper, “It’s beautiful.”

“You’ve never seen it before?”

She shook her head, her hair brushing his cheek. “Never heard of it.” It wasn’t far from the soccer field where they’d played the game that Sunday in January.

“You said the tulip garden was serene. I feel that here, like it’s a peaceful place.” His breath washed over her ear as he

chuckled. “Except Pebble Beach, of course, when we’re hiking in the woods.”

On a spring weekday, just the two of them were at the lake, and the beauty and harmony enveloped them. The intimacy of his body so close and his breath in her hair shot tingles to all her erogenous zones.

“Thank you for showing me this.”

“Thank you for showing me the tulips. Sometimes we forget to stop and smell the flowers.”

She couldn’t even laugh at the cliché. The moment was too perfect. And she nodded against him, reluctant to step away. If only they could stay this way forever.

How long they gazed at the portal she couldn’t say. A path led around the lake, and they could have walked through the columns, but somehow the memorial was best seen from afar, as if you could step through into the San Francisco of the early 1900s. Getting too close would ruin the effect.

“Where to now?” he finally asked, even as she remained mesmerized by his nearness.

To his bed, she thought. It was the only place she really wanted to be.

But it was the only place she could never be. Not ever again.

“We should ride a cable car.” The words almost burst from her, as if she needed the clickety-clack of a cable car and the laughter of other people to burst the bubble in which they stood.

She called another Uber. It dropped them off a couple of blocks from the cable car turnaround near Union Square so they didn’t have to wait in the long line with the other tourists. And soon they swung up onto the running board of an overpacked car, Cammie’s heart in her throat when she thought her foot might slip. Dane was right there, helping her grab a pole and paying the fare in exact change when the

conductor came by. They went up, up, up the monumental hills of San Francisco, turned left on California and then right on Hyde, the car swaying as she held on tight. At the top of Lombard Street, the crookedest street in the world, the crush of bodies eased as many of the passengers jumped off for their turn to walk down among the blooming hydrangeas.

Dane pulled her inside, where it was still standing room only. “Unless you want to get off here and walk down Lombard.”

She shook her head. He was so close behind her she didn’t want to move, not even an inch. “I’ve done that. Let’s ride all the way to Ghirardelli Square.”

“Sounds good to me.” His breath whispered across her hair. The cable car’s jolt as it took off again pressed her against him. And somehow she just stayed there.

Even above the clank and clang of the car, she was sure she heard him breathe deeply, as though he was sniffing her hair. His heat caressed her spine, sending more tingles through her, all the way to her fingers and toes. And other parts.

It was crazy. It was unprofessional. And it was exhilarating.

* * *

Dane breathed her in as if she were a life-giving elixir. Allowing the cable car’s gripman behind him plenty of room to work the manual brakes, he used it as an excuse to hold her close. And he felt her everywhere.

It was enough to make a man want unthinkable things.

With her body flush against him, he could let his imagination run wild. He could imagine hauling her high against his body until she wrapped her legs around him. Until he pressed her against the office wall. Or laid her out on his desk.

Dane knew he’d truly gone crazy when he imagined kissing her right here on the cable car. Imagined undoing her

blouse and tasting her. Imagined taking a seat and pulling her down to straddle him.

Hell if he wasn't fully, temptingly aroused when they stepped off the cable car near Ghirardelli Square. How many blocks had that been from Lombard? Five, maybe. He wished the ride had been longer.

"Where to now?" His voice almost cracked.

She looked at him, her gaze dreamy. If he didn't know better, he'd think she felt the same agonizing need that he did. But of course she didn't. Cammie was always in control.

Except for that one night twelve years ago.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him, walking backward. "I want an ice cream sundae at Ghirardelli Square."

He would have given her anything she asked for.

They shared a banana split with butter pecan, cookie dough, and rocky road ice cream, lots of chocolate sauce, whipped cream, nuts, and sprinkles on top.

Who could have known that sharing a sundae would be so sexy? The cramped table forced them to sit close, the sundae between them, with only one spoon. Had he failed to ask for two spoons on purpose? He couldn't say. But they worked their way through the ice cream with him feeding her a spoonful, then taking one of his own. He was so pathetic he actually relished the lingering taste of her on the spoon.

"Good?" he asked. Hell, it was better than good. It was freaking awesome.

Her pupils were wide, as if he'd stolen her breath, as if he'd stolen a kiss.

"It's so good."

He felt her breathlessness deep inside.

Giving her the last bite, he watched her lick the spoon clean. How he wanted to lick her just that way, wanted to feel her tremble with desire.

The way he trembled with desire at this very moment.

When they were done, he grabbed her hand. “That was dessert, but we definitely need a starter.” They dodged tourists on the sidewalk down to Fisherman’s Wharf, where he bought her clam chowder in a bread bowl.

“One spoon again?” she asked.

He couldn’t let her know how badly he had designs on her. This day was for fun and games, but if she thought any of it was real, she might balk.

“They only gave me one. Here, take a bite.” He fed her again, and she groaned at the clam chowder’s creaminess. He opened the bag of oyster crackers and held it out. “You need a chaser.” After pouring a few into her hand, he watched her suck them down.

His insides tensed.

He kept on feeding her, wanting her, kept on remembering that kiss on the island, remembering the golf game and that night in his condo. He was close to losing his mind. If he went on tempting himself this way, he’d lose it completely.

And he could very well lose her.

With the chowder bowl empty, they were heading to Pier 39 when she suddenly dug in her heels and pointed. “We need a balloon animal.”

Her hand in his, the two of them watched as a clown sitting on a camp stool blew up balloons, twisted them into shapes, and handed them to little kids walking by.

Chuckling, Dane murmured into her sweetly fragrant hair, “You want one of those?”

When she nodded, Dane stepped up to the man. “Can you make a dachshund?”

The man rolled his eyes beneath his white face paint and oversized fake lips. Then he blew hard on the balloon,

twisting, shaping, laughing, smiling. And finally, he held out a dachshund balloon on his palm.

“For a very pretty lady.” He handed it to Cammie.

Her smile grew like a flower opening. “Thank you. I love it.”

Without a thought, Dane tipped the man a fifty. If he’d had a hundred, he’d have given him that, too, just for the smile the clown had put on her face.

He held her hand as they wandered Pier 39, shared a shrimp cocktail, and stopped to watch the seals.

Then Cammie found it. Though it wasn’t a pet shop, it sold dog toys. Her eyes shone so brightly, he could have kissed her right then.

She held out a... thing.

He looked at it for a long moment. “What is it?”

She laughed. He loved it when she laughed at him. “It’s a log,” she said with exaggerated slowness. “With chipmunks inside.”

Her words didn’t make sense. Until she shook the thing and stuffed chipmunks fell out all over the floor.

Dane couldn’t help laughing as she gathered up the little creatures, stuffing them back inside.

“Rex will go wild, shaking out all the chipmunks and chasing them,” she said, demonstrating, hands on both ends so nothing fell out.

He could see her playing with the dog. How she loved that dachshund. He did too. And he loved that T. Rex was theirs together.

She looked at him pointedly, her face tipped up. “Rex absolutely must have this.”

Dane reached for it. “I’ll get it.”

She hugged the chipmunk log to her chest. “No. I’ll get it.”

“But this is my trip. I’ll buy it.”

She glowered at him. “But if you do, it’s not my gift to Rex.”

“It doesn’t really matter who pays for it—it’s from both of us.”

“You don’t get it.”

He opened his mouth, ready to argue with her, but before he could utter another word, she slapped her hand over his lips, shutting him up.

An electric shock zipped through him. He wanted to lick her palm, wanted to grab her and lick way more than that.

But Cammie yanked back before he could get his tongue between his lips.

Her eyes were wide, her face a grimace, as if she’d been scorched by boiling water.

And maybe she had.

Certainly, he’d been scorched.

Chapter Seventeen

Cammie could barely speak. She could barely even think. She still felt his lips on her palm. Had he licked her?

No, that was just her imagination.

Yet an electric current had rushed through her, so powerful that if she hadn't been stunned, she might have thrown herself into his arms and kissed him.

It was the only thing on earth she wanted to do.

Even twenty minutes later, when they'd made it back to the cable car turnaround near Ghirardelli Square, Cammie was still reeling from that almost... She didn't know what to call it. Not a kiss; it was just his mouth under her hand. But it was *something*. Something delicious and sexy.

Something she needed to forget.

It had been such a fabulous day. First, the meeting with the Mavericks, then mustering the courage to ask to be project manager. Then she'd been swept away by the beauty of the gardens and the park, mesmerized by the cable car ride and Dane feeding her the banana split and clam chowder, the seals, the view of the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz on a sunny day.

Being with him made it sublime.

He stopped before entering the line waiting for the next cable car. "Let's do something to celebrate everything we've accomplished."

"That's what we've been doing all day."

He shook his head, looking at her as if she had no imagination. "We were playing tourist. Now we need something truly special."

"Like what?" Her heart beat faster, as if it expected something amazing.

Dane took out his phone, checking the time. Then he smiled. "It's close to dinnertime. Let's go back to the flat and ask Fernsby to make us the most delectable meal. We'll let him choose. In fact, I'll call him right now so he can start preparing. What do you think?"

It was the crowning touch to a flawless day. "That's brilliant. No restaurant chef can make anything better than Fernsby can."

Dane raised an eyebrow and made a mock choking sound in his throat. "Now that will go to his head."

Laughing, Cammie said, "He's the one who told me that." Then she looked at the cable car line. It wasn't as long as the one at Powell and Market, but they still might not make it onto the next car. "Let's walk. It's only a mile or so, right?"

Dane looked up, and up and up. Somewhere up there was Nob Hill. "We'll certainly work up an appetite. Let's do it." Then he grinned. "Even if you are crazy."

Cammie wanted to be crazy. With him. They were both in good shape. While she'd been caring for her uncle, taking a break for a walk had kept her sanity intact. "Don't tell me you're afraid of a few hills," she scoffed.

Dane could never turn down a challenge. "You're on."

They climbed at a measured pace, never rushing, not trying to outdo each other, just taking the hills one step at a time. Just before Lombard Street, a cable car clanked down the hill, its bell ringing. Another came up filled with passengers from the turnaround. Cammie waved, and the gripman rang his bell.

The route wasn't all straight up. Sometimes they had a respite, but after all their long hikes, neither she nor Dane was breathing terribly hard when they finally reached his flat on Nob Hill. It comprised the entire top floor of one of San Francisco's beautiful old buildings that had been rebuilt right after the 1906 earthquake.

Though not the biggest in San Francisco, what the flat lacked in size it made up for in sheer beauty, everything

constructed with precision. But that didn't mean it was minuscule. Dane had remodeled after purchasing it, creating three suites, one for each of them—Dane, Cammie, and, of course, Fernsby, whose rooms were next to the chef's kitchen he'd had a big hand in designing. In addition, there was a great room, dining room, guest bathroom, and an office large enough for their two desks.

Cammie had discovered the flat and supervised the remodeling and decorating. With the world's biggest Rolodex—no longer the old-fashioned mechanical kind, but an app—she'd tapped into some great resources and brilliant artisans. Since Dane always paid well, many of the workmen had willingly slipped their project in between others. Decorating appealed to her, and she'd made several suggestions for his resorts, as well as decorating all his other houses. The London townhouse and the countryside manor, however, had been perfect just the way they were, with the exception of the kitchens, which they'd modernized for Fernsby.

Beyond the massive great-room windows lay Alcatraz and the Golden Gate, Sausalito and Tiburon, the sun sparkling on the bay. Each of Dane's homes had its own unique beauty that called to her. But for a city view, nothing surpassed that of the San Francisco flat.

The patter of doggy nails on the hardwood floor signaled Rex's imminent arrival. He dashed into the room, followed by Fernsby.

"Here, you give it to Rex." Dane handed her the bag with her balloon and the chipmunks, which he'd carried all the way up the hill.

When she threw the log for the dog, she smiled at Dane. "I told you he'd love it."

Rex pounced, shook the toy viciously, and the chipmunks flew every which way.

"Good Lord," Fernsby drawled. "What on earth is that?"

"Rex's new toy," Dane supplied.

“And just who is going to clean up the mess, sir?” Fernsby asked as Rex tore into a chipmunk and sent its stuffing flying.

“Well, that didn’t last long,” Dane noted.

Cammie huffed at them both. “He’s got nine more chipmunks.”

Fernsby merely blinked, slowly, with great meaning, which could have been either, *That’s nine more chipmunk innards I’ll have to clean up* or *It’s your mess, you clean it up*. Then he said in the driest of voices, “As instructed, I’ve prepared a celebratory feast for you. You’ll find it up on the terrace, where you can enjoy the sunset.”

She couldn’t wait to see what he’d come up with.

* * *

Cammie gasped as she stepped out on the rooftop terrace.

The sound hit Dane like her hand over his mouth had in the store. And he wanted to lick her.

He had no choice, of course, but to maintain control.

She laughed, a beautiful musical sound that wrapped around him.

Yeah, he really should have licked her.

He thought the gorgeous sunset through the glass had grabbed her attention. Then Dane saw it—a hot tub where no tub had been before. With a soaker tub in his suite, he’d never felt the need for a hot tub.

But suddenly, Fernsby had created a need. Dane wanted nothing more than to lounge in that tub with Cammie.

Two tables sat on either side, each filled with goodies, from bruschetta to shrimp rolls, seafood mushroom caps to pâté-stuffed phyllo kisses, antipasto skewers to crab cakes with mango relish. Fairy lights strung around the terrace winked on, illuminating the sparkling bottle already chilling in the champagne bucket, two glasses beside it.

Fernsby stood impassively by the terrace door as if he didn't even recognize the impressiveness of what he'd done.

Dane gestured at the hot tub. "Did you forklift this thing up here?"

In a voice as cool as his features, Fernsby said, "You needn't worry yourself about how I did it, sir. Just enjoy the fact that I was able to."

He'd even laid out their swimsuits on a lounge chair, two rolled towels beside them.

Cammie put her hands on her hips. "That's why you didn't want to drive back to Pebble Beach. And why you wanted us out of the way today."

Was that a flicker of humor in Fernsby's eyes? Of course not. Fernsby was the antonym of humor.

"Let me just say, sir," Fernsby intoned like the talking head on a news program, "I've watched you two work yourselves silly, and I've concocted some special treats for you." Fernsby had obviously been working on this long before Dane called him. "Now enjoy the sunset, sir, drink the champagne, eat those scrumptious hors d'oeuvres over which I slaved all afternoon, and enjoy that hot tub. I'll take care of the dog." He gathered Rex under his arm, the little dog covered in chipmunk fluff, and marched through the terrace door, closing it behind him and leaving Dane alone on the roof with Cammie.

"Only Fernsby could get a hot tub up here." Cammie inhaled deeply, exhaling with wonder.

Dane was still shaking his head. "I could drag him back here to tell me how he did it."

Cammie pressed her lips together. "He'll never tell." Then she smiled. "And it's more fun if we don't know."

Then she grabbed her suit off the lounge chair. "I'll just put this on while you pop the cork." She gave him a cheeky grin. "I want to sit in that tub and watch the sunset with

champagne in my hand and one of Fernsby's treats in my mouth."

Of course that made him look at her mouth. And one glance made him think of all the things he'd like to do with that beautiful mouth.

But she was already out of reach.

Dane stripped down right there on the deck. Unless a plane flew overhead, no one would see him. He pulled his trunks on, then pushed the button to retract the glass roof, opening the hot tub to the sky and the stars that would soon pop out. Then he did exactly as she'd told him, pouring champagne, adding three raspberries to each flute from the small bowl Fernsby had left.

She stole his breath when she returned in a slim black one-piece that hugged her stunning curves, a keyhole gold buckle between her breasts and a plunging back that revealed every beautiful inch of skin right down to the base of her spine.

He drooled, wanting to kiss her right there in that keyhole.

Instead, he handed her a glass of champagne. After thanking him, she climbed into the two-person tub. Priceless. They'd have to sit facing each other, their bodies almost touching. Leaning over the side, she grabbed one of Fernsby's shrimp puffs and popped it in her mouth, closed her eyes, and savored the delicacy, damn near moaning over it.

The sounds she made could drive a man crazy.

Opening her eyes, she looked at him without a single clue as to what she'd just done to him.

He had to sink beneath the water before she noticed.

"That sunset is amazing." With the hot tub positioned so they could both see the view over the bay—Fernsby thought of everything—Cammie pointed with her glass out the terrace windows, where the sun streaked stunning colors across the sky.

"Gorgeous." But he was looking at her.

With a satisfied sigh, she smiled. “I’m addicted to Fernsby’s treats.” She patted her stomach. “At some point, I’m going to have to back off, or my figure will soon be dealing with the consequences.”

What the hell was she talking about? Without thinking, he blurted, “Are you kidding? You have the most perfect body I’ve ever seen.”

Her beautiful jade eyes went wide. “Really?” Then she blushed. “Thank you. That’s really nice of you to say.” She paused two seconds, as if she actually had to think about what she was saying, and whispered, “Right back at ya.” Then she sank into the water up to her chin as if afraid of her own words.

He hadn’t meant to say it. It was one thing to compliment a woman on a new dress or a different hairstyle, but you simply couldn’t talk about your employee’s body. Not ever. You weren’t even supposed to *look*. Of course, he’d been looking for years; he couldn’t help himself. But he’d never let her catch him at it.

And what he’d really wanted to say was that she had the hottest body ever. Twelve years ago, she’d made him breathless, made him drool, made him hard. He’d delighted in every facet of this beautiful woman. But now, at thirty-four, she was even more striking than the day he’d met her. Because now he *knew* her—the sharpness of her mind, the sweetness of her character, the beauty of her soul.

Holding her glass above the bubbling water, she said, “You know how it is when you’re over thirty and everything starts to sag, and you go, wow, I’m getting older?”

“Are you crazy? You’re even more perfect than the day I met you.”

Suddenly, as though she couldn’t take another compliment without shrieking and jumping out of the tub, she changed the conversation entirely. “I can’t believe Fernsby actually found a two-seater tub.”

The tub was exactly right, but he said, “It had to be a two-seater. How else could he have hoisted it up here?”

Their body heat ratcheted up the water temperature. Their legs touched briefly, his thigh to her calf. He wanted to run his hand all the way up. But she jerked away as though he’d burned her. Maybe he had. He was certainly on fire.

Instead of sipping her champagne, she gulped it. Then she leaned over for a phyllo kiss, giving him a view of her swimsuit’s plunging back.

Matching her move for move, he stretched for a mushroom cap. And that brought him in contact with her leg again, her warm, fragrant skin skimming his.

He could have laughed at himself, getting intensely worked up over her leg. But she had beautiful legs, her calves toned from all the hiking, her muscles lean. His lusty thoughts almost made him choke on Fernsby’s scrumptious mushroom.

He was glad for the jets stirring the water so she couldn’t see him beneath the surface. She’d probably jump out in shock.

As if she needed to keep things on an even keel—and they might have been getting out of hand—she said, “I’ve always appreciated the work you’ve done. But this resort we’re putting together, it will help so many in the future. Special children who are really in need, as well as their parents and caregivers. I’ve never been more proud of you than I am right now.”

He gazed at her steadily, letting his eyes roam her striking features, her lush lips, her silky red-gold hair pulled into a knot on top of her head. “You took the words right out of my mouth. Only you could put all your heart and soul into managing this project.”

Cammie put her heart and soul into everything she did, from decorating his homes, to running his life, to caring for her uncle. He’d already proven he was a mess without her.

She was everything, and he was pretty damn sure she didn't even know it.

Before he could think how ill-advised it might be, he leaned forward to wrap his hand around her nape. Then slowly, giving her every chance to stop him, he pulled her close. The island kiss had been spectacular but brief. This kiss was openmouthed, sweet with champagne and raspberries and her. Their tongues played hide-and-seek, and their bodies drifted together. He kissed her until their breaths became one, until their heartbeats raced at the same pace.

She put her hands on his shoulders and floated over him as he leaned back against the tub, their bodies caressing, their skin hot. He took her mouth as if he'd been starved for her. With a teasing bite on her lip, he drew her in, delving deep, his tongue sliding along hers. She came down on him, parting her legs, straddling him until he felt her everywhere. If he'd thought he'd known heaven before, he'd been wrong. Because *this* was heaven.

This was what he'd dreamed of night after night, knowing she was just down the hall. Knowing she was off-limits. Until this moment. When she was everything he could ever want in his arms.

Her skin was like satin, her taste like the finest champagne, her thighs taut and inviting. Sliding his hands down her sides, he wanted nothing more than to tear off the sexy swimsuit. Tracing his fingers across her back, he held her closer, closer as he slipped his fingers down to the base of her spine, touching her there, feeling her quiver against him, her legs tightening around him.

