



The Bride's Pink Shoes

- a seabreeze wedding
chapel novel

Award-winning Author

JENNIFER FAYE

The Bride's Pink Shoes

Seabreeze Wedding Chapel, book 1

Jennifer Faye

Lazy Dazy Press

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2022 by Jennifer F. Stroka

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Published by Lazy Dazy Press

ISBN-13 (digital): 978-1-942680-24-6

ISBN-13 (paperback): 978-1-942680-25-3

Thanks & much appreciation to:

Editor: Lia Fairchild

Seabreeze Wedding Chapel series:

Book Prequel: The Bride's Dream Wedding

Book 1: The Bride's Pink Shoes

Book 2: The Bride's Christmas Dress

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

About This Book

Prologue

1. CHAPTER ONE

2. CHAPTER TWO

3. CHAPTER THREE

4. CHAPTER FOUR

5. CHAPTER FIVE

6. CHAPTER SIX

7. CHAPTER SEVEN

8. CHAPTER EIGHT

9. CHAPTER NINE

10. CHAPTER TEN

11. CHAPTER ELEVEN

12. CHAPTER TWELVE

13. CHAPTER THIRTEEN

14. CHAPTER FOURTEEN

15. CHAPTER FIFTEEN

16. CHAPTER SIXTEEN

17. CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

18. CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

19. CHAPTER NINETEEN

EPILOGUE

Afterword

About Author

Also By

OceanofPDF.com

About This Book

A lost love comes back...

Clara Harrington is secretly arranging the wedding of the year for Hollywood's latest sweetheart—an event that will make her the West Coast's most sought-after wedding planner. However, when she discovers the best man is her ex-fiancé, Andrew Cross, Clara is blindsided. Andrew is a changed man, intent on making amends. But will Clara risk her heart again when at long last her career is about to take off?

OceanofPDF.com

Prologue

St. Atticus Hospital, New York City

THE OLD LANDLINE PHONE clattered as Andrew Cross slammed the receiver onto the cradle.

“Whoa there! What did that phone ever do to you?” a male voice asked from the doorway.

Andrew continued to stare in the opposite direction, toward the window of his hospital room. He knew to whom the voice belonged, and he hoped if he ignored the man long enough he’d go away.

As though the man could read his thoughts, he said, “Don’t think you can wish me away. I’m not that easy.”

Andrew stifled a frustrated groan as he turned his face to the doorway. Leaning against the door jamb was the physical therapist, Jerry. The tall, muscular Black man had been by to introduce himself the other day. And he was wearing the same stupid smile then as he was now. Dressed in his maroon scrubs with his ID badge dangling from his neck, he looked like he was there to work. He came to the wrong room if that was what he had on his mind.

Andrew was in absolutely no mood to deal with Mr. Happy-Go-Lucky. None. Whatsoever.

“I’m not up for exercising today.” Andrew’s words were slightly slurred, as his jaw was still swollen and had stitches trailing down it.

Jerry stepped farther into the room. “You might not be in the mood, but your body needs the exercise. You don’t want it turning on you, do you?”

“Not today,” Andrew ground out. His mind was still stuck on the unsettling phone conversation he’d just ended. “Besides, it’s a waste of time. My body is like some ghastly jigsaw puzzle—all pinned and stitched together. I can’t even get to the bathroom by myself.”

“You know, instead of complaining, you should be counting your blessings. Do you know how lucky you are to have a second chance at life?” Jerry crossed his arms, causing his meaty biceps to bulge. “Other people who have been in such severe car accidents haven’t been able to tell the tale. But you, well, you have a chance to make a bucket list and work on it. You can see life with a new perspective—”

“Stop!” His jaw ached as he continued to talk. “You’re wasting your speech on me.”

At this particular moment, Andrew didn’t feel fortunate. He felt so alone—almost as alone as he’d felt when his mother had abandoned him and his father all those years ago. She hadn’t said a word, merely left a short note saying not to try to find her.

Jerry cleared his throat. “So why don’t you tell me what’s bothering you? Who was on the phone?”

Andrew shook his head. “It was nothing.”

“It was something all right. I doubt that phone will ever work right again.” Jerry grabbed a chair from the corner of the drab room with its olive-green walls. The chair legs scraped over the tile floor as Jerry dragged it next to the bed. He proceeded to lounge his large frame back in the chair, stretching his long legs out in front of him and crossing his ankles. “Mighty comfy. Yep, I think I’ll stay right here. Until you talk, that is.”

Andrew groaned aloud this time. He was so tired of this hospital. All he wanted was to be left alone instead of constantly being wheeled in and out of surgery. And on top of all the poking and prodding, he now had Jerry getting on his case.

Eyeing up the determination in Jerry’s dark eyes, Andrew conceded. “Fine. If you must know, I was trying to locate someone. She changed her cell phone number, so I called her family.”

“And does this certain someone have a name?”

Andrew glared at Jerry, who continued to sit there, undisturbed by Andrew’s obvious irritation. “Yes. Her name’s Clara.”

“This Clara, she’s important to you?”

Andrew's mind wandered back in time to nearly nine years ago. He'd met her at their college professor's home for a cookout. She'd been an undergrad, and he'd just begun his MBA program. They'd each reached simultaneously for the same glass of lemonade. When she'd glanced up at him, she'd smiled. It wasn't just any smile. It was one that lit up her big green eyes. He'd never seen such beautiful eyes, not to mention her heart-shaped face and those long blond curls. He'd been a goner right from the start.

Jerry leaned forward. "Ah, I can see by your smile that she's very important to you."

Smile? Andrew pressed his lips into a firm line. That was then. This was now—a much different set of circumstances. "She's part of my past."

"Not from what I can see. You obviously still care about her, or you wouldn't be trying to find her."

"Trust me when I say I burned that bridge. Now, is this session done? I'm tired. Besides, I thought you were a physical therapist, not a psychologist."

Andrew wanted to cross his arms, but his left arm was in a cast with nothing but pins holding it together, and some of his ribs were cracked. So, he just sat there frowning, hoping the guy would get the message and move on.

Jerry leaned back in the chair again. "Tell me about the two of you."

"What's there to tell? We broke up."

“I meant before that. Where’d you meet her?”

Andrew relented and opened up about knowing her in college, hoping Jerry would get bored, but something happened when he started talking about Clara. He found he liked talking about her—he truly enjoyed the stroll down memory lane. It’d been a long time since he’d felt like smiling.

Clara had been his best friend, and he’d been hers. They’d talked about anything and everything, not always agreeing but respecting each other’s differences. Their future together seemed destined. After close to four years together and both of them settling into their respective careers, he was certain they could beat the odds and stay together until their twilight years, with matching rockers on the front porch.

“What’s Clara like?” Jerry asked, drawing Andrew from his straying thoughts.

Andrew faced the window, staring blindly at the blue sky. “She has the brightest smile. It can light up a whole room. And she knows what’s important in life. She used to tell me there was more to life than working, but I refused to admit she was right. I always had one more meeting or one more account to take care of. I...” His voice trailed away as he was hit with a huge wave of regret.

“You what?” Jerry asked.

For a moment, Andrew wasn’t going to answer. But he knew he couldn’t hide from the truth any longer. “I made my career the center of my world instead of her.”

Jerry nodded his dark head in understanding. “Sounds like she’s a smart lady. So, what in the world made her decide to hook up with the likes of you?”