She pulled away to whisper against his lips, "Rules."

Putting a hand to the back of her head, he murmured, "What rules?"

He wanted to break every single one. Now. Wanted to feast on her skin, her breasts, every part of her.

Her voice tantalized him. "We're being so naughty."

The word made him crazy. “Say that again. It’s so damned sexy and hot.”

She whispered, “Naughty.”

He might have exploded right then. He might have pushed her up on the side of the tub and tasted her. He might have done every single naughty, rule-breaking thing he’d thought of for so long. Everything he’d denied himself.

But her phone rang.

At first, he thought it had to be a dream. No, a nightmare.

But the phone kept ringing.

Then she pushed away from him, her eyes wide, perhaps even frightened. “It’s Clyde.”

“We’ve been waiting over a week to hear from him.” They’d called Clyde first, even before presenting to the Mavericks.

Her voice grew tremulous. “What if he needs help?”

Dane’s worry ratcheted up, just as Cammie’s did. He truly liked the old man. “You’d better get it.”

Yet he mourned the loss of this moment between them. There might never be another.

Chapter Eighteen

What was going on with Clyde?

Cammie didn't have time to think about what she and Dane had been doing in the hot tub. Not now. Because that was Clyde's special ringtone. His butler, Digbert, usually made any calls, then transferred after she answered. But Clyde himself was calling. Something had to be wrong.

After climbing out of the tub, she dripped water across the deck as she ran for her phone on the lounge chair. Even after twelve years, she was still close to the old man. She flew out to see him every six months or so. He was like another uncle. And she was a surrogate daughter, since he'd never had kids. They often talked on the phone, but never this late, considering the three-hour time difference. He should have been in bed by now. Worry churned her stomach.

"Clyde?" She heard the anxiety in her own voice. "How are you doing? Is everything okay?"

"Of course it is, dear." He harrumphed with irritation. "Everything's fine. I'm going to live forever. Do you think I'm an old man?" His British accent hadn't faded, though he'd left the UK years ago.

"No, no, no. I never think of you that way."

Dane climbed out of the water, sleek and beautiful, grabbing the two towels and wrapping one around his waist, hiding every inch of beautiful skin.

She sagged onto the lounge chair, still dizzy with worry even as it waned, and mouthed to Dane, *He's okay*.

Dane draped the towel over her shoulders. She'd grown cold in just a minute or two.

Only now could she think about what almost happened in that tub. How amazing his taste was after all these years, the

feel of his skin against hers, his hands on her, his lips taking hers. It was as if they'd time-traveled back to that night in his condo on the golf course.

She would have done anything with him in that hot tub. She *had* done everything with him all those years ago.

But Clyde was talking. She had to pretend that everything was perfectly normal, and she hadn't been sitting on Dane's lap only moments before, the hard feel of him between her legs.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get back to you about your new project," Clyde said.

She and Dane had briefed him, letting him know they were looking for sponsors as well as donations.

"It's only been a week. We didn't expect you to have an immediate answer." She looked at Dane as he sat down next to her on the lounge chair. "Dane's right here. Let me put you on speaker."

"I told you I'd get back to you after I'd thought it over. And I've concluded it's a brilliant project, and I absolutely need to be a part of it." Relief flooded her. Clyde was in. That was a huge boon, since he had an enormous pool of contacts.

"Thank you, Clyde. We're so glad."

"I've been making calls," he went on. "And I haven't heard a single no yet."

"That's amazing news."

She glanced at Dane, whose smile beamed across his entire face. "As always, Clyde, you're a powerhouse. Thank you."

"I take it you're close to breaking ground for the resort?"

Dane juttled his chin at her, indicating that it was her project and her answer to give.

"We're looking for just the right property." Or she would be, as soon as they got back to Pebble Beach.

“Brilliant. I have yeses to the tune of two hundred million already.”

Cammie gasped. That was her lowball figure just to start. “Clyde, you are the absolute best.”

“I know,” he said without an inflection of either humor or humility. “But I do miss seeing you. I hope you can come out soon.”

Guilt hit her that she and Dane had just been in the Caribbean, and she hadn’t even flown over to see Clyde. She hadn’t seen him since the summer, before she’d taken the leave of absence. Of course, Clyde had understood, since they’d talked extensively about her uncle’s condition. But she still hadn’t arranged to see him.

The worst was that she didn’t know when she could get out there again now that she was running the new project.

Dane came to her rescue. “We’re going to come see you, Clyde, don’t you worry. If you can let us nail down the property and get things rolling, we’ll be out for a visit.”

Clyde gave a guttural laugh. “Good. I see I’m guiltning you into a trip.” Then he added more seriously, “I know you’re both busy. Just know you have a standing invitation.”

“Thanks for understanding, Clyde. We appreciate it,” Dane told him.

Cammie’s guilt eased slightly. Clyde claimed he would live forever, but she knew time would catch up to him. She vowed to make it out to see him as soon as they had a property secured.

After they’d said their goodbyes and she’d pushed the End button, Dane touched her arm. “You don’t need to feel guilty.”

“We were just in the Caribbean, and I didn’t even think,” she berated herself.

“Neither did I. But we had other things on our minds.”

Oh yes, she had. That kiss.

“We’ll see him in a very short while, like I said. Let’s just get a site deal going.” He squeezed her hand, his touch reminding her of everything they’d done in the hot tub.

And she couldn’t help an irreverent thought. Clyde really was the best, and she was so happy he’d called, but did he have to call *right* at that moment? Couldn’t he have called two hours earlier? Yes, there were all the rules they shouldn’t break, rules that kept them safe for twelve years, just like she’d told Dane on the island.

But oh, how badly she’d wanted to get naughty with him. In those few sexy, amazing moments in the hot tub, she hadn’t cared about the consequences. It was obvious Dane wanted the same thing.

Just as she’d felt when she watched him at the barbecue, with the children and the babies, she wanted *everything*.

Even if she knew how terribly wrong it could all go.

Maybe the person she really had to fight wasn’t Dane, but herself.

Of course she didn’t want her heart broken. She couldn’t let their relationship change when it wouldn’t be for the better. As much as she wanted that dream of love and family, she couldn’t trust that she’d get it. She couldn’t ruin everything they already had.

Even as badly as she wanted him.

* * *

Clyde was bringing them two hundred million for the resort. Dane couldn’t shake that off. But couldn’t the news have waited until tomorrow? Couldn’t the Fates let them have tonight?

They would have broken all the rules. And he would have convinced her there was no reason to leave him because of it.

Cammie stuffed her arms into the robe, courtesy of Fernsby, that Dane held out for her and belted it tightly, letting the towel fall to the decking.

He pulled on his own robe. The champagne sat forgotten by the hot tub, the bubbles gone flat. Just the way he felt.

But he couldn't let what happened in the hot tub pass. Everything he wanted had bubbled over. He'd let loose. He couldn't rein any of it in again.

"We need to talk," he said with an authority he hoped she'd listen to.

She forestalled anything else he might have said, rushing her words. "What just happened in the hot tub shouldn't have happened. We both know it would have been a mistake."

"It's not a mistake," he insisted, even if he feared it was. Without the rules, and despite the new project, she still might decide it was time to hit the road. Especially now that Lochlan was no longer holding her here.

She shook her head, wet tendrils of hair escaping her topknot and sticking to her cheeks. "Twelve years ago, we were right to make rules. We're just going to have to get a handle on this. No more hot tubs."

"What about golf games? I seem to remember a kiss during a golf game too."

He was baiting her, he admitted it. But he wanted something more from her than a flat no.

Her nostrils flared and her lips thinned, as if there were so many thoughts whizzing around in her head that she didn't know what to do with them. "Maybe we shouldn't play golf either."

Now, that was going too far.

"No," he said, his voice emphatic. "I remember how good it was the first time. And I still want you now." He didn't talk about feelings. Feelings could scare her off. But the chemistry between them was undeniable.

She stepped back, putting physical distance between them as well as emotional. "We've always agreed that was a mistake. And we're not going to make another."

He wanted to grab her shoulders, get right down in her face and say, *Screw that*. After that kiss on the island, that sweet, sexy kiss that could have become so much more, even then he'd agreed about the rules. But no longer. Not after he'd felt how much she wanted him in that hot tub. Not after how badly he wanted her. Had always wanted her.

And now he was torn between losing her and wanting her.

His desire for her won.

"No," he said, claiming the step she'd put between them, her scent ratcheting up his emotions, his need. "I won't pretend it didn't happen. I won't say it was a mistake. On the contrary, that night was the best damned thing I've ever known. And I don't know why the hell we've had to wait twelve long years to do it again."

She stared at him for a long, agonizing moment while his guts twisted into a tight coil. That day at the barbecue, when he'd held her in his arms, he'd known then how much he wanted her, yet he'd still been pretending that all he could do was offer her comfort.

But he had so much more to give her. So he whispered, "I can make you feel so good."

That's when she ran.

* * *

Turning so fast on the deck she almost slipped, she felt him reaching out. If he touched her, she was a goner.

That day at Sebastian's, when Dane had wrapped his arms around her and held her close to his heart, she'd wanted to kiss him. But her desire for him had been a force inside her for so much longer than that. She'd wanted another night like the first. Dreamed about it.

But that was just fantasy.

And suddenly, because he didn't care about the ramifications, Dane wanted to change their status quo. *I know how this will go down. You can want something so badly you*

ache with need, but when you finally get it, it never works out the way you want.

He wanted to give her pleasure, to have sex with her, and yes, it would be out of this world. But then what would happen when she wanted more than pleasure?

She tried so hard not to slam the door of her bedroom, but once inside, she couldn't help herself. She locked it. Because Dane wanted to talk. And talking would lead to so much more. Because she simply didn't have the willpower to resist him—and, worse, to resist herself.

She slid down the locked door until her butt hit the floor.

He wanted her. He couldn't know what those words did to her, how much she wanted to throw herself at him and say, *Yes, yes, yes, I want it all.*

But he hadn't said he loved her. He hadn't even said he wanted a relationship. He'd said nothing of marriage, home, babies—all the things she'd realized she wanted desperately that day as she'd watched him with Savannah and Keegan, with Jorge and Noah.

It was so easy for a man to want a woman, but wanting didn't mean a relationship and love. How many women had Dane drifted through? He dated for a few weeks, sometimes even a couple of months, then moved on. He wasn't callous; he didn't *want* to hurt anyone. She was sure he was upfront that he didn't want a serious relationship. She was pretty sure he'd never been in love, not even before she'd met him.

She'd thought she was in love twice, yet in the end, both men hadn't felt the same. She couldn't make another bad decision, especially not with Dane. He was her livelihood. Even more, he was her best friend. Now that her uncle was gone, he was the closest person in the world to her.

Climbing into his bed would ruin everything because she wouldn't accept anything less than love the next time around. And if she put her heart on the line, he could crush her with only a few agonizing words.

She could never tell him how she felt. She could never ask for what she wanted. She couldn't even ask him what he was offering. Because if she asked for specifics, he would tell her he wanted a hot and heavy sexual relationship.

And that would absolutely kill her.

* * *

Dane followed her to her room, only to hear the lock click on her bedroom door. As if she were afraid of him.

All he wanted to do was make her feel good. He wanted to hold her in his arms, wake up beside her in the morning, open his eyes and see her face next to his.

But she'd run from him. Just the way he'd feared.

Maybe he'd jumped into the conversation too quickly. Tomorrow might have made more sense, when they'd both calmed down, and she'd had a chance to think about what she really wanted.

He could only hope it was him.

He dumped the robe in his room and pulled on sweats, then wandered along to the kitchen. He should tell Fernsby they hadn't eaten all the food. Fernsby could pack it up. Or eat it himself.

He stared at the door to Fernsby's suite just off the kitchen, exactly where the man had designated it should be. With a sitting room, bedroom, and bathroom, the suite also acted as an office, where Fernsby could sit at his desk to take care of the household accounts. Dane trusted him implicitly.

Fernsby had been with him for close to fifteen years, since the first resort. They knew each other's character, each other's foibles. But they never really talked on a personal level. He knew little about the man's past. And he would never ask Fernsby for details. A man had to *offer* his past, and once given, it couldn't be taken for granted.

If Dane had ever gone to Fernsby about any of the women he'd dated, Fernsby would have looked down his nose and

sternly said, *I'm your butler, sir, not your therapist.*

But these were desperate times. As much as his brothers and sisters were his best friends, as much as they were a team—not just in soccer but in life—he couldn't talk to any of them about this. If he'd been at a Maverick barbecue, he might have turned to Susan Spencer, but he couldn't wait even a week for the next one.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he knocked on Fernsby's door.

The man opened it still wearing his bespoke suit, even at this late hour. His face remained expressionless, though the number of times Dane had knocked on his door could be counted on one hand.

Dane finally spoke. "I need help."

Fernsby stepped back and waved his hand expansively, entreating Dane to enter. "Tell me what I can do, sir. And I will do it."

Yet Dane could almost feel Fernsby rolling his eyes. Except that rolling his eyes was beneath him.

So he said it. Because Fernsby was the only one who knew Cammie almost as well as Dane did. "I need advice." He breathed in. Then practically spat out the words as he exhaled. "Cammie and I shared a kiss on the island."

Was that a twinkle in Fernsby's eyes? He had to be mistaken. Fernsby absolutely did not twinkle.

Dane admitted the whole truth. "Then we kissed in the hot tub." Damn, this was humiliating. But Cammie was worth any humiliation. "Actually, it was far more than a kiss. It was romantic—the stars overhead, the bubbling water, the champagne, the feast you prepared."

Shockingly, he swore that Fernsby's eyes *did* twinkle.

Suddenly, he got it. "Damn it, you were setting us up." He pointed at Fernsby. "In fact, you've been trying to set us up for twelve years, haven't you?" He threw his hands in the air,

circled the room, and came back to Fernsby once more. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it.”

If ever there was a poker face, Fernsby wore it now. “I can neither confirm nor deny, sir.”

He didn’t need to admit it. That twinkle Dane had never seen before confirmed it all.

But now Dane had Fernsby right where he wanted him. “You need to help me. Because I’m afraid I’m going to screw up the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” He added, more emphatically, “I absolutely can’t screw this up.”

Fernsby, never one to swear, muttered, “Crikey,” in an East End accent Dane had never heard before. “I’m afraid you’re already screwing this up, sir,” he added with a completely straight face, as if he hadn’t just insulted his boss.

Although Dane sometimes wondered who was the boss and who was the employee, since Fernsby usually did whatever he wanted.

“Thank you very much, Fernsby,” he said dryly, almost as dryly as Fernsby would say it himself. “I’m well aware that my romantic skills are rather lacking.”

“Lacking?” Fernsby croaked, one eyebrow raised. “Shall we say *nonexistent*, sir?”

Dane harrumphed like Fernsby often did himself. “I’ll admit I haven’t had many examples.” His parents certainly hadn’t taught him anything about love, except to make him realize he wasn’t going to get it and should certainly stop expecting it.

“Shall we say no *good* examples?” Fernsby belatedly added, “Sir.”

“True,” Dane had to concede. “I’m not sure I know how to romance a woman. Especially not Cammie.” The women he’d dated hadn’t required romance. And he wasn’t sure he could give Cammie the romance she deserved. “There’re her emotions to worry about.” He absolutely didn’t want to hurt

her. "I'm not equipped with the proper skills." And he did not mean sexually.

Fernsby, once again the staunch and proper butler, said in his highly cultured British voice, "I'm very glad you came to me, sir. I will help you." That stretching of his lips couldn't possibly be a smile. "This is the task I've waited years to perform." He held up a hand. "Leave it to me, sir. I know exactly what to do." He narrowed his eyes. "You just need to say yes to anything I propose."

Fernsby might do anything he wanted to do, but he'd never before ordered Dane to do his bidding. This, however, was a special case.

Dane said, "On any other subject, I'd tell you to go pound sand. But this is about Cammie. If you think you can find a way to make her mine, I'll do whatever you suggest."

* * *

Fernsby closed the door. Then he did a little jig. He never jiggled in front of anyone. But this deserved two jigs.

He was quite aware that Dane hadn't said he was in love with Cammie. But Fernsby had known the man's feelings for years. How those two hadn't figured it out themselves was beyond him.

Yet Fernsby well knew that Dane hadn't mentioned *love*, using the euphemism of *romance* instead, because he was afraid of it. Because he didn't believe he possessed the skills to love Camille the way she deserved. After learning how his parents had abandoned their children to a series of nannies and flown off to God only knew where, Fernsby had realized long ago that *none* of the Harringtons had a clue about love or how to be good examples of it.

Thus, Dane had always held himself aloof from love. After fifteen years, Fernsby knew it all. There wasn't a single time Dane had left for an evening out with a female companion that he hadn't claimed the date was no big deal. It wasn't only

because of Camille either. Dane Harrington was afraid to open himself up to love. Afraid it wouldn't be reciprocated.

It was Fernsby's job to show his employer that he needn't be frightened of love, especially when it came to Camille.

He rubbed his hands together with glee. Because what he'd told Dane was the absolute truth. This was the job he'd been waiting for all his life.

And he never failed.

Well, perhaps once.

But he certainly wouldn't this time.

Chapter Nineteen

Seated at his desk in Pebble Beach only two days later while Cammie was out for a walk with Rex, Dane beckoned Fernsby in when he knocked on the doorjamb. “What can I do for you, Fernsby?”

Impassive as always, Fernsby said, “It’s not what you can do for me, sir, but what I can do for you.”

He paused for effect, forcing Dane to ask, “And what is that?”

“I’ve heard back from *Britain’s Greatest Bakers*, and I’ve made it through the first round.” Fernsby seemed neither elated nor downcast. As always, he showed no emotion at all.

Dane wanted to clap, but instead he merely said, “Congratulations, Fernsby.”

“Thank you, sir.” His butler went on, “They need to see how I appear on camera, so they’ve asked to interview me.”

Dane wasn’t sure how this was something Fernsby could do for him. Rather, it was the other way around. “So you need a couple of days off?”

Fernsby stared him down for a very long moment, then drawled, “They want to see me in England, sir. And Bradford Park is only a ten-mile drive from the site of this season’s competition. Therefore, I respectfully request that we spend a few days there for my interviews and screen tests.”

“Of course.” Dane waved his hand, giving imperious permission. “Stay at the manor house. Take whatever time you need. I know how important this is to you. But I’m not sure why I need to go along.” He tipped his head slightly in question.

Fernsby let out a long-suffering sigh. “Sir, I require that you and Camille travel with me. I’m going to be doing

interviews, a lot of them. I'll be talking with producers." He widened his eyes fractionally. "In fact, I'll rarely be at the house." He allowed a very pregnant pause.

Until Dane saw the light and lowered his voice, even though Cammie wasn't home. "This is part of the plan to help me with Cammie, isn't it? But I'm still not getting how the manor house will help."

Fernsby squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Did I not say, sir, that I will rarely be at Bradford Park?" He waited for Dane's lightbulb to actually turn on.

Dane should have gotten it the moment Fernsby had said he wanted both Dane and Cammie to fly to England. It was just that this was so unlike his staid butler. But he'd asked for help, and Fernsby was throwing him the bone he needed. Plus, Cammie loved the manor, loved the long walks, loved to tease him about his title, Lord Fuzzybottom or Lord Bumstead, or any of the silly names she made up.

"Fernsby, you're a genius. A few days at the manor will be perfect."

Fernsby winked, startling Dane still further. "I'm leaving it up to you, sir, to do the rest. I know you can. Because when you set your mind to something, especially if it's your heart's desire, you always make it happen. And I do believe Camille is your heart's desire."

Dane couldn't say why the words shocked him more than Fernsby's wink. Heart's desire? It was such a powerful image. He desired Cammie, had since the day he'd first seen her on the golf course.

Cammie was always the one to make sure he added heart to his projects. As though he had no heart at all. Yet his heart always beat faster when she was around. His mind and body craved more. And yes, his heart did as well. So much more.

Which was actually quite terrifying.

What if he laid everything before her—and it scared her off?

And yet... he couldn't go on with her only as his assistant. Or his project manager. Not even as his best friend. He wanted her. His heart wanted her.

Even as Dane reeled inside, Fernsby said, "Have no fear, sir. Everything you need will be at your fingertips. Because I've been planning this moment for twelve very long years." He stared down his long nose at Dane. "And trust me when I say, I've already prepared for the things you don't even know you're going to want or need."

But had he prepared Dane for his heart's desire?

Dane could only hope he had and that he showed not an ounce of his trepidation. "Why do you think I've kept you around for so long? You always know what I need before I know I need it."

Fernsby's expression was suddenly as satisfied as a cat who'd just wheedled a handful of treats when it wasn't even dinnertime. "I have faith in you, sir." As the man disappeared around the doorjamb, his voice floated back to Dane. "Get 'er done, sir," he added like a rodeo star.

Dane wondered if a paranormal entity had taken over Fernsby's body.

When Cammie bounded into the room only a short time later, still wearing her hiking clothes, she flashed him a grin. "What's up with Fernsby?"

He told her the partial truth. "He's made it past the baking show's first round. Now they want to do interviews and screen tests. I'm afraid we need to go to Bradford Park. The show will be filming only a few miles away, and he needs our moral support."

Cammie clapped her hands. "This is so exciting." Her eyes were bright as she bounced on the balls of her feet. "I *knew* they'd pick him. He'll totally ace any interviews and screen tests. And then he's going to win."

"Since he is the quintessential British butler, they'll love him."

But he couldn't forget everything else Fernsby had said.
His heart's desire.

She was beautiful and smart. She was dedicated and kindhearted. She was loyal. She was his best friend. He'd never known a more caring woman in his life.

He felt the phantom touch of her fingers on his cheek, the imagined sweetness of her kiss on his lips. Now that he'd tasted her again and felt the thrum of her body against his, there was no way he could go back.

He had to have her as more than his project manager, more even than his best friend. But how to tell her? He couldn't ask Fernsby for the right words. That was too much. He'd just have to tell her the unvarnished truth, that he wanted her, that he cared about her, that they'd be good together, that they could make a relationship work. No over-the-top declarations like he'd die if he didn't make her his. Nothing that would send her running straight back to the airport.

He'd tone everything down, tread lightly. Be calm, cool, and collected. Yeah.

Even if he felt like he'd go stark raving mad if he didn't make her his right this moment.

* * *

He'd gotten them to Bradford Park. Fernsby felt like doing another jig. Of course he wouldn't, not with his patron and the lovely Camille standing before him.

"I will leave you both now," he said formally. "I must go forth and battle for top dog over that person who shall remain unnamed." Digbert might be butler for the inestimable Mr. Westerbourne, but Fernsby would still wipe the kitchen floor with him.

She knew exactly of whom he spoke as a battle light glowed in Camille's eyes. "I can't believe *he* made it into this round too. You're going to trounce him."

She was a feisty one, always ready to go to war for the ones she loved.

Fernsby drawled in his most unaffected voice, “Rest assured, Camille, I’ve got him. You can count on that.” He stretched his lips as if they might want to smile.

“Digbert is going down,” she said, pounding her fist into her palm. Then her eyes widened, and she put a hand over her mouth. “Oops. I said the unmentionable name.”

Fernsby nodded his forgiveness. He was sure the only reason his nemesis, Clyde Westerbourn’s ignominious butler, had entered the contest was because he knew how badly Fernsby wanted to win. Digbert was that kind of dastardly villain.

Dane appeared to stifle a laugh. “He certainly doesn’t bake as well as you do.”

Fernsby almost snorted, refraining only at the last moment. “That’s never been a question.”

“And you’re much more congenial than he is,” Camille added.

Fernsby was well aware he didn’t have a congenial bone in his body. That was part of his charm. “Have no fear, dear lady, I will win.” He would fight to his dying breath to make sure Digbert didn’t best him.

But there was so much more on the line than Digbert, more even than winning a baking contest. There was Camille and Dane’s happiness. He had it all set up—the best champagne, the most delicious food, all Dane’s and Camille’s favorites, and beautiful flowers gracing the table. He’d turned the house into a romantic getaway for two.

Dane wanted this despite any fears he might have. Sadly, they were two people who couldn’t see what was right in front of their faces, let alone written in the stars. So this was up to Fernsby. And with the romantic stage he’d set, they would have to succumb.

He knew it in his gut just as strongly as he knew Digbert hadn't a prayer of beating him.

Getting these two together was truly his life's work.

Suitcase in hand, he stood in the flagstone entrance hall and said severely, "Please don't forget to feed the dog while I'm gone." Then he left them to it.

He was right that Dane and Camille were meant to be. Because he was Fernsby. And he was right about everything.

* * *

Cammie wasn't tired, since she'd slept well during the flight. But she was starving after the drive to the manor. "Fernsby said he left food. What do you think it is?"

"Let's check out the dining room." Dane held out his hand. "Shall I escort you, my dear?" he asked in a fair imitation of Fernsby.

As her stomach rumbled, she couldn't resist. Especially when Dane laughed. His laughter was like sweet wine in her blood.

Champagne chilled in a silver bucket, and flowers bloomed in a magnificent centerpiece. The sideboard was laid with an array of delicacies—tender slices of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding with gravy, roasted vegetables and perfectly crisped potatoes. And, of course, there was an English trifle for dessert, topped with a mountain of whipped cream.

"Oh my God, my favorite," she gasped. "I missed the roast beef and Yorkshire pudding at the signing party, and I haven't had it since last year. How did he do all this?" Awe dripped from her voice. "He was on the plane with us the whole time."

Dane was already popping the champagne cork and expertly pouring two flutes. "He must have made calls with very explicit instructions on exactly what he wanted and how it was to be prepared."

Handing her a glass, he raised his own in a toast. "To us."

It hit her then. “This smacks of romance.” She put a hand on her hip. “Did you put Fernsby up to this, Lord Badboy?”

He smiled. “I may resemble that.”

She spoke in her sternest voice, though she would never be able to emulate Fernsby properly. “We talked about this in San Francisco. We have our rules.”

“I heard all your reasons why we still need the rules.” Dane raised an eyebrow. “But I’ve changed my mind.”

This was bad, really bad. He could make her lower all her defenses. And then her heart could very well be crushed. “But you can’t change your mind. All my reasons are still valid.”

He pulled out her chair, then snugged her closer to the table when she sat.

If her stomach hadn’t rumbled again, she might have jumped right back up and run out of the room.

“Are they?” he asked softly. Then he took her plate and began to fill it at the sideboard. “Let’s put that to the test.”

She was terrified to ask how.

He gave her a bit of everything she most desired—slices of rare roast beef, a gravy-laden Yorkshire, vegetables, and mouthwatering roast potatoes. As he set the plate in front of her, she couldn’t help breathing in the heavenly aromas, somehow breathing in his scent as well.

He plated roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for himself, and the moment he sat, she dove into hers, because, honestly, she couldn’t wait.

“You’re totally right. This is a very romantic setting.” He waved a hand over the table. “Delectable food, good champagne, beautiful flowers. We’re all alone.” He smiled roguishly. “I just made my move. But I’m not going to haul you close and kiss you again.”

She couldn’t help but wish he would.

He held her gaze like a hypnotist, stealing her ability to look away. “And since I already know we’re meant to be together...” He raised his glass. “The next move is yours.”

If this was a contest, she couldn’t let Dane win. Her heart was at stake. “My move isn’t coming. I won’t give up the perfect relationship we’ve had all this time for a romance that will potentially fail and ruin everything.”

There. She’d said it. Even as her heart cried out with how badly she wanted what he offered, she couldn’t go through another heartache. Especially not a heartache over Dane.

He calmly cut into his tender beef, chewed, swallowed, his eyes on her the entire time. Until finally, he said, “I’m not willing to risk failure either. But since I know we won’t fail, I also know there’s no risk.” He speared a forkful of Yorkshire pudding dripping with gravy. “I have feelings for you, feelings that haven’t gone away for twelve years. I know we need to be together. And I know we can make a relationship work.”

He wasn’t talking about *just* sex. They knew each other too well for it to be only about sex. Of course he had feelings. But he hadn’t said *love*. Instead, he’d used the word *relationship*. But a relationship could mean so many things. *Feelings* and *relationship* didn’t necessarily add up to love. It certainly didn’t mean marriage. It couldn’t even be called permanent.

Besides, they already had a relationship that worked.

She could sleep with the billionaire. She could revel in his attention. But it would all come tumbling down eventually. It was the age-old story of the secretary having a fling with her boss. And who ended up out in the cold? Always the secretary.

Dane had made this switch so fast, after only a couple of sexy, heated kisses in a hot tub. He wasn’t a bad man; he was full of integrity. But when Dane Harrington wanted something, he went for it. And when the initial drive was satisfied, he moved on to the next project. She didn’t want to be the next project he left behind.

She didn’t want a broken heart.

She didn't want to lose the only thing that had any meaning in her life—her relationship with Dane, just the way it was. No changes, no deviations. It was better to keep the beautiful thing she knew rather than risk everything on a fleeting affair, no matter how dazzling, that couldn't last.

Chapter Twenty

Since I already know we're meant to be together, the next move is yours.

Dane waited for her to say yes. But everything she felt was written in the strained lines of her lovely face. She didn't believe a relationship with him could work.

He wasn't even sure himself. Could anyone be sure? Until he'd met Susan and Bob Spencer, he hadn't believed it was a possibility.

The only thing he knew for certain was that he couldn't go on with Cammie the same way he had for twelve years. But what if he pushed too hard and ended up pushing her away? If he confessed all his feelings, that meant he was asking her to declare herself too. Then the pressure was on. Essentially, he'd be putting his heart in her hands, and she'd be expected to do something with it.

That very expectation could make her run.

He'd thought about this all the way to England, picked apart his feelings, his thoughts, his heart. It wasn't that he feared for his own heart. His fears were all about putting pressure and expectations on her.

After the hot tub, he'd admitted that first time with her had been the best damned night ever. And he'd just admitted his feelings had never gone away. He'd even admitted Fernsby was right, that she was his heart's desire.

He couldn't say *nothing*.

Finally, he whispered, over tender roast beef, over mouthwatering Yorkshire pudding, over trifle and flowers and champagne, "Tell me why you think it won't work."

* * *

The compassion in his voice brought her close to tears.

Cammie had never talked with him about her love life, but even though they hadn't discussed it, he knew of one bad relationship she'd had. He couldn't know, however, what had happened when she'd been Clyde's assistant.

There were men who lied to women to get what they wanted. Dane, of course, had never been that type. He'd always built her up, telling her what a great job she did, how she organized his life, how he'd be nothing without her. She was his idea genius.

And he was as honest as they came.

But she knew men who thought nothing of spinning a web of lies, or of the devastation they left behind. Maybe in telling Dane her story, he would understand why she couldn't go through it all again with him.

"I made two big mistakes." The trifle sat untouched in her bowl. "The first time was when I'd worked with Clyde for about three years." She sighed, looking up at the ceiling a moment. "And Rufus Mayhew came into our lives. I was twenty-one, still living at home and looking after my uncle, since he was in the early stages then. Between work and Uncle Lochlan, I hadn't dated much." Actually, she hadn't dated at all.

Toying with her cloth napkin, she wished it were paper. Then she'd have the satisfaction of tearing it to shreds. But even if she couldn't look at him, she owed Dane her story. "He was beautiful. I was innocent. I had no idea what men were like. He took me to the best restaurants, bought me wonderful gifts. He was older, and he was magnetic." She'd cared so much, and it hurt to think about how naïve she'd been.

Dane's eyes were flinty in the candlelight. If Rufus had been standing there, he'd have punched him in the nose, she was sure. Yet something more lurked in his gaze—perhaps an ache, though for what exactly, she couldn't tell.

She had to clear her throat. "I fell for him completely. If he'd asked me to marry him right then, I would have handed in

my notice to Clyde and said yes.” She closed her eyes, put her hands to her flaming cheeks, her skin hot against her fingers. “He didn’t start pumping me for information until about two months into our relationship. I had no idea what he was doing. He said he just wanted to know about everything I did during the day so he could feel like he was with me when I was working. And he helped me with Uncle Lochlan, coming to the house, playing card games with us. He seemed so kind, so caring. I had no idea that all he wanted was information about Clyde. Things he could use to make money off him.”

She was so ashamed, she wanted to cry.

Dane laid his hand over hers on the table. “It wasn’t your fault. He took advantage. He stole your innocence. You’re not to blame.”

She whispered, “Yes, he stole my innocence.” And then she admitted, “In every possible way.”

The hard glint in Dane’s eyes turned into a burning flame. Like a gallant knight, he’d have thrown Rufus out on his butt. After running him through with his sword.

But she had yet to admit her full culpability. “One day, a deal of Clyde’s went south. Someone had gotten wind of what he’d planned and stepped in to subvert him, obviously taking the profits for themselves.”

Dane squeezed her hand so tightly it would have been painful if it were anyone else’s touch. “It. Wasn’t. Your. Fault,” he said succinctly, each word its own sentence.

“I was so excited for Clyde’s big deal.” The words seemed to rush out of her then. “It was going to be wonderful. And Clyde was so thrilled.” She stopped, held her breath, then finally made herself add, “And I told Rufus about it.”

“Even then, you still didn’t get it, did you?” Dane said softly. “You were still innocent. You had no idea there were people like that in the world.”

She sighed. “I didn’t have a clue.” It shamed her even now to think about what she’d done. “When I was in Clyde’s office,

and he was railing that no one knew about the deal except him and his lawyers, I suddenly saw it. *I knew about the deal.*” She put a hand to her chest. “And Rufus knew because I told him.” Her soul felt like a bleak landscape as she remembered that day, realizing Rufus had used her information against them. “I had to admit to Clyde what I did.” She swallowed hard. “He didn’t even yell at me. He just said that when we’re young, it’s hard to know who to trust and who not to.”

“Did Clyde ever do an investigation?” That’s what Dane would have done.

“He found a shell company that eventually led back to Rufus Mayhew.” That was her shame. And her broken heart.

A menacing growl rose up Dane’s throat. “I hope Clyde crushed him.” But even as he fisted one hand, he stroked her knuckles gently with the other.

But her story wasn’t over. “I realized right then I had terrible taste in men, and that no matter what, they would find a way to screw me over in the end.”

Except Dane. He’d never screwed anyone over.

“Then I met you on the golf course. And we... you know.” She shrugged painfully. Though it had been only one night, she’d once again chosen the wrong man. Even if she hadn’t known it. Her shock the next day when she’d found out he was the man she was interviewing with had been like a body blow she couldn’t recover from. “But Clyde was leaving, and I desperately needed the job to support my uncle.”

“That’s why we needed the rules, wasn’t it?” Dane said for her. He sounded almost as sad as she’d felt that day.

“It was clear I was so bad at choosing who I slept with that my judgment couldn’t be trusted.”

“But what we did was amazing.” His gentle declaration was both poignant and sweet, thrilling her and saddening her at the same time. He traced a finger across her knuckles. “There was nothing bad or wrong about it. It wasn’t a mistake.”

“I know it wasn’t wrong. And you weren’t one of my bad mistakes.” She shook her head. “But it was never going to work out either.”

Now that she’d revealed her first shameful secret, why bother holding back the rest? “I dated after that, but if anyone got serious, I cut them off.” She slashed a hand through the air. “Just in case I was making another bad decision. I swear, I never told anyone anything about your business.”

He sat back, his dark brows scrunching together. “How could you think I’d ever believe you would? I trust you absolutely.”

“Even now? After what I did for Rufus?”

“You were the innocent. You didn’t do it *for* him. He was the monster who *used* you.” He balled his fist. “If he were here...” He let the sentence hang. Then he whispered, “You said you made two big mistakes. Tell me about the other guy.”

“It was five years into working for you,” she said, so softly he leaned in close to hear.

Five years after *their* night. Five years of their rules. Five years of watching him date so many other women.

It cut her every time she’d set up a dinner date for him or sent roses to another of his ladies. She’d torn herself apart wondering if this one could be *the one*. But she’d chosen the job and her uncle over anything she could have had with Dane. She’d made the irrevocable decision the day she’d walked in to discover that her prospective employer was the man she’d slept with the night before. The man she would have to work for. The man who was a hot property to every woman who came sniffing around.

And especially to her.

So she’d ordered the gifts and made the reservations and wrapped herself in cellophane so tight nothing could puncture her.

And she’d been doing that for twelve years.

* * *

Dane's heart tied itself into knots. She'd bared her soul to him, and he knew what that cost her. In so many ways, she was a very private person. He'd never known about Rufus Mayhew. Clyde had never said a word. Perhaps Clyde had thought Dane wouldn't hire her if he knew. But he would never hold an innocent young woman's mistake against her, especially when Dane knew how very much Clyde trusted her.

Clyde obviously knew she'd never make the same mistake again. But she'd learned so much more. She'd learned not to trust at all.

If she'd never met Rufus Mayhew, would things have been different twelve years ago? Would they have made the same rules the next morning? Or would they have thrown out the rule book completely?

But Mayhew had happened, and Cammie had received an almost mortal wound. Yet she'd recovered. And she'd remained strong.

She'd said it was five years after coming to work for him before she allowed herself to fall for another man. That would have been before she'd moved Lochlan and sold the house.

Five years. Which made it seven years since the Rufus Mayhew debacle. Didn't they say things turned in seven-year cycles?

And now it had been another seven years.

She'd never told Dane about this second man, but he'd known something was up. He'd become used to reaching her almost immediately whenever he needed her, even in off hours, but she'd stopped picking up the phone right away. Sometimes she'd even had to call him back. She'd dressed up a bit more, wearing slightly more low-cut blouses—nothing untoward. Her skirts, though still circumspect, had been a little tighter, showing off her curves. Curves he couldn't help salivating over. She'd worn a little more makeup, and her lipstick had become bolder.

Now she told him the whole story. “He was actually a very nice guy. Arlo Doyle. He’d worked for Uncle Lochlan before my uncle had to retire. Arlo came to the house one day, and Uncle Lochlan lit up. He talked as if nothing was wrong—not a single sign of dementia.” She looked at Dane. “You remember how bad he got seven years ago, when I had to put him in memory care?”

Dane nodded. He remembered so well her trauma over the decision.

“But he was himself again. The uncle I used to know. For days afterward, he remembered everything they’d talked about even though Arlo had been there only a couple of hours. I actually thought I must have imagined the shift in him, that he couldn’t be as bad as I thought.”

“I understand completely. I had a similar day with my grandfather.”

An old school chum of his grandfather’s had come to visit. The man had known him before the war, before he’d changed. And for that one day, Grandpa had been a completely different man—the man he must have been when Dane’s grandmother married him, when he’d been fresh out of college, with hopes and dreams the war had yet to destroy.

Dane still treasured that glimpse of the grandfather he’d never known.

Cammie nodded. “I thought I could make the phenomenon happen again, so I invited Arlo over.” She closed her eyes, and Dane reached for her hand once more. “But I couldn’t duplicate it,” she whispered.

He stroked her warm skin before he withdrew and let her go on.

“Uncle Lochlan liked Arlo so much. And I thought he was sweet. Then he asked me out. I said yes. I didn’t intend for it to get serious.” She blinked away what might have been a tear, so it didn’t fall. “He told me right away that he was separated, not divorced yet, but that he’d left his wife a few months

before. I appreciated his honesty. And he was so good to me. We laughed together. We watched movies together. He liked all the old classics the way I do. We went to that old theater on University Avenue in Palo Alto, the Stanford, where they played classic movies, and we saw *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Margaret O'Brien, who played the little sister, gave a talk before the movie. It was amazing. We had pizza afterward."

His heart flipped over, and he had to admit he was jealous. Binge-watching classic movies was their thing. And he was incredibly sad that he hadn't been the one to take her to see Margaret O'Brien and *Meet Me in St. Louis*.

She shrugged. "Anyway." And she left it at that.

He wanted to see her laugh. But they had to get through this. He didn't ask if she'd slept with this Arlo. He accepted that she had. And he didn't rage inwardly, since he'd skated through his always brief relationships.

She pressed her lips together for a moment, before she finally got out, "Then he told me his wife wanted to patch things up. And that she was pregnant."

Her words tore a hole in the pit of his stomach. "I'm so sorry."

Even now, she straightened her shoulders. "I kept my dignity. I didn't cry. I was very proud of myself," she said with the barest of smiles. "I told him, 'Go back to your wife for the sake of the child.'" She waved a hand as if she were shooing a phantom away. "'And if you need a good family therapist, I'll find you the best one. I'm good at finding what people need.'"

That's what Cammie always did—found exactly what a man needed right when he needed it.

"It was a thousand times worse than Mayhew, wasn't it?" he said, not wanting to hurt her, but realizing she needed to get it all out, that she wanted him to understand why it could never work between them.

"You see, she was only three months pregnant. And we'd been dating for five." She swallowed. "Which meant he'd

slept with her while he was with me. He'd been playing both ends. Maybe he hadn't meant to." She shrugged her shoulders as if giving Doyle the benefit of the doubt even now. "But it made me realize I wasn't—" She paused.