“Hey!” Andrew’s gaze narrowed in on Jerry. “I wasn’t always such a mess.” He glanced down at the cast on his arm and then the brace on his leg that hid the line of stitches running down to his foot. “I was quite a catch before all of this.”

Jerry placed a hand on his broad chest as he let out a hearty laugh. It took him a moment to gather himself. “You just keep telling yourself that. I wonder what Clara would say if I asked her the same question.”

“You can’t.” Andrew no longer felt like talking. His good mood vanished as fast as it had appeared.

“Why not?”

“Just drop it.”

“Not until you tell me the ending. What happened with the two of you?”

Andrew blew out a frustrated breath. “She up and moved to the West Coast after I, um, we broke up.”

“Sounds like you regret letting her go.”

He’d made so many mistakes in his life, and it pained him to recall all of them. Why had he let himself become so focused on his career? Why couldn’t he have seen all of the important things in life before it was too late?

First, he'd closed the door on knowing his half-brother, then he'd pushed Clara out of his life, and lastly, he'd lost his father. He hadn't even known there was anything wrong with his father before a heart attack stole him away. Andrew's good hand clenched tightly as he fought back a wave of remorse and grief. Would his father have told him about his heart condition if he had slowed down long enough to listen? Sadly, he'd never know. Just like he'd never get to tell his father how much he meant to him.

Andrew blinked repeatedly before meeting Jerry's inquisitive eyes. "It doesn't matter about Clara. It's over now. She's in California." The same state as his brother—a brother he'd never taken the time to get to know. "Besides, I don't even know how to reach her. Her brother wouldn't give me her new number."

"There's always the Internet. I'm sure you could track her down that way."

"And what?" With his good arm, Andrew gestured to his battered and broken body. "It's not like I can go to her."

"You're not going to be like this forever. And that's why I'm here, to help get you mobile so you can get on with your life."

"You act like overnight I'll be healed." That was never going to happen. He'd had numerous surgeries to get him this far, and at least one more was on the horizon.

"I didn't say it'd be overnight, but a trip to sunny California is a good goal. It's something to work toward, or should I say

someone to work your way toward?”

Maybe Jerry had a point with the physical therapy stuff. If he could stand on his own two feet again, he could manage a cross-country trip. Perhaps he could visit both Clara and his brother, attempt to undo some of the damage. Was that even possible? He had to hope so.

His thoughts zeroed in on sweet Clara. He owed her an apology—a big one. On second thought, he was glad he hadn't reached her on the phone. This apology wasn't something to be done over the phone. He had to see her—to apologize face-to-face.

He turned to Jerry. “What are you sitting there for? Let's get to work.”

CHAPTER ONE

San Francisco, Seven Months Later

AT LAST, ALL OF her hard work and sacrifice were going to pay off.

Clara Harrington, owner of the Perky Pink Wedding Company, sat on an old ladder-back chair in a small room at the back of one of San Francisco's oldest chapels. The historic building overlooked the Pacific Ocean. It was snubbed by many passersby because the outside was in need of a fresh coat of paint. But the inside still gleamed as Mrs. Mabel Green cared for it.

The Seabreeze Wedding Chapel had large windows in which to take in the breathtaking view. With the building sitting atop a cliff, looking out the windows at the front of the chapel, all you could see was the blue water of the Pacific Ocean. Talk about a stunning view. And only a remarkable setting would do for this very special event—an event Clara had been hired to plan down to the very last detail.

She glanced over at her client, Tula Fox, Hollywood's latest sweetheart. She was easily spotted with her pixie-style purple and black hair as well as her signature heavy eye makeup. The

young woman was in one of the two rooms at the back of the building.

Tula was barely twenty-two. And she was already working on her second marriage. Clara wondered if she had seemed as young at that age.

Clara jerked her thoughts to a halt. Nothing good would come of dredging up the past. She needed to focus on the here and now.

Tula was busy hunting for a wedding dress, but not any dress would do for such a special occasion. The groom was none other than the sexy Hugh Steadman, child-actor-turned-director. And he just happened to be Tula's ex-husband.

Everyone was hoping this second trip down the aisle would stick, including Clara. She knew what it was like when things didn't work out with the one you loved. When her thoughts strayed back to her ex, Andrew, as they did now and then, she jerked them back to the present.

With the paparazzi ravenous for any tips about Tula's star-studded wedding, the details of the intimate nuptials had to be kept hush-hush. As such, none of the usual Hollywood hot spots would do for the ceremony and instead Tula had picked San Francisco for her wedding.

Clara had been nearly dumbstruck when Tula's assistant had contacted her about arranging a private but beautiful wedding. And that's when Clara thought of this chapel. She had stumbled across it when she'd first moved to San Francisco and had hosted other weddings there.

There was one tiny hitch with her plan, the chapel was about to go up for sale. Clara knew this was prime oceanfront property. It would be snapped up so fast that her head would spin. A developer would most likely level the chapel and put up oceanside condos. The thought of losing this sweet chapel with all of its charm and history saddened her.

She planned to speak with the owner, Mrs. Mabel Green, after this meeting with Tula to confirm that the property wouldn't be sold before the wedding. If the worst happened, perhaps Tula would kick in some more money to persuade Mabel to delay the sale.

Clara pulled up a spreadsheet on her digital tablet while her friend and bridal boutique owner, Liza Howard, consulted with Tula. With this being a rushed wedding, everything had been a challenge, from reserving the venue to having little to no time to order a wedding dress. But Clara refused to be defeated.

“This won't work!” Tula's exclamation pierced the peaceful silence. “This wedding is a total disaster.”

What? Clara's finger struck the wrong key on her tablet. She glanced up, hoping she hadn't heard correctly. The frown on Tula's pretty face said otherwise. Clara longed to tell her that she was being overly dramatic. The wedding was far from being a disaster. Clara pressed her lips together, holding back the rebuttal. Mentally, she counted to ten. This wasn't her first difficult bride. Nor would Tula be her last. But this rising star was Clara's most important client. It was imperative that she keep the bride happy.

She would make this work. She would. Somehow.

Clara glanced at Liza, whose long brown hair was twisted and clipped at the back of her head. Liza turned, meeting Clara's gaze. The woman's eyes widened, reflecting the worry churning within Clara. Liza didn't say a word, as though not quite sure what to say in this tense moment.

Clara's gaze moved to the bride, who stood on a platform in front of the single window in the room. The sunshine gleamed off the crystals strategically sewn into the dress. It was a magnificent sight. How could Tula not like it?

Clara swallowed down her anxiety, hoping when she spoke that she would evoke a soft and congenial tone. "The dress is beautiful. If you tell me the problem, maybe we can find a remedy?"

Tula turned her pleading eyes to Liza. "Are you sure you can't get me an original dress?"

"I'd be glad to as long as you delay your wedding."

Tula shook her head. "I can't. The stress of keeping this a secret from the paparazzi is too much. I... I'm afraid Hugh is going to back out of the whole thing."

"Don't worry. Everything will be fine. We'll find a way to make this your dream wedding." Clara hoped her voice sounded confident. Would the groom really back out? She hoped not. She knew how that sort of rejection cut deep and left lasting scars. "What don't you like about the dress?"

Tula glanced in the mirror, turning this way and that way. “The dress, it’s too frilly. Too puffy. And the shoes”—she kicked off the heels—“they’re not right. They’re not me.”