He knew exactly what she'd been about to say. "But you *are* good enough. He was a two-timing ass."

Her eyes were bleak. She was back in that moment, feeling the pain all over again. The first guy she loved had only wanted her for Clyde's contacts and his business acumen. He was a leech, a thief. The next guy had been on the rebound. He might not have meant to screw her over, but he had. And in between, there was Dane himself, seducing her on a golf course, taking her back to his condo, and making love to her that very night. Rushing her. Pushing her.

And the next morning, allowing her to make up all the rules that would keep them apart for twelve years.

He should have told her right then how he felt—though truthfully, he hadn't known the extent of it.

But he wouldn't believe it was too late.

"Remember when you brought me those flowers?" she asked.

He nodded.

"You knew how hurt I was even though I tried to hide it from you."

"I knew. And I hurt here." He put his hand over his heart. "So badly for you."

"Then you brought T. Rex into our lives." She sniffed. Though no tear tracks traced her cheeks, he knew she was crying inside. "I'd just come out of the office restroom, where I'd been crying, when you walked in with a big box and two coffees from the corner café." She laughed, though it was shaky. "And you said some lady outside the coffee shop was giving away puppies."

He smiled with the memory. “I couldn’t resist those sad puppy-dog eyes.” Just as he couldn’t resist Cammie. He’d known something was terribly wrong, and he’d been pretty sure it involved a man. He’d have done anything to make her feel better.

Her laughter came stronger now. “Then you said I’d need to help you figure out what to call him. And how to get him in and out of other countries when you traveled so you wouldn’t have to leave him behind.” Her eyes shone with her laughter, and he felt his heart beat normally again. “You gave me a task to take my mind off the bad stuff.”

She reached for him then, laying her hand over his. “Every time I think of how sweet you were that day, it makes me cry all over again. And you bought me that stuffed T. Rex after we named our puppy.”

“You’ve still got him too.” Dane had seen the puffy thing on her bed. It had been such a small thing to do, yet it made her smile. Even then, he’d wanted to make her smile.

She put her fingers to the corners of her eyes to wipe up the tears. And Rex chose that moment to pop up from beneath the table and put his paws on her thigh. Cammie tugged him onto her lap, and he curled into a ball, the way he always did when he thought she was sad. The way he had when she’d come home after her uncle died. The way he had that very first day when Dane brought the puppy into the office.

Dane told her what was in his heart. “I’ve always known when you needed me, even if you tried to pretend you didn’t.”

After a deep breath, she said, “It’s the same for me.”

He turned his hand over in hers and held on. He wanted to be right where the little dachshund was, his head cradled in her lap, her fingers running through his hair.

But he’d told her he would wait for her to make the next move, and if nothing else, he was a man of his word.

He knew, even if she didn’t, that her revelations were a huge step for her. And for him. She’d kept this locked inside.

And he'd never asked, though he'd known she'd been terribly hurt. She'd put herself out there, only to prove she wasn't good enough and that her judgment sucked. At least, that's what she'd told herself.

He understood now why it had been so important to her to ask for that promotion. It wasn't just about being more involved or wanting more responsibility. It was about her self-esteem, about finding the courage to ask for what she wanted. And she'd done it.

He wanted to pummel those two jerks into the ground for the way they'd treated her, but he was so damn glad the relationships hadn't worked. He would never do the same to her. He couldn't push her. He couldn't put expectations on her. He couldn't take control away from her.

Nor could they let things go on the way they had for the last twelve years. He had to be as honest as she had been. They both had their fears. And they both needed to move past them.

"Thank you for telling me all this. I understand so much better now." He wanted to pull her into his arms, but the time wasn't right. "We made up the rules that day in my office, and we've lived by them ever since." He waited until she looked at him again. "But those rules don't apply anymore. We need to throw them out. We need to change everything. We need more." He stood, stopped by her chair, put his hand on her cheek. "It's been a long travel day. Let's sleep on it." He kissed her forehead and whispered close to her ear, "I hope you'll dream of me."

He'd dream of her. He always had. He always would.

* * *

The sound of his footsteps faded as Rex snuggled into her lap. She'd thought Dane had been in the dark about her affair with Arlo until that big vase of flowers had appeared on her desk. She remembered asking, "Who are these from?" She'd brushed aside the leaves. "There's no card."

Dane had stood before her with not so much as a smirk on his face and said, “You must have a secret admirer.”

But she’d known it was him. He’d never taken credit for any of the nice things he’d done for her. For how he’d helped her uncle. Even in giving her the promotion when she asked for it, he’d blamed himself for not having promoted her long ago.

Maybe that day, as she’d cried her eyes out in the bathroom, she hadn’t been crying so much for Arlo and the way it ended, but for the way Dane had always seen inside her, even the things she hid from him. Maybe she’d been crying out of gratitude and longing and a sense of regret. What if, the moment she’d walked into his office the morning after the golf game and seen the man of her dreams, she’d told him right then she couldn’t work for him because she wanted to be in his life as far more than an assistant?

If she’d found the courage to ask for what she wanted all those years ago, what might have been?

Chapter Twenty-One

True to his word, Dane left her alone. After sipping the last of the champagne in her glass, Cammie picked up Rex. He hadn't moved except to lift his head when Dane left the room.

She carried the dog up the wide manor staircase to the first landing, where a portrait of some naval hero took pride of place on the wall. There the stairs separated, going up each side. She took the right-hand stairway, heading to her room. She kept clothes and other necessities at the manor and hadn't brought much with her. At the top, her door stood open.

She had a fleeting wish that Dane would be waiting inside.

But when she stepped across the threshold, the room was empty. After she set Rex on the bed, he curled into a ball, falling asleep right away. He would stay there all night as if guarding her, where he could jump up at a moment's notice.

In the bathroom, she wiped away her makeup and the residue of the long day.

A voice inside told her the truth. *Dane always comes to me when I really need him.*

When Arlo betrayed her, Dane had recognized her distress and surprised her with flowers, then the cutest puppy in the world.

Now that she thought about it, he had the office space on the Peninsula because of her. He would have been more centrally located for business if he'd been in the city. But he'd chosen that location so she wouldn't have a long commute and could drive home quickly if her uncle needed her. Right after she'd put her uncle in memory care and sold the house, Dane had given up that office. Then he'd offered her a place in each of his homes—always a massive suite that was as big as an apartment. He'd helped her pay for her uncle's care.

He'd done so many kind and thoughtful things for her, many of which she hadn't even recognized. When she'd called him with the news that her uncle was near the end, he'd rushed to her side without hesitation. He'd stayed with her, held her, comforted her.

She pulled her flannel pajamas from the bureau. Even though it was early May, English nights could be cool. She climbed into bed, then tugged the covers to her chin. Wrapping her arms around the stuffed dinosaur—of course she'd brought it with her—she hugged it as if it were Dane, while Rex curled into the crook at the backs of her knees.

So many times, Dane had gone above and beyond for her. He was her best friend, always there. At the barbecue, he'd noticed she was feeling bad and followed her into the house. He'd held her so tenderly, never asking a thing from her. Her grief at the time had been all about him, about realizing what she wanted from him, about knowing what she'd never have. But he'd thought she was grieving for her uncle, and he'd held her.

He said they could make a relationship work. But they had such a good working relationship now. She lay in bed, not thinking about that night or how beautifully he'd made love to her, but about the intervening years.

And she saw everything he hadn't said. He hadn't said he loved her, yet she could see now he'd actually told her in a zillion different ways. Even if he didn't realize it himself. She couldn't live without him. She needed his big, beautiful hugs and his steady reassurance that told her how special she was to him.

She could go on being afraid that it might end badly. That she wasn't good enough.

But what if their relationship *wasn't* damaged? What if he *could* love her?

Lying in her lonely bed, she spoke aloud. "We've both been such dummies."

And she left T. Rex sleeping peacefully.

* * *

Dane paced the room, strategizing like an army general. “By God, I will not fail at this. She will be mine, and I’ll be hers.”

He wanted nothing more than to race down the hall and knock on her bedroom door. To make love to her the way he’d thought about all the years they’d lived under the same roof, and even before. To feel her skin beneath his fingertips, her lips against his, her body taking him to all the places he’d dreamed of.

But she needed to make the next move. He knew in his gut it was the only way it could work. He could knock on her door, and she’d probably let him in. She’d probably even let him make love to her again if he pushed.

But that would be her *letting* him. Him *pushing* her. Instead of her wanting it as urgently as he did. And choosing what she wanted.

He was thinking so hard he almost didn’t hear the soft knock. Then he thought it had to be his imagination. But who wouldn’t let his fantasy walk right through the door? He hurried to answer it.

She wore the most adorable flannel pajamas with polar bears all over them. They made him want to gather her up and kiss her senseless.

But she was already talking. Even as badly as he wanted to shower her with kisses, he needed to hear every word.

“You’ve been my whole world for so many years,” she told him, her eyes wide, their soft jade color darkened almost to emerald.

His body wanted to burst into flames. His heart wanted to soar into the night.

“In every way but one.” Her gaze traced the contours of his face. “And I’m ready—really, really ready—to fix that.”

After only one step into his room, she added, “You’re the missing piece of my puzzle.”

If a heart could burst wide open and spill over the floor at her feet, his did right then.

He got everything she was saying, totally. She’d thought of him for the past twelve years, just as he’d dreamed of her. She hadn’t said she loved him. He couldn’t say he loved her. But he could show her in every way possible.

He grabbed her up in his arms, holding her tight. His hands on her rear, she hooked her legs around his waist, and he whispered, “You have no idea how many nights I’ve dreamed of this.”

She bent her head for a kiss so gentle and so sweet, it felt like butterfly wings caressing him. Then she opened her mouth and delved deep into his inner being. A wealth of emotion, so much bigger than anything he’d ever felt in his life, welled up inside him. And he took her mouth as if he’d never kissed anyone before, as if she was the only one he’d ever kiss again.

Memories were supposedly so much more poignant than reality. You built them up in your mind, turned them into something reverential. Yet her lips were softer than they’d ever been. Her skin beneath the pajama top was smoother than he’d ever imagined. Her legs around his waist were tighter, begging him, owning him before he’d even entered her.

He felt more powerful than he ever had in his life as he carried her to his bed.

“Nothing could be sweeter than your taste.” He let her fall to the bed and came down on top of her. She was so delicate beneath him and so strong.

He’d heard her siren’s call for the last twelve years. And now he would make her his.

Her eyes were bright in the dim light of the lamp by the door, but he wanted more light. He wanted to see every inch of her. The last time, they’d done things in the dark. But he never

wanted to be in the dark with her again. So he reached past her to flip on the bedside lamp, bathing her in soft golden light.

“I want to touch you everywhere. I need to taste every part of you.”

She blinked. And then she whispered, her voice husky, sexy, “What are you waiting for?”

A piece of him wanted to go absolutely wild. But another, bigger part wanted to slow everything down and savor each moment.

“It’s going to be so much better than before.” He reached between them and flicked open the buttons of her polar bear pajama top. Instead of going for the gold, he trailed his fingers across her cheek, nibbled the tender flesh of her lobe, licked the shell of her ear.

Cammie shivered, reminding him of how much she liked that, how delicate and sensitive her ears were. With one last lick and a warm breath, he whispered, “There’s so much more of you I want to see.”

He kissed her neck down to the slope of her shoulder. He licked the hollow of her throat, and lying between her legs, he felt her thighs tighten around him in need.

They hadn’t talked much the last time, but now he wanted nothing more than to hear her voice. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll do it.”

Her words were a hoarse murmur. “Touch me.”

He trailed his fingers to the tip of her breast, circled the tight bead until she gasped. “Taste me.”

Then she pushed him, her hand on the back of his head, guiding him down to where she wanted him. And that was something totally new as well. Before, she hadn’t told him what she wanted, either with words or actions—but then, he hadn’t asked.

“Anything you want.” He looked up at her as he moved down her body. “Everything you want.”

He closed his lips around the pearl of her breast, sucking her into his mouth, worrying her with his tongue until she writhed beneath him.

She gasped. “Dane, please.”

As he spread her pajama top wide, he moved to the other peak, taking it deep, reveling in her breathy whisper of his name. Twelve years ago, there’d been no names, and it had been freaking sexy. But this was so much hotter. And he was so much harder.

“Every inch of you,” he whispered.

He tasted, licked, caressed all that beautiful, smooth, delicate skin, from her breasts all the way to her belly button, where a gentle lick made her laugh.

Her laugh could make a man lose everything.

Then he reached the tie of her pajama bottoms. And he looked at her.

He hadn’t asked permission last time. And he didn’t need it now—at least, not the words—because her scent told him how ready she was. But he wanted her to ask. He needed to know they were in this together.

“Tell me what you want.” Shifting slightly to the side, he laid his hand just above her sex.

“I want you to pleasure me. I want it so badly,” she said on a shaky breath. Then, on a whimper of need, she added, “If you don’t do it, I’ll have to do it myself.”

Amazing visions floated through his mind, of her dreaming of him, of all those nights when she’d been just down the hall from him. Of her needing him, imagining that it was his touch on her body. Of her crying out his name.

He should have known, should have felt the power of her thoughts. Maybe he had. Maybe that’s why he dreamed of her every night. Yes, every single damned night since she’d come to work for him. Even if he’d told himself it couldn’t possibly be that often.

He slid off the bed, kneeling between her spread thighs as Cammie propped herself on her elbows to look at him.

She hadn't watched all those years ago. She'd loved it, lost herself in it, but she hadn't watched. And there was something so hot about her gaze on him now, something so erotic.

He slowly drew the polar bear pajamas down her legs, throwing them aside until only her panties remained. The damp patch between her legs beckoned him, and instead of tearing them off, he leaned over her, breathed warm air on the fabric, covered her with his mouth. She ground against him, and he took her that way, right through her panties, reveling in her taste, her scent, her moisture, her heat.

As sweet she'd been then, she was sweeter now. As wet as she'd been then, she was wetter now. As hot as she'd been, she was on fire now.

He couldn't wait another moment. Ripping the panties off her, he took her with his lips and his tongue the way he'd dreamed of so many times.

* * *

Cammie cried out his name the moment his mouth found her and his tongue delved deep.

He'd been so good before—no one had ever been better. His touch had burned itself into her brain. His taste had lived inside her, his scent filling her head whenever she closed her eyes and thought of that night.

But his mouth on her now was like nothing she'd ever felt before. Maybe it was all the years she'd dreamed of it. Wanted it. Needed it. He clamped his big warm hands on her derriere and lifted her so he could taste more and more of her.

And she watched, relishing the sight of his dark head between her thighs, his closed eyes as he drank her in, his powerful shoulders spreading her thighs wide. Entering her with two blunt fingers, he flipped her world upside down. Just the right touch. So perfect. So—*oh my God*—

His mouth buried against her, he opened those blue, blue eyes.

And she exploded, crying out his name, chanting, “Dane, Dane, Dane.”

She’d made sounds for him before, moans, groans, sighs, but now, with his mouth on her, his fingers inside her, his tongue playing her, her cries slammed up into the ceiling, raining down on her again.

And she came for him endlessly.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was like believing she'd been awake all along, only to realize she'd sleepwalked through her entire life.

He ran his mouth over her thighs, kissed her hot skin, worked his way up her body until he held her in his arms, kissed her. It was like a communion, his taste and her taste mingled, creating a whole new flavor she'd never before known.

"I thought I remembered how good it was," she whispered, looking up into his beautiful blues. "But I never remembered it like *that*."

He chuckled, stroking her hair back from her temple and cupping her cheek. "I've imagined it all a thousand times." He dropped a kiss on the corner of her mouth. "And it's never been this good."

Her heart rolled in her chest, upside down and right side up again. He was still there, still holding her, still gazing at her with what she told herself could only be love. Even if he hadn't said the word. He would—one day, he would.

She trailed her hand down his chest. He'd been shirtless when she knocked on his door, and she followed the arrow of dark hair down to the waistband of his sweats. "You have on way too many clothes. And I'm nowhere near done with you yet."

He gave her the Harrington lady-killer smile. This time, it was all for her. She wouldn't think about how it had been for anyone else, ever.

He stood, grinning. "I can remedy that ASAP." He stripped, the soft sweats sliding down his legs until he stepped out of them.

She could only breathe out a simple exclamation. "Oh my."

Of course she remembered how stunning he was. They swam in the Caribbean all the time, as well as his Pebble Beach pool. And there'd been the hot tub on his San Francisco terrace. But now the room's lamplight painted his sculpted muscles with bronze, and his tight boxer briefs cupped him intimately. The way she wanted to cup him.

His male beauty stole the breath from her lungs, until she grew dizzy from lack of air. And from her need for him.

He circled a finger at her. "You're still wearing polar bears."

She laughed, and pushing herself up, she shimmied out of the pajama top. Then she sat on the edge of the mattress and tipped her head back to look at him. "Let me do the rest. I want to unwrap you like you're the most precious gift I've ever received."

Desire flickered in his eyes. No, need. Need was wholly different from desire. It was a flame that burned inside him, sparking an answering flame deep within her.

Reaching for him, she slipped her fingers inside the elastic of his briefs. Slowly, ever so slowly, she rolled the fabric down. First, it was just his crown. Her mouth watered. He was so hard. So ready. He could take her now. She wanted that.

But more than taking him inside her, she needed *this*.

Inch by inch, she revealed all his hard, male splendor begging for her touch, her lips, her tongue.

Could it be possible he was even bigger than she remembered? Maybe it was knowing each other so much better now. Inside and out. The emotion growing right along with the physical, making everything bigger, brighter, better.

The briefs fell to the floor, and he stepped out of them. She could have tasted him then, but she wrapped her hand around him, felt the weight of him, the thickness, the length.

His guttural rasp rolled down to her. "Please. Don't tease me."

She looked up into his burning gaze. “I am so done teasing.”

The last twelve years had been one long, agonizing, exquisite tease.

And now it was over.

She bent her head and wrapped her lips around his crown, sucking for a long moment, loving the gasp and groan that exploded from him.

He swore, and she loved that too.

For long, incredible moments, she licked him, tasted a drop of his essence, swallowed it, and wanted more.

Then she swallowed all of him, taking him deep.

Shoving his fingers through her hair, he swore and growled. “Please,” he begged.

For what? For her to finish him? For her to throw herself back on the bed and beg him to take her?

Memories of the last time were suddenly so clear to her. All she’d known after he’d taken her to the peak with his mouth had been the need to have him inside her. She hadn’t done *this* to him.

But now, she savored the taste of him, the feel of him between her lips, the tremble in his limbs, the tautness of his muscles. Gripping him in one hand, she squeezed his thigh with the other, her nails making small dents in his flesh.

If it was even possible, he grew bigger, harder, filling her mouth.

Until he pleaded, “Let me come inside you. I need that. I want that. I have to have it. Please. Cammie.” Then he swore again.

She let him slide from her lips, sucking hard one more time, and looked up at him.

Then Dane said the thing that could have made the moment fall completely apart. “If I know my butler, he’s left a necessary little packet somewhere around here for us.”

But she wouldn’t let the *necessities* ruin anything, and she stood then, went up on her tiptoes to wrap her arms around his neck. “I’m on the pill.” She didn’t explain it helped her cramps. “I don’t need the little packet if you don’t.”

He looked at her with eyes such a vivid blue she thought he could see all the way to her marrow. To her heart.

“I haven’t been on a date since you went on family leave,” he said. “I couldn’t. Not while you were dealing with everything. All I could think about was you. That’s why I called you on video chat all the time. So there’s been no one else for so long. I want to feel all of you. And I want you to feel all of me.”

Her heart burst wide open. She hadn’t wanted to think he’d been out there dating nameless, faceless women while she’d sat by her uncle’s bedside. And she’d savored every one of those nightly video chats.

“Then don’t make me wait another second,” she whispered against his lips.

He twisted then and fell back on the bed with her on top, his skin caressing her from breast to thigh.

“I feel like I’ve done this a thousand times,” she told him. “Every night in my dreams.”

He tangled his fingers in her hair. “In my dreams, it was just me inside you and nothing between us.” Then he pulled her down for his kiss, that unique combined taste—him, her—filling her up.

She wanted to taste it for the rest of her life.

He let her go, whispering, “Take me. All of me. Please.”

Looking into the ocean-blue depths of his eyes, into the flames burning there, she felt as if the words meant so much

more than just the physical. They offered up his heart and his soul too.

And she took him.

* * *

She came down on him, taking him deep. And he felt as though she was the home he'd always longed for.

He groaned as she threw her head back, letting out a long, low moan of need and pleasure.