Really? Clara glanced down at the pink strappy heels. They were the most stunning shoes she’d ever laid her eyes on. She’d love to own a pair, but there was no way she could swing the staggering price tag that accompanied the designer shoes.

Clara moved forward and picked up the heels to examine them. “Are they too small?”

“No. They fit perfectly. But they’re the wrong color.” She pointed to her hair. “Purple’s my color. Besides, they’re... They’re too girly.”

Girly? Seriously? They were an exclusive, much-sought-after custom design. “I thought you liked the idea of making your wedding unique. They would certainly make a statement.”

“They would. But that was before.” The star’s shoulders sagged. “Hugh says he wants a more traditional wedding. Our first go-around was a funky wedding in Vegas with an Elvis impersonator, and we all know what a disaster that turned out to be. The marriage didn’t even last two months.” Tula sighed loudly. “Maybe he’s right. Maybe something more traditional will give us the luck we need to make this work.” Tula’s gaze met hers. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “I... I don’t want to lose him again.”

“You won’t.” Clara didn’t know if that was true or not. Tula wasn’t an easy woman to keep up with. One minute she was demanding and rigid, the next moment she was vulnerable and insecure. It would be a lot to live with on a daily basis. “Okay. So pink shoes aren’t exactly traditional, but no worries, this can be fixed.” In the grand scheme of wedding planning, finding more traditional shoes for the bride would be a cakewalk. “I’ll send them back to the designer.”

“Thank them. And explain that we decided to go another direction.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of everything. That’s what I’m here for.”

“I knew I could count on you.” Tula smiled at her before moving to the rack of wedding gowns. Luckily, they were all traditional white. Hopefully, there would be something there that would appeal to the bride. “After all, you are a miracle worker. You found the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel and were able to book it on short notice. But don’t you think this place needs some work?” Tula glanced around, and her nose crinkled up in disdain.

The truth was that the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel wasn’t new to her. She’d been planning weddings there for more than a year. Some had been on the beach below the chapel but most had been inside the chapel. But she didn’t publicize it, because she didn’t want other wedding planners to home in on her spot.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure it looks fabulous.” A bunch of flowers and candles would hide any blemishes. She hoped.

The worried lines on Tula’s face smoothed. “I’m so glad your name came up when we were talking wedding planners. You’re making my life so much easier.”

This was Clara’s long-awaited opening. “You never did say how you heard of my services.”

“Actually, it was my fiancé who suggested you. I don’t know the details, but he said the Perky Pink Wedding Company has an excellent reputation, that you’re a stickler for details, and you’d provide a high level of discretion. I personally liked your business name. Even if purple is a cooler color.”

“Thank you. Glad you like the name. I wanted something unique—something that would stand out in people’s memories.”

“It’s memorable, all right.” Tula inspected a pair of white heels and with a crinkle of her nose, promptly rejected them as well. “The name suits you. You know with your pink car and your pink clothes.”

Clara glanced down at her white blouse and pink slacks. Besides it being a memorable name, pink was her favorite color. There was something so cheery about it.

But back to her original question about who recommended her service to an A-list actress, Clara was still no closer to finding the answer. Whoever it was, she was eternally grateful

to them. Nine years ago, she'd been let go from her position as an assistant to Washington DC's most illustrious and sought-after wedding planner. Her mentor had said she'd taught her everything she could and it was time for Clara to spread her wings.

The news couldn't have come at a worse time. It had been the week of Clara's own wedding. A familiar sense of loss and sadness swept over her. As quickly as the memories came to her, she shoved them to the back of her mind, refusing to dwell on what would never be.

She needed to stay focused on her work. Once this star-studded wedding took place, the agreed upon contract stated she would be allowed to use both the bride's and groom's names as prior clients on her website. But for this wedding to be successful, it had to be kept off the media's radar.

"None of these are going to work." Tula scanned the gowns without even bothering to remove any of them from the rack.

Clara rushed over and selected her favorite, hoping Tula would change her mind. "I found this gown and thought you might like it. Initially, I picked it out because of the way the hemline rises in the front, showing off the bride's shoes. I thought it'd be perfect with the pink heels, but it'd work with whatever shoes you select."

"It's not bad." Tula moved closer to examine the gown. "Wait. Is that a price tag? Is this off-the-rack?"

Clara hesitantly nodded. "We don't have much time—"

“But I can’t be seen in a run-of-the-mill dress—a dress anyone can afford. Can you imagine the headlines? The tabloids would have a field day.”

Clara couldn’t believe anyone would call the dress run-of-the-mill. It was absolutely stunning. She’d been so sure that Tula would love it, too. And she had, until she’d realized it was off-the-rack. If only Clara hadn’t been in such a rush and had remembered to remove the price tag.

“With the wedding in just a few weeks, we don’t have the time for an original gown to be made.” Clara glanced over at Liza, who nodded in agreement.

“It can’t be just any dress,” Tula said firmly. “It has to be special.”

Talk about a tall order. It couldn’t be off-the-rack, but there wasn’t time to design a gown. What did that leave?

A thought popped into Clara’s mind. “What if we took an off-the-rack gown and modified it, making it an original of sorts? Would that work?”

Both Tula and Liza paused as though to consider the idea. And then in unison, they nodded. Now they just had to find the right gown to modify. That shouldn’t be too hard. She hoped.

Clara made a note on her tablet. “Now let me pull up some shoes for you to pick from.”

Tula shook her head. “I don’t have time. I have to get back to LA. You know what I want. Pull together some other dresses. Preferably with a short hemline.”

Clara held out the tablet to Tula. “But what about the shoes?”

Instead of looking at the snapshot of gorgeous heels, Tula gave Clara a once-over, taking in Clara’s conservative outfit. “I think you’ll have a better chance of picking out something traditional than I will.”

Clara refused to react to the backhanded compliment. *Stay focused. She’s a client. A very important client.*

Summoning her professional voice, Clara said, “How about I put together a few photos of potential shoes and email them to you?”

“Make sure they’re from designers I’ve worked with in the past. They’ll be more likely to send over a free pair just for the publicity of me wearing them for my wedding.”

Clara was surprised at how much Tula worried about freebies and the prices of things, but she kept her thoughts to herself. The deposit check had cleared the bank. That was what mattered.

While Tula changed back into her street clothes, Clara let her gaze scan over her lengthy to-do-list. The purple calla lilies and white roses had been special ordered. And the tapas menu had been approved by Tula. Now if only the bride could decide on a dress.

Clara glanced up at Tula. “When will you be back? We’re running out of time.”

Tula slipped on her white high-top canvas tennis shoes. “I’ll be back the day after tomorrow. That will give you time to find some more shoes and dresses.”

Clara inwardly groaned. She’d already offered Tula the best dresses she could find. She was going to have to think outside the box for the next round, because she wasn’t exaggerating about running out of time. The wedding was in three weeks. Just the thought of the narrow timeline sent Clara’s heart racing, and her palms grew moist. She told herself that once they found the dress, everything else would fall into place. She fervently hoped so.

Tula rushed out the door, complaining that she had to get back to LA for a promotional appearance. Clara, on the other hand, took her time cleaning up the room and thanking Liza for all of her help and patience. Once everything was sorted, she slipped her digital tablet in her oversized pink purse and grabbed the stack of bridal magazines she’d brought along for any brainstorming sessions.

As she neared the chapel door, her thoughts were focused on the large amount of work she had to accomplish in the next forty-eight hours. Talk about one of life’s biggest challenges. Okay, maybe it wasn’t that bad, but she doubted she’d get much sleep between now and her next meeting with Tula.

She’d just locked up the door when she glanced up, finding someone coming up the steps. They came to a stop next to her. Clara tilted her chin upward and shielded her eyes from the sun with her hand. After her eyes adjusted, she took in the

man's handsome face—a very familiar face. Her heart skipped a beat. Dark, short-cropped hair framed an angular face with a chiseled jaw.

Her gaze moved to his eyes but quickly lowered, noticing something new. A scar. It snaked its way along his jaw on the left side. What in the world had happened to him?

Her gaze rose again, meeting his. She'd recognize his cool blue eyes anywhere. They were forever imprinted upon her mind. When they focused on her, like they were now, it was like they could see clear through her to all of her secrets and insecurities. She swallowed hard.

Andrew!

What is he doing here?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

AT LAST, SHE STOOD before him.
Flesh and blood instead of a dream.

Andrew knew he should say something—anything. Instead he stood there, drinking in Clara’s beauty. How was it possible she was even more beautiful than he recalled?

Her questioning gaze bore into him. His heart pounded in his ears. And the words he’d rehearsed on the short flight from LA to San Francisco had scattered and disappeared.

He was left speechless and in awe of her. Clara’s blond hair was pulled back and braided. And her face had only a trace of makeup. She didn’t need makeup. Her beauty started on the inside and radiated outward.

His initial instinct was to sweep her into his arms and kiss her—it’d been so long since he’d held her close and felt her lips pressed to his. But he could tell by the guarded look in her eyes that any such overture would not be welcome. And that was probably for the best.

The sunlight reflected off Clara's pendant, catching his attention. A gold chain held it, dangling just above her cleavage. The heart-shaped pendant was studded with tiny diamonds that shimmered when the light hit them. It was something new—perhaps a token of love by some other man?

The thought of her involved with someone else stabbed at his chest, but it was inevitable. She was young and quite attractive with a sweet personality. Of course men would be eager to date her. An uneasiness churned in his gut. It was best not to think any more about the pendant.

When his gaze returned to her face, Clara's complexion had dramatically paled. For a moment, he wondered if she was about to pass out. Every muscle in his body grew tense, ready to spring into action should she start to fall. A few stressful moments later, when he was fairly certain she was steady on her feet, he realized she was waiting for him to speak.

He climbed the last step until they were on even footing. "Clara, it's good to see you. How are you?"

"I... I'm good." A breeze swept past them, sweeping back the strands of hair framing her face.

"Glad to hear it." He forced his voice to sound as normal as possible. Still, it was so strange standing there and talking to her like they were strangers. "Well, go ahead." When she sent him a puzzled look, he added, "Aren't you going to ask me how I am?"

She blinked repeatedly, as though making sure he wasn't a figment of her imagination. "Um, how are you?"

“I’m good. No complaints.” It was obvious even to the most casual observer that he wasn’t the man he used to be. He could complain, but what good would that do? He’d been given a second chance to fix some wrongs—not everyone received such a blessing. That had to be enough.

“Now that the pleasantries are out of the way, what are you doing here?”

He supposed that was a legitimate question considering this was a wedding chapel. “I didn’t mean to catch you off guard. I thought we could talk.”

Her fine brows drew together. “You knew I’d be here? But how?”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

When he’d flown to California, his first stop had been to visit his half-brother, Hugh, in hopes of mending some fences. It was only then that he’d learned of Hugh’s upcoming wedding. And much to Andrew’s surprise, his brother had asked him to be his best man. How could Andrew refuse? This was a real chance to create a relationship with his sibling where none had existed before.

It was then that Andrew had decided to recommend Clara’s wedding services. At the time, he thought it was a sign—an open doorway just waiting for him to step back into Clara’s life. Now, he wondered if it had just been a bunch of wishful thinking.

“Now isn’t a good time for me.” Clara glanced down at the stack of magazines in her arms. “Excuse me, I have to be going.”

She dashed past him and down the steps to the parking lot. He started after her, but his steps were slow and lumbered. It had taken him more than a year of surgeries and intensive therapy to get him this far. But he was on his way to being his old self, or rather a modest resemblance of the man he used to be.

After all he’d gone through to be there, he wasn’t about to let her get away so easily. “Clara, please wait.”

He ignored the searing pain in his leg as he hurried down the steps. By the time he reached the bottom step, his injured muscles were in total rebellion. It was all he could do to keep moving.

Clara crossed the parking lot, headed for a little pink convertible. He willed her to wait for him. Still, she kept moving. He sighed, knowing he’d never catch up to her.

“Clara.” He kept moving toward her. “Please.”

At last, she stopped next to the car. Her shoulders were held in a rigid line when she turned, waiting for him. “Why are you here now? Do you know how long I waited for you to come to your senses after our wedding fell apart? But you didn’t. No visit. No phone call. No nothing.”

The warm day suddenly grew chilly. “I thought about it. Honestly, I did.”

“But you were too busy with work, weren’t you?”

He glanced down at the pavement. “It was easier to work than to think about what had happened with us.”

He deserved her anger, but he still hoped they could work their way past the pain and at least make peace between them. “I know things between us ended badly, but I’m here now. Can we make a fresh start?”

Her eyes momentarily widened as though she’d realized she’d forgotten her well-groomed manners. The tip of her tongue moistened her pink glossy lips. “I’m sorry. You just caught me off guard. I wasn’t expecting to see you.”

He approached her. “I understand. How are you, really? A lot of time has passed.” When her brows arched and her eyes reflected her disbelief, he added, “Am I not allowed to be curious? Until the end, we’d been able to talk to each other about anything. I remember—”

She shook her head. “Don’t do that. Don’t meander any further down memory lane. I don’t want to remember.” Her voice brooked no argument. She turned her back to him as she placed an armload of magazines on her car seat.

He knew if they were to get past their breakup, they’d have to hash out some of the past. But she was right; now wasn’t the time to push the subject. “Am I at least allowed to know how you’re getting on?”

She turned back to him. “I’m great. I have my own wedding planning business here in San Francisco. It’s really taking off,

and now that I'm getting some well-known clients, the sky's the limit."

"I'm happy for you. I always knew you could achieve whatever you set your mind to."

She glanced away. "Not everyone would agree with you."

He knew she was referring to her father. Andrew would guess her father was none too happy about Clara's move to the West Coast or her intention to stick with her wedding-planning business.

She glanced at a delicate wristwatch with gold trim that was more like a fancy bracelet. "I should be going. I have a meeting soon."

The lines bracketing Clara's expressive eyes and the shadows lurking beneath told him she was working herself too hard. Worry settled over him. What was driving her to work so hard? Was it her pursuit of success? Or something more?

Clara definitely wasn't the same person he'd once known. Funnily enough, she used to be the one trying to persuade him to lighten up on his workload. He'd always brushed off her concerns, assuring her that he would one day, when things slowed down and he was more established.

In the end, he'd never slowed down. He'd missed all of those opportunities to make happy memories with Clara. And when the accident forced him to slow down, he found himself all alone. He didn't want to see Clara follow in his footsteps and have to learn that life lesson the hard way.



What was he thinking?

Clara could see the wheels in his mind turn. She pressed her lips together, holding back her string of questions. The truth of the matter was that she wanted to know everything about what had happened to him since they'd been apart. What had caused the scar on his jaw—no, it was none of her business.