Then she leaned forward, bracing her hands on the bed, her lips only inches from his, her hair falling over him, her breath sweetly bathing him. "I want slow. Real slow. Until I need it fast."

"Take me any way you want me."

He wondered if he'd always been the one to take, if he'd never given. Except that one night with her. How could he have been so blind? But maybe that was why this joining was so precious. Because it had taken so long to get here. Because he'd dreamed away the last twelve years.

And now she was real. *This* was real.

The short glide she performed on him was enough to drive him completely out of his mind. He wanted his hands on her hips, wanted to slam into her, to roll her beneath him and thrust so deep they both saw stars.

Yet, even more, he needed whatever way she chose.

As she rolled her hips on him, she moaned, her eyes drifting closed as she lost herself in the pleasure. The slow ride was exactly what her body craved. She tensed around him, released, again and again. And threatened to blow off the top of his skull.

"That is so good," she said in a voice he'd only ever heard once, that night, in the throes of her passion.

He wanted to hear that voice forever.

Eyes closed, she whimpered, chanted, “Oh, oh, oh.”

His gut knew what would make this even better. Reaching between them, he put his finger on the tight button between her legs. And he stroked her.

The chanting stopped, taken over by groans of exquisite pleasure and of her desire for him. Only him. He knew it, felt it in every clamp of her body around him.

Her legs began to quiver, and her arms, supporting her on the bed, trembled. Her eyes scrunched closed, and her breath fell in sharp gasps from her lips.

He remembered those sounds. He’d heard them every night for twelve years. And he remembered how excruciatingly good that night had felt. Yet now, with all his senses heightened, he felt every vibration of her body, her tension rising, dragging him with her. His own blastoff was so close, it took every ounce of willpower to hold off, to wait for her. This was altogether different from before, so much more—the slip-slide of her against him, on him, the way she gripped him so tightly, the way she lost herself in ecstasy.

She bowed her head, puffed out her breath, fast, harsh. Then she cried out as her body clamped down on him. He felt her orgasm as if it were his own. With barely a rational thought, he rolled her to her back, pulled her legs up around his waist, and pounded into her. Her whole body vibrated, her beautiful rose-gold hair flying across her face, her mouth open, gasping out her satisfaction in two words. “Don’t stop.” Then three more. “Please don’t stop.”

He couldn’t have stopped even if the world were ending around them. He took them both to a place they’d only glimpsed the last time. And prayed they would stay there forever.

* * *

Her words came out part laughter, part tears. “That was...” She couldn’t complete the thought.

He finished it for her. “Exquisite.”

She nodded. “Yes. That’s it. Exquisite. Stunning.”

“Life-altering. Mind-blowing.”

“Out of this world.”

“Freaking unbelievable.”

They laughed together. She rolled her head to meet his gaze as she lay curled against him. “Are you trying to outdo me with words?”

He shook his head, grinned. “I could never outdo you, sweet lady. You drive me crazy.”

She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. “Is that a good drive-me-crazy or a bad drive-me-crazy?”

He rolled on top of her. “It’s the most amazing crazy I’ve ever felt in my life.” He kissed her quick, even though she wanted him to linger. “And I only want it to get crazier.”

Then he rolled off and strolled into the bathroom, his butt muscles rippling.

He was so beautiful. So perfect.

She crawled to the bottom of the bed, searched for her panties, and was stepping into them when he returned. “Come on, Lord Lazybones. I’m starving.”

He grinned like a naughty kid. “Me too, Lady Lazybones.”

She loved the banter. She loved being lady to his lord. They dressed, then ran down the stairs hand in hand, giggling like children.

The kitchen was state of the art, yet it still had a touch of the old, with the range built into the ancient hearth and the refrigerator designed to look like an old-fashioned icebox. Sitting on stools at the granite counter opposite the sink, they finished the rest of the roast beef, Dane feeding Rex the tidbits Fernsby would yell about.

Narrowing his eyes, Dane said, “I’m still hungry.”

She found a Sainsbury's packaged fish pie in the freezer and heated it up in the microwave. Seated once again at the counter, she smiled. "I like eating junk food sometimes. It's so deliciously salty."

He grinned. "I agree, but you still taste better." And he pulled her off the stool, angling her to stand between his legs.

Kissing her, he slid his hands beneath her pajama top, cupping her breasts, tweaking the tips until she groaned. Then he slipped into her waistband and palmed her bottom. Not to be outdone, she glided inside his sweats, pulling on him to stand up long enough for her to slide them down to his ankles.

"Get on the counter," she demanded.

He happily agreed while she sat on the stool between his legs. She made love to him with her mouth until he begged her to stop. Then he hauled her up on the counter and spread her thighs, thrusting between her legs and touching her in every perfect spot until she was the one who screamed.

And of course, they couldn't let it end there.

* * *

Dane couldn't count how many times they made love in the night. He held her close, waking up hard and ready against her backside. Lifting her leg over his thigh, his fingers deep inside her, he played her for long moments until she cried out, shattering. Then he entered her, taking her hard and sweet. And the taking was mutual.

Waking to bright morning sun breaking through the slit in the curtains, he wanted nothing more than to stay there with her forever.

Except that she wasn't in the bed.

It couldn't have been a dream. Not like he'd been dreaming all these years.

He went in search of her and found her in the kitchen, where she'd already made coffee and toast.

Over the delicious aroma of rich coffee, he could smell her, that uniquely sweet and spicy scent that could only be Cammie.

And he wanted more of her, right there on the kitchen countertop where he'd had her last night.

* * *

Over slightly burnt toast, Dane said, "That was amazing."

Cammie almost faltered. "It was awesome," she agreed.

But why did everything have to look different in the morning light?

They drank coffee and ate their toast slathered with marmalade. She popped two more pieces into the toaster, one for each of them.

And he didn't say it.

"Fernsby won't return for a while. We should go back to bed. Or maybe take a shower." He winked.

She stared at him for a long moment. And somehow managed to laugh. "We can't let T. Rex miss his morning walk."

He grinned. "Then after the walk."

After last night, she'd expected him to say it. She wanted him to say it. And somehow it was like a knife stabbing straight through her heart when he *didn't* say it.

Dane would never lie. And that was the problem. He wasn't going to say anything he didn't truly feel. He would be honest. He wanted her. He desired her. Maybe he even needed her. And yes, deep down, she thought he loved her.

But he couldn't say it.

And didn't that mean they were right back where they'd been before she'd knocked on his door last night? Right back where they'd been all along? With her wanting more than he could ever give?

* * *

Okay. He could handle this. He wanted to go back to bed and make love to her all over again. Make her scream all over again.

But she wanted to take the dog for a walk.

All right. He could deal with that. He wouldn't pressure her. Especially after last night. He couldn't push her and ask if what they'd done last night meant as much to her as it did to him. Last night, she'd said he was the missing piece to her puzzle. He'd taken that to mean so much.

But maybe it hadn't meant as much as he wanted.

That was okay. He'd give her time. He wouldn't push. He wouldn't make her run away. And tonight he'd take her to bed again and show her over and over how much she meant to him.

But that would be tonight. For now, he said, "You know, we really need to hire an assistant for you. With you being in charge of the new project, we're going to need more help. I'll start looking for someone."

He couldn't read her expression. It was suddenly flat, not a single indication of what she was thinking.

Then she smirked. "Oh, no. I'm choosing my own replacement."

She put both hands on the counter and levered off the stool. "I'll take a shower and get dressed. Then I'll take Rex for a walk before we get to work."

Just like that, in the space of a moment where he hesitated about what to say, she was gone. He watched the empty doorway through which she'd disappeared.

Mentioning the assistant had been his way of giving her time. And letting her know she was his equal. It hadn't been a way to avoid talking about his feelings.

But she was running away. Even though he could swear he hadn't pushed her. But maybe he'd pushed over dinner, telling her the next move had to be hers. Setting up an expectation. And she had made her move. Except that this morning, she regretted it.

That day after the Maverick meeting when he'd thought she'd been about to quit on him was the closest to a heart attack he'd ever come.

Don't push too hard, don't ask too soon, just play it low-key.

All he could do now was wait and see. Even if the wait might kill him.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Cammie couldn't flat out ask Dane, *Do you love me?* She just couldn't. It would break her to ask. She'd laid her heart on the line last night when she'd told him he was the missing piece to her puzzle. What else could that mean except that her heart was only complete with him in it? Yet, even as perfect as last night had been, as out of this world, he hadn't said he loved her.

Was Dane even capable of love after his upbringing? His parents had pretty much abandoned him and all his siblings when they were young. Something like that left irreparable damage. If that were so, they didn't have a chance.

It hurt her head to think about it.

Sitting at her computer, she busily searched for an assistant for them both while she managed the special needs resort. The office suite, formerly the library, was a darkly paneled room, with bookcases floor to ceiling, a massive fireplace, and only two smallish windows looking out on the garden. Which made the entire room dark.

She could barely concentrate.

Especially with Dane sitting at his desk busily throwing a rubber ball for Rex. The dog went crazy, running into walls, rolling across the carpet, sliding on the hardwood that wasn't covered by the rug. At any other time, she would have laughed at T. Rex's antics. And Dane's.

But it wasn't any other time. It was the morning after he'd made glorious love to her.

And she could think of nothing else but why he hadn't said he loved her.

The slam of the front door made them both jump.

“Good God,” Dane said, sitting up straight. “That can’t possibly be Fernsby.”

Of course it wasn’t. Fernsby would never slam a door. Yet who else could it be?

A moment later, the man himself stood in the office doorway. Grinning. The man who never smiled was actually *grinning*.

“I’m one of the contestants on the show.” His fist moved as if he wanted to punch the air and only barely held himself back. “I beat that scourge of the earth, Digbert.” He laughed, a raspy sound, as if his throat muscles didn’t know how to laugh. “He actually made *croissants*.” Glee trickled through his voice. “How did he get past the first round? Even one of your sister’s vegan monstrosities would have been better.”

Cammie had never—absolutely never—seen this side of Fernsby. It was uncanny that sheer happiness had freed him. Or had victory over his nemesis brought it out?

She wasn’t about to miss this opportunity. Not for anything.

She jumped out of her chair and hugged him.

Then, miracle of miracles, Fernsby, the staid, stern butler, waltzed her around the library.

Who even knew the man could dance?

* * *

Dane had expected Fernsby to start in on him the moment he walked through the door, pulling him aside to ask what the heck had happened with Cammie. Because they obviously weren’t all lovey-dovey the way Fernsby had predicted. They were still miles apart at two separate desks.

If Fernsby even noticed, he didn’t say a thing. He was too happy.

Fernsby and *happy* had never before gone together in his lexicon. But Fernsby danced Cammie around the library, his

face lit up with irrepressible joy.

Dane must be dreaming. Or it was a nightmare. He couldn't tell which.

Suddenly releasing Cammie, Fernsby seized Dane, waltzing him around the room just as he'd waltzed Cammie.

It was like something out of *My Fair Lady*. The horror remake.

Yet Dane couldn't help laughing—loud, uproarious sounds welling up his throat.

Fernsby grabbed Cammie again, whirling them both hand in hand as if they were dancing around a maypole. Until Fernsby abruptly let go, and the only way Dane saved himself from falling was by latching on to Cammie and dancing across the floor with her.

All he wanted to do was hold her close, kiss her luscious lips, and drag her upstairs to his bed.

The maniacally happy Fernsby—or maybe just maniacal—danced his way out of the room. Cammie pulled away from Dane.

And that was that.

* * *

Fernsby stopped outside the door, overhearing Camille say, "I'm so happy for him. But we still need to find that assistant."

He'd given them the most romantic setting, the perfect food, the best champagne, all of it whispering romance into the air. And now... nada.

Fernsby muttered, "A butler's job is never done."

What had he said to the Mavericks? Ah yes, that he was the only butler who could handle a boss too big for his britches.

Dane obviously still needed a kick in the pants.

* * *

Maybe he should have carried her upstairs the moment Fernsby frolicked out of the library. Or kissed her senseless. Maybe waiting her out was a mistake.

But his cell rang. Cammie pushed him toward the phone lying on the desk. “You’d better get that.”

He grumbled, wondering if it was just an excuse to pull out of his arms.

But then he looked at the screen. “It’s Daniel Spencer. It must be three o’clock in the morning back home. What the hell?”

Her eyes widened. “It’s got to be important.”

He put the phone on speaker and demanded, “Why are you calling me at three in the morning? You should be sleeping.”

“Because I knew you were in England,” Daniel said, as if that revealed everything. “And this can’t wait. I’ve been going over the numbers all night.”

“Which ones?”

“I’ve found the perfect property right on Lake Tahoe.” He laughed, sounding as if he were buffing his fingernails on his shirt. “We all agreed that Tahoe is healing—the beautiful waters, the clean air—and that we want a place relatively on its own away from the big casinos.”

“Tell us everything,” Cammie said, Daniel’s excitement vibrating all the way across the air waves and grabbing her. Or maybe that had been the dance around the library.

“It’s on the waterfront with an amazing stretch of beach and its own dock. It backs into the forest, with hiking trails, and there’s a ski resort and snow park close enough to send kids on bus trips for the day.”

Cammie pelted him with questions. This was her show. “What’s on it now?”

“An old resort, defunct for ten years. There’s sewer, power, all the infrastructure.”

Cammie gasped, hand over her mouth. “Are there any hazardous waste issues? Asbestos?”

“Nothing disclosed. Though we’ll still do a survey. It’s on the market only because a real estate development company was renovating, and they’ve run out of money. We’ll probably need to tear down the existing structures and start over, but that’s no big deal. That’s what the development company should have done instead of working with what was already there. You run into all sorts of trouble with that. But we need to jump on this now. It won’t last long.”

Dane leaned over the phone, fists on the desk. “We’ll get right on the plane and head back to you ASAP.”

“Good. Like I said, this won’t last long.”

“Thank you, Daniel,” Cammie added, smiling at the phone as if Daniel could see her. “I knew you’d find the perfect spot.”

“It’s what I love to do. I can’t wait.” Then he was gone, probably wanting to get to bed after pulling close to an all-nighter.

Dane wanted to waltz around the room all over again.

“Let’s get packed.” He looked at his watch. “We can be on our way in ninety minutes.”

Then he’d have a ten-hour flight to work on her.

* * *

She stared at Dane. So smart, so competent, so assured. But this was her project. If Dane went along, everyone would defer to him, just as Daniel had called him instead of her even though Dane had already informed the Mavericks that she was in charge.

If he was there, she’d look to him for approval the entire time.

She had to take charge. Without Dane as backup. Otherwise, she’d always be Dane’s little assistant.

Even more than proving to everyone else that she was good enough, she needed to prove it to herself.

That made her straighten her spine. She *was* good enough.

As Dane headed for the door, she said, “Since I’m one hundred percent in charge of this project, I have to take charge of it completely. Which means I have to do this myself.”

He stopped dead and looked at her. “What does that mean?” His voice sounded bewildered, his brow scrunched in puzzlement, his head tipped slightly, as if he were Rex asking why Dane had stopped throwing the ball.

“Can you understand?” She paused a long moment. “I have to do this without you.”

* * *

He was doing it again. Holding her back. He hadn’t given her a promotion years ago. And now, he was rushing to do the very thing she needed to do herself.

Yet he couldn’t help asking, “You don’t even want me to fly home with you?” He sounded like a little boy begging her not to leave him behind. The way he’d so often begged his parents when he was young.

But this was different. He had to tell himself that.

“If you do, we’ll talk about it the whole way, and my plan will turn into your plan.” She put her hand to her chest. “This needs to be all me.”

“Of course it does,” he said softly, wanting so badly to touch her and knowing he couldn’t. “You’re right.” Then he picked up his phone. “I’ll make the arrangements. You go pack.”

She looked at him one long, last moment and whispered, “Thank you.”

As she walked out of the office, he shoved away the thought that if he let her go now, it would be for good.

But sometimes the only choice you had was to set a person free to do what they needed to do. And pray it led them back to you.

He had to set her free, like so many of the animals he'd nurtured when he was a kid. And pray she'd return. Even if none of the creatures or the people he'd loved before ever had.

* * *

Cammie had finished packing. She hadn't brought much, since most of what she needed was already here. She snapped the carry-on closed and hefted it to the floor. Rex lay on the bed, looking up at her with the saddest pair of eyes she'd ever seen. Sort of like Dane had downstairs. The dog whimpered as she pulled up the bag's handle.

She scratched him behind the ears. "I won't be gone long. I promise."

The dog licked her hand as if saying he understood.

"Are you going somewhere?"

She jumped at the sound of that deep, stern voice. Bracing herself, she faced Fernsby in the doorway and said, "Daniel just called. I'm heading back to California. He's found the perfect property in Lake Tahoe, and I need to see it. Since I'm managing the project, it's my job and my decision."

It was funny, or odd, how Fernsby just seemed to know things without being told. He knew all about the new resort and her promotion.

He raised his hands to applaud her. "You'll do a smashing job, Camille. I'm very proud of you." His expression turned even more grave, if Fernsby could actually be more grave than usual. Except when he was waltzing. "I must talk to you before you go. In private," he added ominously.

Her heart dropped all the way to her toes. A shiver ran through her bones, and she trembled like a teenager at boarding school being brought before the headmistress. Fernsby had never asked to speak with her privately before.

She wondered if she'd come out of this alive.

And she tried to forestall the dressing-down. "But the plane is waiting."

Daniel had called back to say he'd chartered a plane for her and would meet her when she arrived in California. She couldn't take Dane's plane, of course. How would he, Fernsby, and Rex get home?

But Fernsby said unequivocally, "The plane will just have to wait."

What choice did she have? When Fernsby made a demand, you had to obey.

"Is it about the baking show? You want to make sure you can have the time off? Dane's totally behind you on this." She prayed that was what Fernsby wanted to talk about.

He'd been so out of character this morning. Something was going on.

But Fernsby merely strode across the room and squished his tall frame into an armchair. Then he pointed to the other chair on the opposite side of the table, where she liked to read.

She had no option but to sit.

And Fernsby began. "Once upon a time..." He paused for effect.

Cammie stared, wide-eyed.

"There was a woman." He gazed at her with unblinking gray eyes. "I made a mess of it."

Oh yes, this was totally out of character. His sudden soul-baring made her twitch. "I'm so sorry." She didn't know what else to say.

He looked at her, his silvery eyes silencing her. He would say what he had to say no matter what she did. "I have never spent a day when I didn't regret losing her." He held his hand up, almost as if he were examining his fingernails. The hand where a gold band might have rested. "If I could change that, I

would in a heartbeat.” That couldn’t be a smile twitching on his lips. No, not Fernsby, despite his display in the library. “I know you don’t believe I actually have a heart.”

She had to refute that. “Of course you have a heart. You absolutely adore Rex. And I think you love Dane too.”

If Fernsby was capable of an eye roll, which she didn’t believe, the expression in his eyes could have been just that. “I don’t like dogs. I don’t even like people.” He waited a beat of the heart he claimed he didn’t have. “But I will admit to having a soft spot for that.” He pointed at the bed where Rex lay, giving him the evil eye. “And I have a soft spot for Mr. Harrington.”

Good Lord. Fernsby admitting to a soft spot? Unheard of. She knew it existed, just as she knew his heart existed, but to have him say it aloud?

“As I was saying.” He looked at her, his gaze adding the words *before I was so rudely interrupted*. “If I could go back in time and change things...” He didn’t finish the sentence. “But I can’t. I had so many reasons it wouldn’t work. She had so many reasons it wouldn’t work. By the time you get to my age, you realize all those reasons are poppycock.”

Cammie wondered how old he really was.

“The truth is that we were just afraid to fail at love. And now I see you doing the same thing to yourself.” He gave her another stern look. “Please don’t make my mistakes. We both know the truth about where you belong.” His pause closed around her heart. “And who you belong with.”

She didn’t know what to say. Was there really anything *to* say? Fernsby had actually been in love. Once upon a time. It was almost unfathomable. Even more unfathomable was that he’d told her about it. She felt like Alice in Wonderland. Was Fernsby the Cheshire Cat? Or the Mad Hatter?

“Fernsby,” she said, trying to keep her voice as calm as possible and not sure she accomplished it, “I’m afraid you might be misreading things.”

He raised one long finger and wagged it at her. “You and I both know the truth. I realize you wish to deny it. Just like I wanted to deny the truth all those years ago. But while you’re gone, I want you to think about everything I’ve said.” His hard gray gaze made her shudder.