It was best to make a hasty exit. She opened the car door. Nothing good would come of visiting the past. And though it was just as easy to walk to Mabel's house next door, driving there would put a distinct end to this very uncomfortable reunion.

Then, realizing she couldn't drive off until she knew one thing, she turned back. "You didn't say why you're here at this chapel."

"I'm here for the wedding."

"What wedding?" Wait. Was he trying to tell her that he was getting married? The thought soured her stomach. "You're getting married? Here?"

For a moment, the only thing to be heard were bird calls and the rolling ocean. Her heart squeezed. Had he totally moved on?

And then she realized it had been a long time—even if her tattered heart said otherwise.

He cleared his throat. "No. Not me."

Her heart slowed to its normal rhythm. “I don’t understand. If you’re not getting married, what are you doing here?”

Lines etching his eyes and mouth became quite noticeable, as though he were wincing in pain. He shifted his weight to his right leg. “Clara—”

“Wait.” They may be exes, but that didn’t mean she didn’t care about his wellbeing. “Do you need to sit down?”

He shook his head. “I’m fine.”

Sure, he was. And she had a castle to sell him. Male pride at its finest. She sighed, not about to fight about it. She obviously couldn’t force him to sit down if he wasn’t willing. *Stubborn man*. “Okay, what were you saying about a wedding?”

“I’m part of the Fox-Steadman wedding.”

“What? But no one told me.” She opened her digital tablet and began to type.

“I’m sure Tula just forgot to mention me.”

Her gaze narrowed in on him. “Am I really supposed to believe you know Tula Fox?”

He smiled, easing the lines marring his handsome face. “Actually, I do know her, as strange as that may sound. I just saw her yesterday.”

She narrowed her gaze on him, trying to sort out the truth. “Nice try, but I’m not buying it. Either you saw her leaving here and you put two and two together, or you overheard someone talking about the wedding.”

“I’m perfectly serious. I’m the best man.” While she stood there, silently trying to figure out if head trauma was among his injuries, Andrew said, “Hugh is my half-brother. My mother’s son.”

Clara searched his face for some hint that he was pulling a fast one on her, but his expression remained perfectly serious. She shook her head. “I don’t understand. I didn’t think you had any contact with that part of your family.”

“I didn’t... Until recently. When my mother left me and my father, you know, when I was just a little kid, well, she cut us completely out of her life. From what I’ve learned from Hugh, she pretended like we didn’t exist.”

“I’m so sorry. I can’t even imagine how painful that must have been for you.” She recalled how he’d avoided talking about his mother any time the subject came up. And then there was Mother’s Day. It’d always been tough on him.

“My mother was a piece of work. Anyway, after she died in a car accident, Hugh found my name and number in her belongings. He was curious to learn about his big brother. When he first called, I was still in high school. Back then, I thought I knew everything. And I didn’t want anything to do with him.”

Clara tried to figure out where he was going with this. “Since then you’ve changed your mind?”

Andrew nodded. “None of the past was Hugh’s fault. I recently realized I’d been putting the blame on the wrong person. It’s tough undoing the past, but we’re both trying.”

“I’m happy for you. Really, I am—”

“A lot has changed since you left DC.”

“Apparently—”

“Clara!” Mabel waved. The older woman crossed the parking lot, wearing a serious expression instead of her sunny smile. She came to a stop next to Clara. She glanced back and forth between Clara and Andrew as though realizing in her haste she might have interrupted something. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“You didn’t.” Clara actually welcomed the interruption, needing a moment to absorb all she’d just learned. “Andrew, allow me to introduce Mabel. She owns the chapel. Mabel, this is Andrew Cross. He’s, uh, the groom’s brother.”

Mabel smiled and shook Andrew’s hand. “Welcome. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.” She turned back to Clara. “We really do need to talk as soon as possible.”

“Um, sure. I have a couple of things to go over with you, too.” But she didn’t want to have the conversation in front of Andrew. “How about I meet you at your place in a couple of minutes?”

“That would be good.” Mabel’s gaze moved back to Andrew. The smile returned to her face. “I hope you enjoy your time in San Francisco.” And then Mabel walked away. She was quite agile for someone of her age.

Clara turned back to Andrew. This was a legitimate excuse for her to make a hasty exit. “I really should go take care of

this problem.”

“Go ahead and do what you need to. I’ll just have a look around while I wait.”

“Wait? For me?” When he nodded, Clara added, “But I might be a while. And then I have a deadline I have to meet.” She couldn’t put off finding Tula the perfect dress.

Disappointment reflected in his eyes. “I understand. I’ll let you go then. But we aren’t done. I’ll be in touch soon.”

She shook her head. “It’s not a good idea. We said everything we needed to a long time ago. I really do have to go. Take care of yourself.” She turned and rushed to catch up with Mabel as she crossed the parking lot.

What in the world had just happened back there?

Clara’s stomach quivered with nerves as she clutched her purse strap. When she glanced down at her hands, she noticed they had a slight tremble. How was it possible that after all this time, he could still get to her?

Not that she still loved him. No way. Once bitten, twice shy, and all of that jazz. Besides, she didn’t have time for a relationship—with anyone. Her business was on the verge of taking off. All she had to do was stay focused.

Once she caught up with Mabel, the older woman insisted on making them some coffee to go with the snickerdoodles she’d baked that morning. Clara had quickly learned that Mabel liked to be busy whether it was baking or going to her bridge club. She was always on the go. In fact, Clara had a

hard time catching up with Mabel when she first got the idea to use the chapel for weddings. Once Mabel heard what she had in mind, Mabel was happy to help both with renting out the chapel and officiating the ceremonies.

Clara gave her coffee a stir. “The wedding plans are coming together.” She said it more confidently than she felt at the moment. “It’s the most beautiful backdrop for a wedding.”

“I always thought so.” Mabel held out the plate of cookies for Clara to take one. “My Tom and I were married there.”

“It must have been a beautiful wedding.”

“Oh, it was. My father married us on a sunny Saturday morning. Wait right here.” Mabel rushed off.

While Clara waited for her friend to return, she munched on a cookie that was baked to perfection. She eyed up the plate of cookies. Her sweet tooth urged her to take another one, but the snugness of her waistband had her hesitating.

“Go ahead. Have another one,” Mabel said as though reading her thoughts. “Otherwise I’ll have to eat them all by myself. I don’t get many visitors these days.”

Clara took another cookie. She’d just have to cut back on her dinner. Sometimes—no, most of the time—that was easier said than done, but she’d worry about it later.

Mabel sat down again with a picture frame pressed to her chest. “I wanted to show this to you.” She handed over the photo. “This is Tom and I on our wedding day.”

As Mabel continued to tell Clara about her wedding day, Clara stared at a much younger Mabel. Her hair had been dark and long. The smile on her face said that she'd just married her true love. And the sparkle in her eyes said that she had been excited about their future. Her groom had been tall and handsome, wearing a military uniform.

“You made a beautiful couple.”

Mabel beamed. “We complemented each other in many ways. I miss him so much.”

Clara had once thought she and Andrew would have a similar romance story. But in the end, she hadn't been able to compete with his career. It took up all of his time and left her home alone most evenings. It never would have worked out.

“Did I tell you that my father helped my grandfather build the chapel?” Mabel's voice interrupted Clara's trip down memory lane.

“No, I don't think you did. That's very special.”

“My grandfather and then my father married a lot of couples there. Eventually my husband took over. Oh, wait.” Mabel rushed off again and quickly returned with a thick brown leather-bound book. “This book has the names of hundreds of couples that were married in the chapel—some were famous.”

Mabel handed it to her. Clara opened it and began flipping through the gold-leaf pages. There was name after name, year after year.

“It was built how long ago?”

“More than a hundred years ago. And it makes having to part with it that much harder.”

Clara swallowed hard. “Has there been an offer?”

“Not yet. But I have a very eager real estate agent, who thinks it will sell quickly.”

Sadly, so did Clara. There was something about the little chapel that drew her in. She would love to own it. “How much are you asking for it?”

Mabel’s eyes widened. “You want to buy it?”

“I’d love to.” But even with this Hollywood wedding, she doubted she’d have enough for the down payment.

Mabel smiled. “Let me talk to my real estate agent and see if he determined the price.”

Clara knew the price would be steep. And if she were to ask her family to help out, it wouldn’t be a problem, but this was her career, and she would do it on her own. “I’d appreciate it.”

“And don’t worry, you can still have the wedding at the chapel.”

“Thank you.”

Three weeks until the big day and there was still so much to do. Although now that Andrew was in the wedding party, she might be a bit distracted. But as she thought it over, she realized this development wasn’t as bad as she’d initially thought. She’d see him at the fitting, at the rehearsal dinner,

and at the wedding. Three run-ins—three well-chaperoned events. They probably wouldn't even have a chance to talk.

Clara didn't know if it was Mabel's company or the cookies, but she began to relax. This wedding would work out. Andrew being there was no big deal. At least that was what she wanted to believe.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEXT MORNING, CLARA sat in her San Francisco office, staring blindly at the computer monitor. She glanced around, wondering what Andrew would think of what she'd done for herself. It might not be the fanciest suite of offices, and it might not be situated in the poshest part of town, but she'd paid for the lease on her own—without any help from her family. She'd dipped into her dwindling savings—money she'd earned while working in DC. She just hoped the building's rustic charms made up for the less-than-impressive address.

Her thoughts strayed to the Seabreeze Chapel. She would love to buy the place. Talk about a stunning location and a breathtaking view. She exhaled a dreamy sigh.

And then she gave herself a mental shake. The chapel was most definitely out of her financial reach. She needed to concentrate on making Tula's wedding a huge success because that wedding would make or break her wedding planning business.

The Perky Pink Wedding Company had to succeed, because she didn't have a backup plan. Instead of taking a role in her family's charitable foundation, she'd followed her heart—making romantic dreams come true for brides. Her father had been so upset with her when he thought she'd thumbed her nose at his life's work. It wasn't the truth—not even close. Still, he'd cut her off financially. To this day, they weren't speaking. His choice, not hers.

Her heart still panged when she recalled her father calling her work frivolous. He insisted he wouldn't release her trust fund until she came to her senses. In the end, all he'd done was make her even more determined to strike out on her own and to make her business a success.

Clara halted the disturbing memories. All of this unwanted introspection was Andrew's fault. He was the absolute last person she'd expected to see at the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel. It wasn't exactly a tourist destination.

Andrew was the reason she planned others' happily-ever-afters and not her own. She'd tried dating a few times, but when she continually found herself comparing each man to Andrew, what was the point in going out? They all came up lacking in one respect or another.

Yesterday she'd immediately noticed Andrew wasn't the same man she'd once loved. Gone were his designer suits and colorful ties. He'd had on a blue oxford with the sleeves partially rolled up, jeans—faded ones at that—and loafers.

Definitely a more casual look for him than she'd become accustomed to seeing him wear.

But more than that, she'd noticed how he favored his left leg. What was up with that? On top of that, he'd lost some weight—not that he'd had any extra pounds to lose. And there had been a scar trailing up his jaw on the left side. That was most definitely new. And somehow it made him even sexier and more tempting.

Let it go. It's none of your business. What happens to Andrew is not your concern.

Great advice. Yet this was a case of it being easier said than done. And what did he find so important that he had to talk to her after all of this time? Surely the fresh start he'd mentioned didn't include them getting back together, because that was never going to happen.

A rapid, soft knock at her closed office door drew Clara from her thoughts. She focused back on the computer monitor to realize that her finger had rested on the space bar, making a mess of the email she'd been writing.

“Come in.”

Her assistant, Brooke Carson, rushed inside and promptly closed the door. Clara's interest was piqued. Brooke usually didn't make a point of closing the door. Either someone was in the outer office who made her uncomfortable, or she had information that she didn't want anyone to walk in and overhear.

Clara really hoped it was the second because she just wasn't up for dealing with difficult clients right now. She needed some downtime to regroup after the way Andrew's sudden appearance had rattled her. She'd thought she'd let go of that part of her life. Obviously, she hadn't done a good enough job.

Clara skipped the small talk. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. It's what's right." Brooke smiled brightly, as though she were holding the winning lottery ticket.

"Brooke, don't start with the word games. If it's about the Fox wedding—"

"It isn't. There's a really hot guy here. His name is Mr. Smith, and he wants you to plan a party for him."

"What? I don't have time for that, not with this headliner wedding and everything."

"But Mr. Smith has an appointment."

"Why would you give him an appointment when you know how busy I am?"

"It was set up a while back, and I totally forgot about it." The smile slipped from Brooke's face. "He seems like a really nice guy. What should I do?"

Maybe this man would be reasonable and let her recommend another party-planning service. She had an entire list of them. Surely someone would be able to fit him in—she hoped.

"Send him in."

“You’re going to like him.” Brooke smiled again as she walked away.

Seconds later, the man was ushered through the doorway. Clara got to her feet to greet him. When her gaze landed on her newest client, the breath caught in her throat. This was not Mr. Smith.

Her pulse picked up its pace. “Andrew, what are you doing here?”

He smiled and shook his head. “You really do need to work on your greetings.”

She sighed. He was right, but he kept catching her off guard. She’d always prided herself on maintaining her composure, but Andrew was the exception to that rule—in fact, he was the exception to every rule—from his corny come-on lines that made her laugh, to his toe-curling, mind-blowing kisses.

Don’t think about that now.

Think about work.

Not his kisses. Or being held in his arms. Definitely not that.

He moved toward her with a noticeable limp. She glanced away, pretending she hadn’t noticed, but the questions circled round in her mind. She refused to ask. He’d tell her when he was ready.

Andrew held out his hand to shake hers. Her gaze moved from his outstretched arm to his face. His eyes gleamed with a challenge. Seriously?

Not about to back down, she slipped her hand into his. Right away, she knew she'd made a mistake. A tremor raced up her arm and settled in her chest, making her heart beat faster. She quickly withdrew her hand.

Realizing Brooke was still lingering at the doorway, Clara glanced her way. "Thanks. I've got this."

Brooke's eyes twinkled with curiosity. Clara already knew that later there would be many questions about Andrew—questions she didn't want to answer. Besides being her employee, Brooke was also one of her closest friends. They'd met the first week Clara had moved to San Francisco, when they'd both been waiting to view the same low-rent, one-bedroom apartment. In the end, they'd ended up with apartments in the same complex. So besides being co-workers, they were also neighbors.