She wanted to tell him that she knew exactly what she wanted. She just wasn’t sure Dane wanted the same thing, even after they’d made love. Because that wasn’t the same as *being* in love. And what if Dane could never admit it? She couldn’t discuss any of that with Fernsby. She certainly couldn’t admit they’d made love last night. That was beyond the pale, even after Fernsby’s uncharacteristic confession.

Fernsby stood then to tower over her. He intoned like a judge on the bench, “I have faith in you. You will know what to do when you come back.”

Then he rolled her suitcase out of the bedroom.

What if he was right? What if she was just afraid to fail at love?

* * *

A car waited in the driveway, ready to take her to the airport. Fernsby had already laid her case in the trunk.

There was nothing to do but walk away. And yet, she couldn’t. She and Dane had left so much unsaid.

Cammie turned to find him right there, so close she could breathe him in. He gazed at her with his heart in his eyes. At least, she wanted to believe that.

He cupped her face in his big hands. “I know you can do this,” he whispered. “I believe in you with every fiber of my being.”

Then he kissed her—the sweetest, most beautiful, most heartfelt kiss she’d ever known. It wasn’t dueling tongues and passionate lips. In its simplicity, it was so much more. It was the splendor of what they’d done last night and the tenderness of his arms around her as her uncle lay dying. It was the

thoughtfulness with which he bought her flowers when her heart was crushed and the sensitivity when he eased her pain by bringing her the cutest puppy ever. It was the purity of friendship.

When he stepped back only an inch or two, she said, “Thank you for understanding that I need to do this on my own.”

He brushed his lips across her forehead. “Of course you do. I should have seen that without you telling me.”

Then she climbed into the car and let it carry her away from him.

God, how she loved that man. Turning in the seat, she looked back at him, still standing in the drive long after Fernsby had gone inside.

She’d wasted the morning being angry with him for not saying the words she wanted to hear. They could have made love again.

But she knew he loved her. He understood what she needed, and he accepted it. If he didn’t love her, he could never have let her go. Dane liked to be in control. He was always smack in the middle of everything. He was a decision-maker.

It must be killing him to let her make this tremendous decision without him.

It was another of the many reasons she knew he loved her, knew it straight through to her heart and deep into her soul.

As the car turned the corner on the long, long drive, Dane disappeared behind a hedgerow, and the manor house vanished from view.

She needed to complete this deal. She didn’t have to prove herself to Dane. She had to prove it to herself. He’d mentioned once that he’d held her back, but she was the one who’d held herself back.

Not anymore. This deal was hers.

Then she'd return and persuade Dane to admit he loved her, that he couldn't live without her.

Exactly the way she felt about him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

With that tender kiss, he let her go. He'd played it cool, hadn't pushed. He understood why she had to do it. But he couldn't help the fear. What if she didn't come back? Or what if she did, and they had to start over again from the beginning? What if she didn't quit, but wanted the rules reinstated? Or even added new ones to the list?

Dane had barely closed the front door behind him when Fernsby attacked.

Though with Fernsby, the word *attack* was relative. He was his usual severe self—gone was the impish man who'd waltzed around the library—and a light burned in his silver-gray eyes that turned them to ice.

“Sir,” he said with a hard edge like a slap, “it’s obvious you have FUBARed the entire operation.”

If Dane hadn't been so miserable, he would have laughed at Fernsby's use of the WW2 acronym. But it was true. Dane had effed up beyond all recognition. Though he wasn't sure exactly what he should have done.

Fernsby was on a roll. “I did my part.” He waved his hands in the air. “No details, sir, but you clearly did something wrong. Because the two of you are *not* together.” He enunciated each word sharply. “And I'm not talking about the fact that she's off to do this amazing new job, which we both know she was meant to do. And at which she will excel.” If possible, Fernsby grew even taller, until he was almost Dane's height. “I saw the two of you before I entered the library. It was obvious.”

It was obvious even to Dane. “I told her I wanted us to be together.” The flagstone floor beneath his feet suddenly felt incredibly hard. And cold.

Fernsby eyed him critically. “Did you get down on one knee and tell her she is the perfect woman for you?” When Dane shook his head, he went on, “Did you tell her she is the most important person in your life?”

He said very quietly, “No.”

Fernsby spoke without raising his voice. His frustration was all in his clenched fists. “Did you tell her you love her?” The words were said in capitals and underlined five times. “Or did you just tell her you wanted to have sex with her?” More capitalized words, with extra-extra underlines.

Dane fought back. “I certainly did *not* tell her all I wanted from her was sex.”

Fernsby’s wrinkled brow and glowering gaze said, *What the hell did you say, you imbecile?* But he only asked, “Do you love her, sir?”

There was only one answer. “Yes, I do.”

“Do you love her with every cell in your body?”

The answer was simple. Just repeat. “Yes, I do.”

Fernsby exhaled like a fire-breathing dragon. “Then why can’t you tell her, man?” Not *sir*, not *Mr. Harrington*. Not *Lord Bradford*. Not even *Lord Braindead*.

Dane had no choice but to admit the truth. “Because I don’t want to push her so hard she runs away.”

Fernsby’s head jerked slightly, like an automaton who suddenly understood its programming. “Haven’t you figured out that not telling her how you feel is the exact thing that *will* drive her away?” His lips flattened into a grimace as he added, “Sir.”

“But in my experience—” Dane stopped, not only because of Fernsby’s flesh-flaying glare.

“Camille is nothing like your parents,” Fernsby prompted.

You always want too much from people, Dane.

In his experience, people you loved always left. Especially if you loved them too much.

Fernsby said in the mildest tone he'd used yet, "Your parents were rather self-centered, in my opinion."

He knew that. He'd said often enough that they were bad examples. He'd blamed his siblings' lack of relationships on them. But even so, somewhere deep inside, he'd always thought that if he'd done something differently, his parents might have been different too.

Dane cocked his head. "Cammie knows how to love."

Fernsby stretched his lips in a facsimile of a smile. "She showed us that time and again with her devotion to her uncle."

"Where Cammie's concerned, there can never be too much love." Dane said it almost with wonder. As if the thought had never occurred to him before, when he'd actually known it almost from the day he'd met her.

The day he'd fallen in love with her.

Cammie would come back. Absolutely. But she'd only stay if he gave her his heart. If he had the courage to let his love envelop her.

He pounded his fist into his palm. "Damn it, I totally screwed up."

He loved her with all his heart. But for all he'd told himself he was protecting her, the truth was, he was safeguarding his own heart. "The other day, you told me she was my heart's desire. And she is. And yet—" He tore his gaze away from the flagstones and looked at Fernsby. "When it came right down to it, I didn't open my heart all the way for my own selfish reasons."

Fernsby looked on him now with something that might have been kindness. Which was so un-Fernsby-like it threw him off.

"Camille will always tread lightly upon your heart. She will never stomp it."

“I know that.” He shot out a determined exhale. “She and I need to be together. She’s my other half.” He remembered her words to him. “She’s the missing piece of my puzzle.”

Fernsby raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Thank the Lord you finally see that, sir.”

Dane didn’t have time to think about it. More important things were at hand. He hadn’t bared his soul to her. But she had given hers to him completely. That metaphor revealed her love for him. He hadn’t said it back. Instead, he’d tried to get out of it by showing her with his body.

“You’re right,” he told Fernsby. “I haven’t been honest. I didn’t tell her everything I felt about my parents.”

Sitting at the dining table last night, Cammie had told him of her fears, how hurt she’d been by the men in her life, how hard it was to put herself out there again. But he hadn’t reciprocated by revealing how hard it had been to grow up with parents who didn’t care. Or how hard it was now to lay his heart in another person’s hands. Even hers.

Yet that was what Cammie deserved to hear.

Standing taller, he vowed, “I’ll tell her everything. I’ll fly out there right now.”

Fernsby opened his mouth.

Dane held up a hand. “But... I know I can’t. She asked me to let her do this on her own. I have to abide by that. But when she’s done, I’ll be right there like a shot.”

Raising both arms, Fernsby seemed to strain forward, almost as if he wanted to waltz around the front hall the way he had in the library. But his hands dropped. And he said with a deep intonation, “A wise decision, sir.”

Dane could swear his eyes twinkled. Almost as if he were a fairy godfather.

* * *

Each minute that dragged by was torture. Dane had never been good at waiting. And every time the grandfather clock in the hall chimed out another hour, he wanted to shout—or punch something.

But as badly as he wanted to fly to her, he couldn't. For her sake. She needed this. He had to give it to her.

She'd proven to him how well deserved this promotion was, proven over and over again the full scale of her capabilities. She'd had the courage to tell him what she wanted, not just in his bedroom, but that day after the Maverick meeting when she'd asked him to promote her.

Still, he couldn't help constantly refreshing his phone, waiting for a text to magically appear.

Fernsby brought in a tray of something that probably tasted delectable. Dane didn't want even a bite as he stared at the screen.

Until Fernsby reached over the desk and tore the phone from his hands. "Sir, you must let her do this. This is what she's always needed. And she can do it."

After a harsh exhale that burned his throat, Dane said, "I know. But the wait is killing me."

As he raised a brow, the corner of Fernsby's mouth twitched. If Dane didn't know better, he'd say a smile was trying to claw its way out. Although the man had actually danced.

"You can't rain on Camille's parade, sir," Fernsby said, quoting the old song. "But there's no reason we can't fly home now and wait for her call there. That way, it won't take you so long to get to her."

Dane jumped up from his desk to throw his arms around Fernsby. "My dear man, you're a lifesaver."

Fernsby stepped back, brushing away the wrinkles Dane had left in his bespoke suit. "I've taken the liberty of informing your pilot," he said, nose in the air.

Dane would have hugged him again if Fernsby hadn't already been walking away.

"I knew there was a reason I kept you around all these years," Dane called after him.

Without turning, Fernsby raised his hand. Was that the man's middle finger? Then he looked again, and no, there were all his fingers, waving. Dane must have imagined it.

* * *

The jet was flying over the Rockies when Cammie called. And if Dane had ever doubted he had a heart, he knew it now, because it was just about ready to burst out of his chest.

Her voice was like a caress over every single nerve in his body. "It's a done deal," she said. Joy and triumph infused her voice. And maybe a bit of wonder too. She flew off into a soliloquy, her words almost merging together. "This place is perfect. It's got practically a mile of private beach. There's room for a baseball diamond. A volleyball court on the beach. Basketball, tennis, pickleball, just about anything you could think of, Dane. I walked the perimeter back by the trees and counted at least a dozen trailheads. There's even a trail up to a gorgeous waterfall. You're going to love it. I've already got contractors and inspectors en route, and as soon as we're done, I can come back to England."

She told him the price she'd negotiated, and Dane whistled. "You are brilliant."

He heard her smile all the way over the mountains. "I detailed for the developers all the work we'd have to put into tearing down existing structures, getting new construction permits instead of renovation permits, yadda, yadda. And suggested that perhaps we should look for something else that already had the structures we needed and necessitated only the barest minimum of modification." Then she laughed. "They had no idea how desperate I was to grab it before it was gone."

So excited for her, he blurted, "Damn it, you're freaking amazing, and I love you."

After a three-second silence, she laughed it off. “You always say that when I make the perfect deal.”

All right. She didn’t want to hear it now. But she would soon. Very soon. “Congratulations. Only you could have made this deal. You didn’t need my assistance at all.”

She whispered, “Thank you.”

Then, before he could blurt out everything he felt, because it simply couldn’t be done over the phone, he told her, “We’re on our way back, but I’ll have the pilot divert us to Tahoe.” He looked at his watch. “I should be there in a couple of hours.”

“You’re going to love it,” she told him.

“I already do.” She was talking about the property, but he meant so much more.

He’d fallen for her on a golf course. And he’d never recovered.

It had just taken him a long, long time to admit he never wanted to recover.

* * *

Dane had followed the sun home to her, arriving at the Tahoe airport by midafternoon. Fernsby took T. Rex to the hotel along with the bags, while Dane drove out to the site.

It was just as Cammie had said. Perfect. The property sloped down to the beach on the lake and far back up into the mountains. The sun was bright, the May day warm, the peaks still snow-covered. Tahoe had been blessed with a good snow year, and there was still skiing on the highest slopes.

The buildings were old, a seventies-style that didn’t fit the beauty of the land. Cammie was right, as was Daniel, that demolishing the existing structures and building a new resort that fit the landscape and the needs of its guests was the only way to go. The cracked and weedy parking lot was full of work trucks with a variety of logos, from contractors to demolition experts to inspectors. When he rounded one of the building’s crumbling cornerstones, he saw her.

Cammie wore a tailored suit that hugged her curves and made his mouth water. Not because it was sexy or revealing, but because it was her.

He'd never salivated over her. He hadn't let himself, because they'd had their rules. But now they'd broken every single one. His body knew it, his brain knew it, and so did his heart. His every cell wanted her. Not just in lust, but in need.

He needed her in his bed, in his life, in his heart. Forever.

Holding a clipboard, she was surrounded by a gaggle of men and women who hung on her every word. He overheard a smattering of phrases, like *hazardous materials* and *bringing things up to code* and *confirming sewer lines are sound* and *power lines are connected*.

His beautiful girl Friday directed, questioned, instructed. She was the capable, confident woman she'd always been. But she was a girl Friday no more. In fact, she'd never been his girl Friday. She'd always been in charge—of him, of his life, of his work, just as she was in charge of the men and women standing before her now. She was his idea genius and his right hand.

His partner.

And she charmed the group as easily as she'd charmed him from the moment he'd first seen her.

Why had they waited twelve years? But he knew the answer. This was how it was meant to be. They needed to be workaholic colleagues and best friends and equals. They needed to know each other inside and out.

They needed to love each other *before* they fell in love.

As he watched her now, totally in charge, respect gleaming in the faces of the professionals surrounding her, he realized this was what they'd been working toward. A partnership of equals.

With a smile and a wave of her hand, the group broke up, off to do the tasks she'd assigned them. He couldn't wait

another moment. Even as a contractor turned back to her with a question, Dane commanded her attention.

Before the man could open his mouth, Dane said, “Excuse us. We’ll be back in a moment.” Grabbing her hand, he pulled her into a copse of trees near the lake.

She looked up at him with her beautiful green eyes, perfectly at home among the wildflowers surrounding them. “What are you doing?” she whispered. “I’m in the middle of a meeting.”

“You have them completely corralled. They all have their tasks. You’ve set everything in motion and handled it all.” Still holding her hand, he said, “And now it’s my turn.” He went down on one knee in the moist, sandy soil.

She gasped. “You’re getting your suit filthy.”

“I don’t care.” Because a five-thousand-dollar suit was replaceable.

But Cammie, the love of his life, could never be replaced.

* * *

Cammie put both hands to her mouth. She wanted to laugh. She wanted to cry. This was everything she’d ever wanted. But she whispered, “Get up.”

He held her gaze a long moment, his true-blue eyes compelling. “Not until I bare my soul.”

“But, Dane—”

“Shh,” he whispered. Her heart wanted to burst.

Then he told her everything. “For so long, I was focused on taking care of the family. Clay and Troy and Gabby were so young when our parents died.”

She’d seen how hard he worked to make sure their needs were met. When she came to work for Dane, Troy had just won his first gold medal and was poised to win so many more. After attending night school, Ava had graduated from college.

Clay was a sophomore at university. And Gabby was heading for cooking school.

Dane had navigated all of that with his siblings, always cheering in their corner.

She said softly, “I know how hard you worked. You and Ava did an amazing job raising them.”

He’d given up so much to do it—his dreams of being a veterinarian, dropping out of college to handle the financial debacle his parents left behind, then working at a resort just to keep food on the table and pay for his siblings’ college educations. He’d worked so his siblings could achieve all their dreams while he had to give up his own.

“I admired you from day one,” she admitted. “Especially when I learned everything you did for them.”

He put up a hand. “I’d do it all again. They’re my family. But I could never give them the love of good parents, much as I wanted to.”

She wanted to drop to her knees and hug him close. “You gave them all the love they needed to help them grow into the most incredible adults.”

Something sparkled in his eyes. It might even have been tears. But she knew better than to point it out.

“The thing I couldn’t give them was the example of a loving family. Of parents who cared for each other, supported each other, parents who wanted to spend time with their children. Parents who inspired them. Like Susan and Bob Spencer.”

She held out her hand. And he took it. “Don’t you know you always inspired them?”

“But not in all the ways I wanted to. Look at them. Not one of them has had a meaningful relationship.”

“They have loving relationships with you and with each other.” She pulled him to his feet. He was just too far away from her down there on the ground.

Dane shook his head, his hair falling over his forehead. “But I could never show them how to love. Because I was afraid.” He put his finger to her lips as though he thought she’d deny it for him. “I drifted from woman to woman, never knowing what I truly wanted or needed.”

She squeezed his fingers. “You have so much love in you, Dane. Look at everything you’ve done for them. And everything you’ve done for me.”

His eyes melted to baby blue, sadness creeping into them. “I never gave you the piece of my heart you deserved.”

“Did you ever think that maybe I wouldn’t let you? That it was a two-way street? We had our rules because we both needed them. But you showed me how you loved me all along in everything you did for me and Uncle Lochlan. You moved me into your homes so I’d have more money to take care of him. You were always there, listening to me, comforting me. And you made it possible for me to make the last years of Uncle Lochlan’s life the best they could be.”

He laughed, a sharp sound in the quiet. “For God’s sake, I didn’t even give you the promotion you deserved. I never let you manage a project. And the worst is that I didn’t even realize you truly wanted to.”

All she could say was, “Dane, please.”

He shook his head as he barked out his anger with himself. “You deserved so much more than I gave you. You were the one who showed me how to put heart into all my projects. That wasn’t me. It was all you.”

“You always gave me everything you could.” She wanted to throw herself at him, hold him. But he had to let all his feelings out before she could.

He shot out a harsh breath. “I didn’t give you my love. And Cammie, I’ve loved you since the moment I met you. I loved you that first night. If you hadn’t come into my office the next day, I would have searched heaven and earth to find you. I should have told you that the moment you sat down. I

don't know why I didn't. Maybe I couldn't recognize what I felt back then. Maybe I knew all along I'd screw it up."

He tightened his fist; she was afraid his nails would break the skin of his palm.

"If I had been a better man, I would have offered you not only the job, but also myself." He tipped his head back and closed his eyes as if the spring sun burned his irises. Then he looked at her again. "I have fallen more in love with you every day since. And every day, I told myself we had our rules, the perfect working relationship. That you were my best friend. That I shouldn't ask for more. Because I didn't believe I deserved more. There's always been a part of me that believed that my parents ran away from *me*." He laid his hand over his heart. "That somehow, I didn't know exactly how to go about loving, and I pushed them away because I smothered them. I never wanted to smother you."

She laid her hand over his and whispered, "You've always had a huge heart. And you could never have loved your parents too much. Real love can't smother. They were the ones who let you down."

He nodded. "I figured that out. Yesterday. After you left the manor." He smiled. "And with a little pep talk from Fernsby."

Cammie laughed. "He gave me a pep talk too."

Then he said the thing she'd craved to hear for twelve long years. "I love you, Cammie. And I don't care about our damned rules." He held her hand in his, right over his heart. "I know we can't possibly screw this up. Because I love you too much. I want you too much. And I will do everything in my power never to disappoint you. To always hold you close. To think of you first, to love you, to be the man you deserve."

She wanted to throw herself at him. "And I love you because you've always had heart. You didn't need me to show you that. You've always deserved love. I've always known how focused you are on taking care of the family and what a

terrible example of love your parents gave you. But you learned how to love in spite of them.”

He smiled, his heart shining in his eyes. “Now you know everything there is to know about me.”

“I’ve always been afraid of losing what I had,” she admitted. “I needed the rules because I was afraid to risk. I was afraid of not being good enough. I’ve been afraid of asking for too much, just the way you have.”

He trailed his hands up her arms, then cupped her face. “I would give up the entire business for you. I’d give up everything in the world for you, everything I do and everything I am, if I could be the perfect man for you.”

“You *are* the perfect man for me. You don’t need to give up a thing, because I’ve loved you from the first moment I saw you too.” She leaned against him, letting his warmth soak into her body, and tipped her head back. “Let’s make a new rule that takes precedence over all the other rules. Let’s make a rule that we’ll never need any more rules. That we won’t be afraid to say what we need or ask for what we want.”

“And that we’ll love each other for the rest of our days,” he said, pulling her close enough to see streaks of blue flame in his irises. “That all we need is each other.”

“And our family.”

“And to watch it grow.” Then he kissed her, his taste so sweet, so loving, so beautiful. The taste of love.

Dane looked down at her. “The moment I saw you on the putting green all those years ago, I knew there would never be another woman for me. I’m sorry it took me so long to admit it. But Fernsby was right. I was afraid. I was a coward.”