The click of the door being closed jarred Clara from her meandering thoughts. She moved back behind her desk and sat down. Without any further physical contact, she hoped to keep her thoughts on track.

"Andrew, why are you here?" She leaned back, causing the secondhand chair to groan. Heat rushed to her cheeks as she returned to the upright position, making the chair creak again. "And what's with calling yourself Mr. Smith?"

"Sorry about that. I knew if I used my real name, you wouldn't take the appointment, and I really need your help."

He was right, she would have found an excuse to avoid him. Still, she couldn't help but wonder what was so important that

he'd go to so much bother. "What sort of help?"

"I need to arrange a bachelor party for my brother. And since I've been given the honor of being his best man, I need it to be extra special. Now that we've gotten to know each other, I want to know..." Andrew shifted his weight from one foot to other. "Well, I want him to know that I'm really happy we're brothers. And... And I'm sorry about the past."

Wow. The man she'd been engaged to never would have said those words. Something big must have happened to cause this transformation. "I still don't think I'm the right person to help you."

"I'm running out of time. You're well aware, there isn't much time to plan an elaborate party with the wedding just a few weeks away."

She was confused. Was he trying to say that he was only interested in her professional skills? "And this is what you wanted to talk to me about at the chapel?"

He nodded. "What did you think I wanted?"

"Um, nothing." Heat swirled in her chest and rose up her neck. When he'd mentioned them having a fresh start, he obviously hadn't been referring to their personal relationship. She'd obviously spent too much time around hopeful brides.

His gaze met hers. "So will you do it?"

Andrew had a way of putting her body and mind in conflict with each other. Her gaze strayed across his mouth—a mouth that had kissed her so many times. She forced her gaze to meet

his. Being around him was like playing with matches. One spark, and she'd get burned again.

As much as she applauded him for reconciling with his brother, she had to watch out for herself. "I can't help you."

His brows lifted. "I thought you'd want to do it, seeing as you're in charge of the wedding itself. This would ensure that any word of the nuptials wouldn't be leaked to the press. It'd be all in-house."

He was good. She'd give him that much. But she was better at this war of words. "You forgot one thing. I'm fully booked."

"That's why I made my appointment a while back."

She pulled up his information on her computer and immediately noticed his large deposit—so large it would help the expansion of her business. *Her business*. She loved the sound of it. There was something about being able to build her business all on her own—if only her family could be happy for her.

"Clara?"

She glanced over at Andrew. He was waiting for confirmation that she would take on his party. She mentally listed the pros and cons of taking on this job. In the end, it came down to finances. She honestly couldn't afford to turn him away. But could she risk letting him get close to her again?

And then a thought came to her. She didn't have to handle his account personally. She hadn't become a modestly

successful event planner without thinking outside the box now and again.

She lifted her chin ever so slightly. “We’ll do it.”

“Great.” He sent her a knowing smile, as though he’d assumed she wouldn’t be able to turn down him or his large down payment. “Here’s what I was thinking—”

“Whoa.” She held up a hand to stop him. “Slow down.”

“But since we’re short on time, I thought you’d want to get a jump start on this.”

“True. But with my calendar being so full, I think we should have my assistant, Brooke, work on your party.”

A frown pulled at his lips. “You mean you’re pawning me off on her.”

She subdued a smile at her cleverness. Oh yes, she was, but she was pleading the Fifth. “Brooke is quite capable and truly invaluable to me. If she hits any snags, she’ll consult with me.”

His dark brows scrunched together. “But I paid for *your* services.”

“And you’ll be getting them.”

The frown lines on his handsome face deepened. He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair as though preparing for a counterattack. “I don’t like this.”

“Don’t worry. This will all work out.” Especially from the standpoint that she wouldn’t have to deal with him personally.

Once he thought about it, he'd realize her plan was best for all concerned.

Frown lines marred his handsome face. "Everything has to be just right. I'm still building a relationship with my brother, and I don't want to let him down."

"You have my word that everything will be just the way you want it. But if you have doubts, I can recommend another event planner—"

"No." There was no hesitation in his answer. "That won't be necessary."

"Then let's call Brooke in here and get started. Once we get the details of what you're interested in for entertainment and the menu, it'll take us a couple days to put together some options for you to choose from."

Clara was quite pleased with herself. She'd handled what could have been a very sticky situation with professional fortitude. Maybe everything she'd felt when their hands touched was nothing more than nerves. Maybe she was truly and completely over him.

CHAPTER FOUR

“**I**’VE GOT IT ALL under control.”

Clara smiled as she held up her tablet displaying a spreadsheet with the progress of each part of the Fox wedding. It included the budget, an accelerated timeline for the wedding, and so much more. Every item for the wedding had a line in the master file and a link to another document with detailed notes. She was nothing if not organized. Now if only the bride would decide on a dress.

Tula stood in one of the two rooms at the back of the chapel while Liza laced Tula into yet another wedding gown. “Clara, how’s the bachelor party coming along?”

She knew about that? Clara swallowed hard, wondering if Tula also knew she and Andrew had once upon a time been a couple—an engaged couple. Talk about making things more than awkward. “While I’m personally handling every aspect of the ceremony and reception, I have my assistant working on the plans for the bachelor party.”

V-shaped lines formed between Tula’s sculpted brows. “What do you mean your assistant is handling it?”

Clara's body tensed. She met Tula's narrowed gaze. The woman was not going to intimidate her. After all, Clara wasn't the first wedding planner to involve her assistant in wedding plans. Just as Tula wasn't the first bride to panic over matters that were well in hand.

Clara sat up straighter. "With all of my attention on the details for your big day, my assistant is more than capable of setting up the bachelor party—"

"Is this wedding too much for you to handle?" Tula arched a brow as she stared at her. "Maybe you're too inexperienced—"

"I'm on top of everything—"

"Except the bachelor party." Tula glanced in the mirror at the latest wedding dress. It was her tenth dress that morning. The knee-length creation had a demure white polka dot overlay with a sweetheart neckline. She turned back to Clara. "You know how important this wedding is to me. Nothing can go wrong."

"And it won't."

"Good. I knew you'd understand that it's best you personally oversee everything."

Wait. She hadn't said that. Her lips parted to set Tula straight, but the young woman was smiling at her image in the full-length mirror as Liza showed her how they could add a purple petticoat. And if they were to raise the hemline a couple of inches, the petticoat could peek out. Or they could gather the skirt a little on the side to show off the purple organza with

satin trim. The high-waisted dress wasn't frilly or traditional, but it was beautiful and fit Tula's personality.

As for personally planning the bachelor party, that definitely wouldn't work. Clara inwardly groaned. Aside from dealing with Andrew, the truth was she'd never planned one before. She'd always been involved in the bride's activities, not so much the groom's. She knew this would be a good experience, but it was such terrible timing, in more ways than one.

Not about to fret over the inevitable, Clara turned her attention back to the hunt for the perfect wedding dress. She couldn't stand the anticipation any longer. She had to know if they could mark finding a dress off her list. "What do you think?"

Tula turned this way and that way in front of the mirror. "Did you say this dress was handmade?"

Clara nodded. "I had it overnighted from a designer in Europe."

Tula glanced at Liza. "And you're sure we can put touches on it to make it a truly one-of-a-kind creation? After all, my wedding dress can't be the same as anyone else's. It has to be unique. Like me."

Liza assured her that she would do her best to make it an original. After they went back and forth over which changes to make, Tula turned to Clara. "What do you think?"