She smiled. Fernsby. Of course. “A man of so few words,” she said. “But what he says is everything we need to hear.”

“Except to have you say you love me.”

“I love you,” she whispered.

He wrapped her tightly in his arms, his words drifting through her hair. "I have always loved you. I love you now. And I will love you endlessly."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Fernsby looked down at his phone the second after it chirped. He didn't have to open the text to read it. The three brief words shouted from the screen: *You were right!*

Fernsby did not punch the air. Another man might have, but he was much more subdued, in keeping with his persona as the best butler any billionaire could ever have.

Despite his frenzy of dancing in the library.

Holding Lord Rexford in his arms, he whispered to the dog, "Fernsby is always right."

He surveyed the room, making sure he'd missed nothing. He'd turned down the bed, neatly folding the duvet at the bottom. On the way back to Lake Tahoe's most distinguished hotel, he'd stopped to buy some necessary supplies.

Fernsby always thought ahead. He hadn't had time to prepare a meal fit for lovers, but room service had delivered quite an excellent meal. He stepped back to assess his work. Yes, everything was in order.

Only then did he type back a reply: *Your room is ready, sir.* He included the room number and passcode. While other plebeians in the hotel might receive key cards, the luxury suites on the top floor each had a lock which could only be accessed with the designated code.

He'd canceled Camille's room and had her suitcase transferred. She would never need a separate room again.

Fernsby backed out with one last appraisal. It was perfect. Then, looking both ways along the hall and finding no one in sight, Fernsby allowed himself a smile. Bending his head to Lord Rexford in his arms, he murmured, "Did I not tell you that true love always wins?" He grinned down at the little dachshund. "A butler's job is to knock a few heads together until they realize what's best for them."

Then he fished a treat out of his pocket for the dog, who had been so good today while Fernsby worked his magic.

* * *

Standing at the bedroom door, Cammie gaped. “Did you have all this set up?”

Dane could say only one word. “Fernsby.”

The suite had Fernsby’s fingerprints all over it. The scrumptious meal for two on a dining trolley, a candle and bud vase in the center. The rose petals sprinkled on the sheets. The candles sweetly perfuming the room from almost every flat surface, on the sideboard and the tables surrounding the cushy sofa, the bedside tables and the bureaus, even in the bathroom.

“You told him *everything*?” Her eyes sparkled, as polished as a piece of jade.

Dane grinned. “Fernsby told *me*. He said he knew all along we were meant to be together.”

She glided across the plush carpet to loop her arms around his neck. “Fernsby. He’s a man of many talents.”

“He’s a magician.”

“He’s an all-knowing seer.”

Dane couldn’t wait another moment to lower his head to hers and take her lips. The kiss was so sweet and yet so hot. It turned him upside down. The way she had that night. The way she had in his dreams.

He whispered, “That delectable meal is a Caesar salad topped with salmon. And it’s cold.”

Those beautiful eyes of hers twinkled at him like stars. “Which means we don’t need to dine until later.”

He kissed the tip of her nose and backed her toward the bedroom. “My thoughts exactly.”

When the backs of her knees hit the bed, he began undoing the buttons of her elegant business suit.

“What are you doing?” she asked with the sexiest lilt in her voice.

“I’m undressing you.”

When the last suit button popped, she reached for his jacket, deftly sliding it off his shoulders. “Two can play this game, Mr. Harrington.” She started on the buttons of his shirt.

He busied himself undoing the gold cufflinks Ava had purchased for him after he’d made his first million. Before Cammie had helped him find his heart.

The cufflinks made no sound on the carpet as she thrust his shirt down his arms and threw it aside.

Staring at his cotton-clad chest, she murmured, “I decree that you shall never wear a T-shirt under your dress shirt ever again.”

He raised one eyebrow, Fernsby-like. “Why not, pray tell?”

She ran her fingers over the soft cotton undershirt. “Because I don’t want any more impediments than necessary when I undress you.”

He picked her up then, swinging her around the room until she giggled. Then he set her back on her feet and dragged the T-shirt over his head. “I don’t intend to let you be dressed at all.” He went at the buttons of her silk blouse with gusto.

“You want me to work in my robe?”

“In your robe with nothing underneath.” His heart leaped with all the needs and desires racing through his body. “Or your workout clothes. Don’t you know that’s why I never worked out with you? Those tight leggings of yours damn near drove me insane.”

She laughed, a low, husky tone that made him twitch. “And here I was dying to see you get all sweaty and sexy while you lifted weights.”

“I can see a lot of workouts in our future.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “Here’s another idea for office attire. One of those sexy sundresses you always wear on the island. Those little dresses haunted my dreams.”

She ran her finger down his chest to the waistband of his slacks. “Did you know you have this sexy line of hair that goes right down here? I saw it every time you raced into the ocean for a swim.” She trailed her fingers over the outside of his slacks.

At her touch, he surged to full strength.

“Oh, that deserves payback,” he growled, pushing aside the lapels of her blouse to stroke her breasts through the tantalizing lacy bra.

She moaned as he unsnapped the front clasp. Then he did what he craved, bending to take a tight pearl into his mouth.

His name fell from her lips on a groan. “Dane.” Then she pushed him to a standing position once more, her skin glistening where he’d licked her.

“Do you know how many times I’ve cried out your name in the night?” she whispered.

And here he’d thought she had her emotions under lock and key. “I never heard you.”

“I was very quiet. But I never stopped thinking about that night. I never stopped wanting it again.”

He framed her beautiful face with his hands, her skin smooth against his palms. “I thought about you every night. I wish now we hadn’t waited so long.”

She swirled his chest hair beneath her finger. “We needed to know each other inside and out.” And Lochlan had needed to be her priority.

“We needed everything that happened in the last twelve years to teach us there’s no one else in the world for us but each other.” He whispered, “I love you.”

Then, as if every minute of all those years had just caught up with him, he kissed her with all the passion inside him, all the lost nights, all the fantasies that filled his dreams, all the moments he'd looked at her across the office and wanted her, needed her.

Even with his lips locked to hers, he reached behind her and unzipped her sexy pencil skirt, letting it fall to the carpet. And she worked his belt buckle, unzipping and pushing his slacks over his hips. Her bra fluttered to the bed as he slid the straps down her arms.

Then he toed out of his shoes and socks, never letting her lips slip from beneath his as he plundered her mouth. As she plundered his. Finally, even the last scraps of fabric that kept them apart—his boxer shorts, her silk panties—fell to the floor.

And he dove on her.

* * *

She'd waited so long to feel Dane's weight on her. He'd made love to her at the manor, and that had been beautiful and perfect. But he hadn't said he loved her. And she hadn't been able to confess she loved him.

Now, there was nothing between them, nothing held back. He kissed her with the passion of her dreams. He kissed her with the memory of that night so long ago, when it had been so good she'd needed rules to make sure it didn't happen again. He kissed her with the love they shared.

Pulling back slightly, he dazzled her with the laser blue of his eyes. "I need to taste every bit of you, like I've never tasted you before."

To beg was a delight. "Please."

He helped her back onto the rose petals Fernsby had scattered across the sheets, the sweet scent rising up to mesmerize her. Or maybe that was the feel of Dane's silky dark waves beneath her fingers as he kissed his way down her body. His tongue on her throat made her tremble, his mouth on

the tight bead of her breast dragged a moan from her lips, his fingers trailing down her abdomen drew a shiver of need from deep inside. Then he fell into the vee of her legs, looking up, his gaze so hot it scorched her flesh.

“Put your legs over my shoulders,” he urged her.

She opened for him, locking her ankles behind him. He touched her then, one finger sliding down her center until she quivered with desire. And she whispered, “You naughty, naughty man.”

He looked at her steadily. “I’m the man you want me to be. You gave me heart. You gave me back my soul, though I was afraid I’d lost it years ago. You made me who I am.”

She reached down to hold his face in her hands, loving the sexy look of him between her legs and the emotion in his eyes. “You’ve always been the man I want you to be. The man I admire. The man I love.”

He looked at her with so much love in his eyes, love she’d never expected to see, love she could never again live without. “All I want right now is to make you feel good.”

“Just make me feel, Dane. That’s all I want. Just to feel what you do to me.”

Then he took her with his mouth.

It had been so good that first night, so unforgettable, then even more glorious when she’d come to him in the manor house.

But it had never been like this. His lips, his tongue, his fingers did crazy things to her, things she’d never have imagined. Her body climbed, higher, higher, until she felt as if she could touch the sky, as if she could feel heaven, as if her body were no longer tethered to the earth, but tethered to him. She climbed to a beautiful somewhere only Dane could take her to.

He closed his hands on her bottom, holding her tight against him, and the pleasure was more than she could bear.

She cried out, clamping her fingers in his hair, twisting the silky locks, unmindful of the pain she might cause him. But he never stopped. He didn't let her go, didn't let her come down, didn't even let her breathe. Until the climax slammed into her like a rogue wave, tumbling her head over heels, the sensation so powerful she thought she might have lost consciousness.

Then Dane climbed her body, holding her as she trembled with aftershocks. He lay between her legs, hot, hard, ready.

She trapped his face between her hands and whispered, "I love you. I want all of you. Now." She raised her legs to his waist, and he lifted slightly so she could wrap her hand around him, guiding him inside.

He entered her then, giving her all that he was. "This is what I've always wanted." He held her gaze. "You. Me. Together just like this. Forever."

He moved gently inside her, taking the gift she offered him and giving her the gift of himself. Pulling him down, she kissed him, her lips on his as he filled her up with everything she'd missed for twelve long years.

He was strong, powerful, yet he took her with a gentleness that only love could bring. Clamping her legs around him, she begged, "Take me. Please. I need you to make me all yours."

Going up on his elbows, his hands framing her face, he gave her more than she could ever have dreamed of.

As he whispered, "I love you," they went over the cliff edge together. Always together and never apart again.

* * *

He'd never known another woman like her. He'd loved her from the moment he first saw her. And he would never let her go again.

As she lay soft and sweet in his arms, he murmured into her hair, "You know, I was always rooting for you in your relationships. I never wanted you to be sad and alone. You're my best friend, and I always wanted your happiness." He

kissed her forehead. “But I always secretly hoped those relationships would fail.”

She leaned up to meet his lips. “Me too. I wanted you to be happy, but I never wanted you to fall for any of those women.”

His gaze traced every feature of her face, from her forehead, to her lush lashes, to her sweet lips. “You know the reason why I could never truly get into a relationship?”

She smiled. “Because you loved me the whole time, just the way I always loved you.”

Truer words had never been spoken.

“Absolutely, Lady Brilliant.” He kissed the tip of her nose.

“Ooh. Lady Brilliant. I love it.” She raised an eyebrow. “Does that mean your real title is Lord Brilliant?”

“If the shoe fits.” Then he rolled her beneath him and showed her just how brilliant they were together.

And, like the stars, the night was endless.

Epilogue

Two months later

The Maverick and Harrington clans filled Dane's home theater. He dimmed the lights for a crystal-clear screen, his gaze roaming the assembly. Next to Fernsby, Susan sat with Bob in the front row. He thought they might be holding hands.

His heart did a two-step as Cammie slipped her hand into his and laced their fingers, the two-step turning into a waltz. He didn't want to get ridiculously romantic about it, but his heart waltzed like Belle and the Beast in Cammie's favorite movie.

Not that he would ever admit that to anyone. Maybe not even Cammie. Although he had watched the movie twice with her.

The opening credits came up on the season finale of *Britain's Greatest Bakers*.

Everyone in that room had sworn, even pinkie sworn, not to watch the episode. It was actually why he'd agreed to back-to-back showings of both the animated and live-action versions of *Beauty and the Beast*. It had been the only way to placate Cammie.

He'd been on saccharin overload ever since. But it had kept him from watching the last episode of *Britain's Greatest Bakers*.

They'd chosen Pebble Beach for the viewing. It was Fernsby's home territory and Fernsby's show. And it was the first time Dane had hosted the weekly barbecue. Correction—it was the first time he and Cammie had hosted.

Fernsby sat in the place of honor, front and center. Even Noah and Jorge didn't squirm in their seats the way two seven-year-olds normally would when faced with a baking show.

In the second row, Paige and Evan each held a baby. Miracle of miracles, both Keegan and Savannah slept soundly.

Dane had led Francine Ballard to a seat on Fernsby's other side. The two appeared to get along famously.

He was happy to see Troy and Clay had made it, too, as well as his sisters. Dane felt surrounded by family, and the thought made him slip his arm around Cammie, holding her close.

As the show began, Bob and Susan put their heads together, whispering, and it struck him how utterly adorable they were. That a couple who'd been together as long as they had could still whisper and giggle together like new lovers amazed him.

His heart filled up completely, Dane took the opportunity to plant a kiss on Cammie's hair. She smiled up at him, so sweetly that he felt his insides get all jumbled up just knowing she was his and he was hers.

The opening credits ended, the show began, and all the whispering stopped.

Fernsby actually looked pretty damn good up there on the big screen. It wasn't quite movie-theater size, but it was still ginormous. Dressed in a chef's apron and a chef's hat cocked jauntily on his head, he looked twenty years younger. He actually seemed to smile.

Cammie tugged on Dane's hand, pointing at the screen, and mouthed, *Is that a mirage?*

Flummoxed, Dane wasn't sure he even recognized the smiling man. Fernsby had to be acting. Obviously, they couldn't have a staid, taciturn butler-type on the show. No one would vote for him.

He hadn't even smiled like that the day he'd returned from filming.

Yeah, it was totally an act. It had to be. But then Dane remembered that waltz in the library. Who knew?

But there was Fernsby, smiling, up on the big screen. Even though it was vegan day. Yes, Fernsby had to make a vegan dessert. It was crazy. Dane was suddenly terrified the man hadn't won after all. Because he certainly hadn't gone to Gabby, the vegan and gluten-free expert, to ask for advice.

As the show unfolded, Dane held Cammie's hand the entire time, both of them crossing their fingers. Because, really, what would happen if Fernsby wasn't the winner? The thought had never occurred to Dane. And the man himself had locked his lips on the secret.

Except for the voices and sounds up on the screen, the theater was entirely silent. He couldn't even hear anyone breathe.

Then it happened. The judges tasted and reviewed, talked and gabbed, going on forever, making Dane want to jump up and shake his fist at how long it was taking. Couldn't they just fast-forward?

Until the moment the head guy—Dane hadn't even listened to his name, which was very unlike him—stopped in front of Fernsby. Then he held out his hand. Fernsby shook it. It was as if the entire show on screen and the entire theater went into meltdown, jumping, shouting, Susan pulling Fernsby out of his seat and actually hugging the man, who remained undeniably stiff.

And Cammie whispered in Dane's ear, her sweet scent washing over him, reminding him of all the sweet nights in his big bed and all the definitely hot moments when he made her scream wildly, endlessly.

"The handshake means he won!" She practically bounced out of her seat.

You'd never be able to tell by Fernsby. Even as Susan gave him that resounding hug. But then Fernsby whispered something in her ear, and Susan Spencer laughed. It was crazy. It was Fernsby. Always full of surprises.

Francine Ballard patted him on the hip—all she could reach from her seat. And Fernsby turned, taking her hand in his and bowing low to brush a kiss across her knuckles.

Cammie whispered, “Will wonders never cease?” Then she looked at Dane. “Did he tell you about his lost love?”

Dane was reeling from all the shocks, but this one might have landed him on the floor if he hadn’t been holding her hand. “A lost love? *Fernsby*?”

She nodded, leaning in to kiss the side of his mouth. “You’re gaping, Lord Blowfish.”

“He told *you*?” His voice rose on the last word.

Cammie sighed. “Let’s just say he felt compelled to. But it’s his story.” She pecked him on the nose. “You’ll have to ask him about it.”

He would never ask Fernsby about it. He turned, gazing at his butler, who was taking all the backslapping and hugs and congratulations without breaking his composure.

“We can’t just wait here,” Cammie said. Then she rushed down to the front and threw her arms around Fernsby in a bear hug, or at least as bearish a hug as someone smaller and shorter could give.

Was that a slight bending of the man’s spine?

No. Dane must be imagining it.

The hugs and congratulations continued, Cammie edging farther out of the way to give Fernsby room.

Then it was Dane’s turn. He strode down the aisle to the front, as if he wasn’t flabbergasted. As if he hadn’t had the rug torn out from under him. And all the other clichés he could think of.

“Fernsby, congratulations.”

Just when Dane thought all he’d have to do was stick out his hand and shake Fernsby’s for all the man was worth, he suddenly found himself enveloping his butler in a manly hug.

It was probably the craziest thing he'd ever done. Besides taking twelve years to tell Cammie he loved her.

Oddly, maybe wondrously, Fernsby actually hugged him in return.

Dane stepped back, his hands still on Fernsby's shoulders. "I knew you could do it."

Fernsby, with the sternest, straightest face the man had ever exhibited, said, "I had faith you could do it too, sir."

Then, with yet another miracle of miracles—could there be more than one miracle of miracles?—Fernsby looked at Cammie. And smiled.

* * *

Good Lord. Cammie glanced at the ceiling to make sure it hadn't fallen in. Fernsby had smiled. An undeniable, endless smile. The hug her two favorite men shared hadn't shocked her as much, even though she'd never seen Fernsby hug anyone, ever. But this was Fernsby's day.

And that hug had the flavor of father-son bonding. Whatever the two had said to each other, it had made Fernsby look at her.

And smile.

Cammie wouldn't dream of smothering her answering smile. She had everything she'd ever wanted. Dane professing his love for her and trusting her in every decision she made for the new resort. Dane taking her hand as they hiked the trails of Pebble Beach or walked along the beach with the waves pounding the shoreline. Dane beneath her on his soft mattress, whispering all the naughty things he wanted to do to her, then actually doing all those naughty things.

Even now, her cheeks flushed with the glorious memories.

Her cheeks grew even warmer when she looked at Evan and Paige with their beautiful babies, now three months old, a reminder of that barbecue when she'd realized she wanted Dane and love and family. All the pregnant ladies, Lyssa, Ari,

and Rosie, were also a sweet reminder. And they were very pregnant now—huge, in fact, all far into the third trimester. As if the women were triplets, they each held their hands on their bellies, their faces glowing.

Someday, she thought, automatically searching for Dane. She found his gaze on her, and he smiled. Then he glanced from her to the pregnant ladies and back. She understood his meaning. He wanted what these wonderful Mavericks had as badly as she did.

As if there weren't several heads and bodies between them, he mouthed, *I love you*.

She mouthed the words back at him.

Back in January, watching the Harringtons take on the Mavericks on that soccer field, she could never have dreamed of this. She couldn't even hope for it.

But Dane would always be hers. Just as she'd always been his, right from the beginning, before she even knew his name. They belonged to each other. From this moment on. Forevermore.

Then she simply couldn't stop her feet from carrying her to him or her arms from winding around his neck, pulling him down for a kiss. Not a showy, blatant kiss, just the soft, gentle touch of lips on lips that sealed their love.

When she surfaced, Fernsby was once again smiling.

* * *

Now that was a *lot* of very pregnant ladies. Lyssa Spencer looked as if she could have her baby right here. So did Rosie. And Ari couldn't be far behind.

Ava resisted the urge to shudder. The gooey looks their respective partners gave each of them were a tad frightening.

The entire group assembled out on the patio. The July sun beamed down on them from a cloudless sky. Flowers bloomed in the beds surrounding the pool deck, and from beyond came the distant sound of golf clubs whacking golf balls and the

incessant shush of the waves hitting the beach. The little dachshund barked wildly at Charlie Ballard's Zanti Misfits hiding in the rock garden.

Following his onscreen triumph, Fernsby had laid out a spread that had every mouth watering. Today's centerpiece was his winning vegan, gluten-free Victoria sponge.

Ava was sure it had never been done before. But Fernsby, a man with depths more profound than she could have imagined, had done it.

And now he did the honors before any of them could even tackle the rest of the gourmet banquet. "You must not be full for this tasting," he announced. "This isn't the end of our meal, it's the beginning." How proud he was of his lighter-than-air sponge.

The mini dachshund ran up to sit at Fernsby's feet, as if he might receive a slice, or even a crumb. But Fernsby offered the first piece to Gabby, his sternest critic. Even the televised handshake would be nothing compared to Gabby's assessment.

A hush fell over the Mavericks and Harringtons, as if they were one big family rooting for one of their own. Somehow, since January's soccer game, Ava, her siblings, even Fernsby and T. Rex, had become Mavericks as well. They'd been accepted. Susan Spencer, standing beside her, linked fingers with Ava, as anxious for Gabby's opinion as anyone who'd known Fernsby for the last fifteen years.

The Maverick matriarch was a tall woman. Ava topped her by only half an inch.

She felt something in their clasped hands—energy flowing between them. The synergy Dane talked about. Ava knew in her heart that this group of Mavericks, which included all the Harringtons now, would do great things together.

But now they needed Gabby's judgment.

First, she sniffed. Then she tested the cake's texture with a finger. Finally, she sliced into the Victoria sponge with a

dessert fork, just the tip of the piece Fernsby had cut for her, and raised it to her mouth.

Ava could almost feel Fernsby vibrating.

Other than her chewing, there was no expression on Gabby's face. Ava wanted to laugh as her sister played Fernsby to the hilt.

With another bite, she allowed a thoughtful frown to gather between her brows.

Fernsby's fists clenched, as if he might have to throttle her if she didn't offer her opinion soon.

Though she hadn't finished her piece of vegan, gluten-free Victoria sponge, Gabby looked at Fernsby.

Ava defied the entire assemblage to read her sister's expression. Gabby gave nothing away. Until finally, she said, loudly enough for everyone to hear, "I know we've had our differences over the years, Fernsby." She paused dramatically, everyone wanting to scream at her to hurry up. "But I must grovel at your feet and ask you to create a Fernsby special for my cafés. It would be my greatest honor."

Emotion flickered in Fernsby's normally detached expression. Ava was sure, if there had been no one else to witness it, he would have picked Gabby up in his arms and whirled her around the pool deck. Instead, holding himself rigid, he intoned, "My dearest Gabrielle, I will make a Victoria sponge for you." Then something glittered in his gray eyes. "But I also have something even bigger in mind."

The entire Maverick group, including the two boys, Noah and Jorge—perhaps even the babies—held their collective breath.

Until Gabby couldn't hold it a moment longer. "What? What will you make?" She took a big gulp of air.

"A butter tart." Fernsby paused a long beat, as if waiting for Gabby to deflate. Only to blow her up again with his next words. "A butter-free butter tart."

Gabby gasped, her hands flying to her mouth, covering the shriek that wanted to burst out.

Then Fernsby smiled. Again. Shocking Ava to her core. Again.

“It will be the most delicious tart any of you have ever tasted,” he declared with ultimate confidence.

And Gabby threw herself into Fernsby’s waiting arms.

“Oh my God. What’s happened to Fernsby?” Ava said without even thinking. “And what’s happened to my sister?”

Susan squeezed her fingers and whispered, “Synergy.”

It was so true. After all the years since they’d lost their parents, maybe even long before that, she and her family had finally found a home.

Maybe it was the Maverick synergy that had shown Dane the way to Cammie. She looked at them now, hand in hand, beaming like newlyweds. What had happened to her brother was almost too hard to believe. Not that Ava hadn’t known Dane was in love with Cammie almost from day one, especially after he went ballistic when Troy simply asked her out. But she’d truly believed her brother would never figure it out. It had taken so long that Ava had come to believe he was exactly like her, that he knew how bad relationships could be, and he wanted none of it.

Yet here he was, looking at Cammie as if he was starstruck.

And Cammie gazed up at him so adoringly that, had Ava been a different woman, she might have been moved to tears. Just the other week, she’d told Cammie she didn’t need to pay back any of her uncle’s care fees. And yet, Cammie had made a bank transfer and said she’d go on doing so until the debt was paid. She even insisted on paying Dane too.

That was Cammie. A woman of her word, a woman who never forgot what someone else had done for her. A woman Dane deserved.

And yet, despite all evidence to the contrary surrounding her here at this Maverick barbecue, Ava knew relationships didn't always work out. Especially not for her.

She felt eyes on her then and searched the crowded patio, only to find those eyes belonged to Fernsby. Deliberately, he turned his gaze on Dane and Cammie. And back to her once more.

Then he winked.

Oh my God, Fernsby isn't thinking about matchmaking for me, is he?

It was enough to strike terror into her heart.

* * *

Thank you so much for reading ENDLESS IN LOVE! We hope you loved Dane and Cammie.

Are you ready for the next Maverick Billionaire romance, REUNITED IN LOVE? Ava Harrington, brilliant billionaire businesswoman, has conquered the world. And yet, scarred by a love lost fifteen years ago, she's built a wall around her heart, swearing off love forever. Ransom Yates's culinary genius has taken him to the pinnacle of success as a magnetic celebrity chef. But that success came at a devastating price when he left behind the woman who held the key to his heart. Their reunion is anything but sweet when Ava must swallow her pride and seek Ransom's help, though he's the last person she ever wanted to turn to in a crisis. But the sparks flying between them are hotter than ever—and their undeniable chemistry reignites their long-buried passion with steamy kisses and sultry nights. Ransom can't help but fall for the woman he never stopped loving. But Ava's heart is still hardened with the memory of how their long-ago affair ended. Can they find a second chance at love? Or is their love forever lost in the ashes of their past?

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*“I’d recommend *The Look of Love* to any romance reader who likes their love stories steamy, realistic, and with a couple worth fighting for! Add in a unique, close knit family and you have a treasure on your hands.”*

~ 5 stars for THE LOOK OF LOVE

Turn the page for excerpts from BREATHLESS IN LOVE (Maverick Billionaires) and THE LOOK OF LOVE (The Sullivans)...

Excerpt from BREATHLESS IN LOVE (Maverick Billionaires)

Will Franconi has a dark past that he's kept a closely guarded secret—very few people have ever heard his real story and he plans to keep it that way. After surviving a hellish childhood, he's now living the dream life where everything he touches turns to gold. But something's missing. He doesn't quite know what, until a simple letter from a teenage boy brings Harper Newman into his life—a woman who just might fill up the empty places inside him...if only he could ever be worthy of her love.

When a man has more money than he could spend in five lifetimes, Harper has to ask herself what Will Franconi could possibly want from a woman like her. She's learned the hard way that rich men always get what they want no matter the cost. If it were only herself she had to worry about, Harper would manage, but she's guardian to her younger brother, who depends on her for everything. After he nearly lost his life in a car crash, she's vowed never to let anyone hurt him ever again.

Still, sometimes Harper can't help but long to change her story from that of the always cautious woman to an adventurous tale of a heroine who's wild and free...especially when Will's kisses and caresses make her utterly breathless. And as he begins to reveal his story to her, she discovers that he's so much more than just another wealthy, privileged man. He's kind and giving, and he fills up all the spaces inside her heart that have been empty for so long. Together, can they rewrite their stories into a happily ever after that neither of them would have believed possible?

Oh yes, Will Franconi was dangerous. *Extremely* dangerous as he drew her to the passenger side of the car and her stomach fluttered with the hand-to-hand contact.

Harper hadn't dated in over a year, ever since she'd realized that she was an easy target. Not only for men who wanted to get at her brother's trust fund, but also because after so many years of working to take care of herself and Jeremy, she hadn't had much time left over to nurture her other relationships. First she'd become involved with a man who wanted Jeremy's money but not Jeremy. And then she'd rebounded into a relationship with a guy who had sworn he would always be there for her and Jeremy—at least until he'd found a far lower-maintenance woman.

After that, Harper had decided love and marriage simply weren't in the cards for her.

Not that getting in the car with Will was akin to dating him, of course. She couldn't imagine what a rich playboy like him would want with a completely ordinary woman like her. It was just that she hadn't been this close to a good-looking man in a very long time. That had to explain why her heart was pounding hard and her skin felt flushed.

Will put her hand on the roll bar. "Hold on tight right here."

Everything he said seemed to have a double meaning, turning something ordinary into something sexual. But she knew it had to be her sex-starved brain adding the extra meaning.

She lifted her skirt slightly to step inside, then slid down into the leather seat. Picking up the ends of the seat belt, she looked at them, unsure how the contraption worked.

"It's a five-point racing harness," Will explained as he got into the driver's seat beside her.

When she started fumbling with the hooks and levers on the harness, he said, "Let me help you."

The next thing she knew, he was settling a strap over her shoulder, his fingers brushing her collarbone as he brought it down across her chest. Thrill bumps raced across her skin with the near contact. She inhaled his scent—shampoo and soap

and *very* sexy male—and her body tingled. Pulling the harness down to her lap, he flicked the latch closed with a snap, and she felt the pressure of his touch just below her belly. Low enough—and intimately enough—that her pulse rate shot up.

As he started on the other strap, his fingers skimmed the air just above her breasts, not quite touching, but barely short of a breath away. Harper didn't look up, didn't dare meet his gaze, just in case he realized the effect he was having on her. He snapped the second latch, buckled the belt across her lap with a simple flip of the two pieces she'd already connected, then cinched the strap.

“Comfortable?” With the sun behind him, his eyes were shadowed, but she could have sworn heat sparkled in their depths.

“I'm fine.” Her answer was low, breathy, too close to a moan.

He pulled back slowly, his gaze still dark and intense, making her pulse beat even harder. After he secured his belt, he started the engine with a roar, and put a hand on the gear shift. “Ready?”

With a man like him, she didn't think she'd ever be ready. But she managed a nod.

He took off with a burst of speed, and she hung on to the door with one hand, clutching the seat tightly with the other, down by the gear box where he wouldn't see.

“Don't worry,” he yelled over the rush of wind, “I won't go too fast.”

Didn't he get that everything he was doing was already too fast?

Her hair whipped around her face, and she had to let go of the seat to pull it back. She needed two hands to bunch the thick locks at the back of her head, out of her eyes and her lipstick. She was flying free beside him, held in only by the harness, as the wind screamed past her ears.

And he was smiling, watching her.

“Look at the road,” she shouted at him.

She felt him brake as he went into the turn at the end of the runway. It felt like they were going too fast, but the back end didn't slide as he went into the second turn, heading down the opposite runway. Her body swayed and jostled in the leather seat. She could taste the salt air on her lips. In the distance, she could see Jeremy jumping up and down, punching his fist high.

Will went faster and faster, making her blood pound in her ears and the wind beat against her chest. She should have told him to slow down, to stop and let her out. She should be calling him a maniac, even screaming at him.

Yet right then, Harper had the insane urge to raise her arms in the air like a teenager on a roller coaster. A crazy voice inside her whispered, *Do it*.

Unable to resist the pull of excitement and the thrill of the speed racing through her, she let herself go, throwing her hands up and her head back.

It was as exhilarating as it was terrifying. Maybe it was the combination of fear and danger and the pure joy of soaring through the air that made her feel so alive, with every nerve firing.

Or...maybe it was the man beside her.

* * *

Harper was utterly gorgeous, the sun sparkling in her wind-tossed hair, ecstasy glowing on her face. She didn't shout or cheer—but she did hold up her arms. And she smiled.

The most beautiful smile Will had ever seen.

He wasn't even near freeway speed, yet the shriek of the motor, the rumble of the pipes, and the open sky above them made it seem as if the car were flying at over a hundred miles an hour.

Just as he'd promised, he took her around only once. He didn't want to push her limits.

Not yet, anyway.

While harnessing her in, it would have been so easy to touch her, to let his fingertips graze her gorgeous skin. His heart had hammered with the desire to put his hands on her. Even now, his fingers sizzled with her heat, and her sweet scent filled his head. But he could tell that she wasn't like the women he usually spent time with—women who knew the score and were in it for what they could grab before he moved on.

Will knew he shouldn't lead Harper on. She was a good girl. She was someone who deserved the fairytale, a guy who was as good as she was. Not an ex-thief who still battled his demons, who knew that he could never change the blood he came from, no matter how much he wished he could.

Speed had taken away far too much from Harper already—her brother's independence and her parents' lives. And yet, he could feel that she craved it all the same. Craved the rush, the thrill, just as much as he did.

Just as much as he craved *her*.

“Don't begin this book in the evening—you will read all night long!”

~ 5 stars for BREATHLESS IN LOVE

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Excerpt from **THE LOOK OF LOVE (The Sullivans)**

Chloe Peterson is having a bad night. A really bad night. The large bruise on her cheek can attest to that. And when her car skids off the side of a wet country road straight into a ditch, she's convinced even the gorgeous guy who rescues her in the middle of the rain storm must be too good to be true. Or is he?

Not only has Chase Sullivan never met anyone so lovely, both inside and out, but he quickly realizes Chloe has much bigger problems than her damaged car. Soon, Chase is willing to move mountains to love—and protect—her. But will Chloe let him?

The two of them hiked up the hillside, and the view took Chloe's breath away.

Chase took a waterproof blanket out of the basket and laid it on grass that was still damp from the previous night's rain shower.

"Wow, you really come prepared," she said.

"I've got a good crew."

"You certainly do. I enjoyed watching you work," came out of her mouth before she could hold the words inside.

His smile was like a warm caress over her skin. "I liked you being there." He laughed and admitted, "I was trying not to show off."

Amazed by how easily he could make her smile, she said, "Most guys don't admit stuff like that."

She half expected him to say something like, "I'm not most guys." Instead, he surprised her yet again by asking, "So, what do you do?"

He was being so careful with her. She felt it in every glance, every word. Even now, when he could so easily have

asked her where she was from or why she was running, he was getting to know her another way instead. Just as he hadn't touched her without her permission last night. It was as if there was a silent agreement between them—he wouldn't push too far or get in too deep unless she allowed it.

The big question was, would she dare let him in?

Chloe didn't have an answer. How could she, when she was afraid to even acknowledge the question?

He handed her a gourmet sandwich full of goat cheese and grilled yellow and orange bell peppers, and as she took it from him, she said, "Well, most recently, I've been waitressing."

"But what do you like to do?"

Most people would have stopped at her day job. But not Chase. He was truly interested. And that honest interest went a long way toward shoving aside her reluctance to talk about herself.

She paused before answering, "I make quilts."

People never knew what to make of that. Most assumed it was a hobby. Others just thought it was plain weird or boring. Men, without exception, dismissed it as just another housewife craft. Chase, however, gave her a sincerely interested look.

"Tell me more."

Downplaying it like she usually did, she said, "I like seeing how fabrics come together in patterns."

"I don't know much about the quilting world," he said, "but I've photographed a few quilt shows and art quilts for various publications, and what I've learned about technique and the skill that's involved in making them has been really interesting. I'd love to know more. When did you start?"

Chloe rarely had a chance to wax on about her love for quilting. Not since she'd been a member of a quilting guild years and years ago. She missed those women—and their shared passion—terribly.

Which was probably why she actually found herself telling Chase, “I started quilting when I lost a close friend from college in a car accident. She had been so passionate about it. Her mom actually owned a store in town. It was the only way I could think of to keep up my connection to her. And it gave me something else to think about—the motion of my hands and the needle, the patterns of fabric and shape, the building of something that I could create. Sometimes I can almost feel her watching me from up above with a smile on her face.”

“I’m sure she is.”

Chloe started at Chase’s words. Had she really just said all of that to him? Somehow he had gotten her to talk about her passion for quilting—a subject that would have put nearly every guy on the planet to sleep. But he wasn’t snoring yet. And she found herself wanting to tell him more about herself, more than just her love for quilting.

She wasn’t at all comfortable acknowledging that Chase had just become the exception. And that it had felt so good to share herself with someone who was really listening. Not when she knew that she was being stupid, letting herself think that this fantasy of sitting with a gorgeous guy on a hilltop in Napa Valley had anything to do with her real life.

It didn’t.

She put down her sandwich and made herself face him, but before she could say anything, he said, “Uh-oh. That’s not a good look.”

She wasn’t going to smile. There was no place for grinning when she needed to set him straight, when she was about to make her position on the two of them perfectly clear.

“Why are you being so nice to me, Chase?”

“I like you.”

The glow his words caused was too bright. Too warm. Forcing herself to blot it out, she said, “You don’t know me.”

“I’m starting to.”

No pause. No smooth words. No trying to charm her into agreeing with him. Didn't he realize just how much harder his honest responses were making this for her?

"Is this what you do?" she asked.

"What am I doing?"

"You keep helping me, making me breakfast, asking Jeremy to be nice to me all day."

He frowned, and she could see that he was confused. "Is there something wrong with wanting to make you smile?"

Oh. Wow. Why did he have to say that?

She couldn't think of any other man who'd simply wanted to make her smile. Not even the man she'd married. Especially not the man she'd married.

Frustrated with herself for being so soft—so easy to turn to goo—she made herself come at him one more time with, "I get it if you're into saving people, but—"

"I'm not a saint, Chloe."

His low voice cut her accusation off in midstream, and she found herself unable to look away from his serious expression.

"I'll always take care of my family," he continued, "but I've never gone out looking for women who need to be saved. And even though I hope you'll soon trust me enough to tell me what happened to you, trying to boost my own ego by saving you is not why I asked you to stay."

Feeling like a big jerk for doing anything and everything she could think of to try to keep herself from doing something really, really stupid like falling for him, she said, "Look, Chase, you really have been nice." Despite having been slow to hand her a towel last night, she silently amended with a flush. "But, despite how great you've been—" she purposefully left off a reminder as to what she'd been doing in the bathtub the night before "—we're not going to...well... you know."

Ugh. She wasn't used to having conversations like this.

She half expected—half wanted—him to tell her she was wrong. That they were, in fact, most definitely going to end up doing *well-you-know* if she stuck around much longer.

Instead, his expression grew even more serious. “Earlier, when we were out in the vineyard, when I asked you to stay, you didn't want to. But I didn't let up until you finally gave in.” He ran a hand through his hair, clearly upset with himself. “I would never want to force you to do something you don't want to do, Chloe. I don't ever want to take something from you that you don't want to give me.”

This was the perfect opening. It was her chance to tell him she'd never had any intention of staying, to make it clear that there was not going to be any further connection between them, and that it was time for her to be moving on.

So then, why did she find herself saying, “You didn't force me to stay. I wanted to stay.”

The pure truth of that statement resonated within her solar plexus. Because it turned out the truth didn't care if she wanted it to be true, or not.

“I want to stay,” she said again in a firmer voice. She wanted to spend more time with Chase. She shouldn't. But she did. “But I don't want to be in the way.”

“You could never be in the way,” he said. And then with a grin that was softer this time, and somehow even more potent, he said, “You were saying something about how you and I aren't going to...?” He paused, letting the unsaid words hang in the air between them.

She should have come back with a quick retort, something to put him in his place. But right at that moment, with the Napa Valley sun shining down on her and grapevines budding to life across rolling hills as far as the eye could see, there was nothing left but honesty.

“I haven't had a male friend in a very long time.”

He was silent for a long moment, and even though the butterflies in her stomach had her keeping her eyes on the horizon, she could feel his gaze on her.

“I’d be honored to be your friend, Chloe.”

Her breath caught in her throat then, and she liked him so much it was almost impossible not to grab him and kiss him.

Sure that he could hear her heart beating in her chest because it was so loud to her own ears, instead of kissing him, she had to be content with whispering, “I like you, too.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Having sold more than 10 million books, Bella Andre's novels have been #1 bestsellers around the world and have appeared on the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists 93 times. She has been the #1 Ranked Author on a top 10 list that included Nora Roberts, JK Rowling, James Patterson and Steven King.

Known for “sensual, empowered stories enveloped in heady romance” (Publishers Weekly), her books have been *Cosmopolitan Magazine* “Red Hot Reads” twice and have been translated into ten languages. She is a graduate of Stanford University and has won the Award of Excellence in romantic fiction. The *Washington Post* called her “One of the top writers in America” and she has been featured by *Entertainment Weekly*, *NPR*, *USA Today*, *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *TIME Magazine*.

Bella also writes the *New York Times* bestselling “Four Weddings and a Fiasco” series as Lucy Kevin. Her sweet contemporary romances also include the *USA Today* bestselling “Walker Island” and “Married in Malibu” series.

If not behind her computer, you can find her reading her favorite authors, hiking, swimming or laughing. Married with two children, Bella splits her time between the Northern California wine country, a log cabin in the Adirondack mountains of upstate New York, and a flat in London overlooking the Thames.

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NY Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Jennifer Skully is a lover of contemporary romance, bringing you poignant tales peopled with characters that will make you laugh and make you cry. Look for *The Maverick Billionaires* written with Bella Andre, starting with *Breathless in Love*, along with Jennifer's new later-in-life holiday romance series, *Once Again*, where readers can travel to fabulous faraway locales. Up first is a trip to Provence in *Dreaming of Provence*. Writing as Jasmine Haynes, Jennifer authors classy, sensual romance tales about real issues such as growing older, facing divorce, starting over. Her books have passion and heart and humor and happy endings, even if they aren't always traditional. She also writes gritty, paranormal mysteries in the Max Starr series. Having penned stories since the moment she learned to write, Jennifer now lives in the Redwoods of Northern California with her husband and their adorable nuisance of a cat who totally runs the household.

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