Really? Tula wanted her opinion? The actress usually had a mind of her own, but the fact she valued Clara's opinion meant

a lot. “I think the dress suits you.” And then a thought struck Clara, dampening her enthusiasm. She hesitated to mention it, but better now than later. “Is it traditional enough?”

Tula glanced back in the mirror. “Let’s face it, no matter how much Hugh wants me to be the traditional bride, I’m not one. I think this is a good compromise. Isn’t that the key to a good marriage?”

Clara nodded as her thoughts spiraled back to her engagement to Andrew. After they’d graduated—her from college, him from grad school—who’d have thought their careers would lead them to different cities? Still, looking through rose-colored glasses she’d figured that New York City wasn’t so far from DC—just a train ride away. And in the beginning, neither of them imagined the separation would last for so long.

She’d done everything she could to be the kind of woman he would want to marry—except giving up her career. She’d cut her long hair into a smart, trendy fashion. She’d switched her wardrobe from fun, flirty fashions to blues, blacks, and grays. She’d gladly worn sensible fashions more fitting an executive’s wife. Or at least Andrew’s vision of a quiet, supportive spouse. And where had it gotten her?

Maybe if she’d been more like herself, she’d have spoken up sooner, and they could have found a compromise between what he’d wanted for the future and her own needs. Instead, she’d ignored it all, hoping it would somehow work out on its

own. Oh, how much she'd learned since then. But it was too little, too late.

“Do you have them?”

Tula's voice drew Clara's thoughts back to the present. She glanced at Tula's expectant face, but she had no clue what had been said. “Um, sorry. What did you say?”

“I wanted to know if you brought the shoes with you.”

Clara gestured to the shoe boxes lined up along the wall, holding the shoes for Tula to try on. All three of them painstakingly went through the two dozen plus pairs of shoes, but none of them would do. They were either too flashy or too dowdy. None were just right.

Clara glanced around the room, hoping for some sort of inspiration. After all, the bride couldn't walk down the aisle in bare feet. And then her gaze landed on Tula's canvas shoes. Could it really be that simple?

She was hesitant to mention it to Tula. After all, she was a high-profile figure. Her wedding pictures would be sold to the highest-paying publication in the world. Everything had to be just right.

“You've thought of something. I can see it on your face.” Excitement laced Tula's words. “What is it?”

“Um, nothing.” Clara realized her idea was born of desperation. It just wasn't a viable solution.

“Oh, it's something. Tell me.”

Clara waved her off. “You’ll think it’s silly.”

“If you hadn’t noticed, my wedding is almost here, and I’m running out of options. What do you have in mind?”

Clara took a deep, steadying breath. “What if we got a white pair of high-tops and dyed them to match your petticoat?”

Silence filled the room. Clara glanced at Liza for some direction, but all she did was shrug her shoulders. They both turned back to Tula, who was once again staring in the mirror. The expression on her face was unreadable.

Clara mentally kicked herself. The woman had asked her for traditional, and so far she’d given her a non-traditional dress and now an even less traditional pair of shoes. What if her groom had a meltdown? It’d be all her fault.

“I love it. You’re wonderful!” Tula rushed over and gave her a brief hug. “Thanks to you, I realize that I just need to be myself and this wedding will be a success.”

She’d done all of that? “Um, you’re welcome. I really think Hugh will approve, especially if he sees you happy and relaxed.”

“I hope so.”

As Tula slipped out of her dress, Clara’s phone buzzed. She grabbed it and checked the caller ID. It was Brooke. Her assistant knew she had a meeting with Tula, and she wasn’t to be disturbed unless it was a dire emergency. *Please don’t let it be anything catastrophic.*

Clara slipped into the hallway, not wanting to be overheard.
“Brooke, what is it?”

“It’s Mr. Smith, um, Mr. Cross. He called and asked to speak with you. I told him you weren’t available. He wasn’t happy.”

Clara suppressed a sigh. “What did he want?”

“He wouldn’t say. He said he’d catch up with you later. I’m sorry. I didn’t know what else to tell him.”

“You don’t have to worry.” Remembering her conversation with Tula, she realized this was the perfect opportunity to tell Brooke about taking over the bachelor party plans. “I’m sorry I assigned his party to you. I shouldn’t have done it. Andrew is very particular about everything since this is his brother’s wedding. And”—she almost mentioned that the two men had been estranged most of their lives—“he’s nervous about making everything perfect.”

“I understand. Is there anything special you want me to do?”

Clara went on to accept her assistant’s timely offer. Clara handed off all of her current wedding/party clients, giving her the next couple of weeks to concentrate on the Fox wedding and everything it entailed. When she’d taken on this celebrity wedding, she’d known it would be involved, but she never thought it’d take over her life.

Or reunite her with Andrew.

CHAPTER FIVE

HE WASN'T ABOUT TO give up so easily.

After having no luck tracking Clara down at her office, Andrew recalled his conversation with his brother that morning where Hugh had mentioned Tula was off doing something for the wedding, which meant Clara would be involved. Andrew took a chance that Clara would be at the chapel.

He wheeled his rented black sedan into the massive parking area. He pulled into an empty spot and turned off the engine. Off to the side, he spotted Clara's metallic-pink convertible and a couple of other cars. If he knew his cars—and he did; he loved cars, the faster, the better—he was certain her car was an older model. That, combined with the secondhand furnishings at Clara's office, told him things weren't all roses for Clara—no matter what she wanted him to believe.

She had always promised that someday she'd get a pink sports car. He'd asked her once why she was waiting. After all, her family was flush with old family money. It'd taken a bit of

coaxing, but she'd finally opened up and admitted that her father had cut her off.

How could a parent be so demanding, so expectant of his child? And cold enough to turn his back on her because she didn't want to follow in his footsteps? Andrew swore long ago that if he was ever blessed with children, he'd accept them for whom they were and always be there to support them. He just always thought when that day came that he'd have those children with Clara.

It bothered him even more to know his presence in Clara's life had put a further strain on her relationship with her father. Though her mother and brother had been nothing but kind to him, her father had been a completely different story. Clara had never said anything, but Andrew knew he never measured up to her father's vision of a suitable son-in-law. His background was so much less than stellar, what with his mother running off and his father working at a convenience store. And if that wasn't bad enough, their take on politics conflicted. Even their favorite football teams were at odds. There'd been no winning with her father.

Through it all, Clara had never once been swayed by her father's objections. Andrew had never known anyone more loyal in his life. Clara was most definitely one of a kind.

How could he have let her slip through his fingers? His hands balled up as frustration coursed through his body. If only he could go back in time...

After the breakup, he'd comforted himself with the thought that Clara would be happily reunited with her family. The fact that it didn't appear to happen saddened him. This was all the more reason for him to help Clara now. He owed her that much...and more.

As he made his way up the walk to the steps of the chapel, he barely noticed the well-kept flower gardens. He could only think about Clara. He recalled the heart pendant she'd been wearing. It was most likely from her significant other. He hoped it was someone deserving of Clara's love, someone to help fill the gap her family had left in her life.

The chapel was quiet except for the lulling rush of the ocean on the beach. He tried the front door and found it unlocked. Inside, he was amazed at how bright and sunny it was. This place was quite spectacular.

Just then Tula stepped into the foyer. He still wasn't sure what to make of her. She was certainly a knockout, not only on-screen but also in person. He could see why his brother had fallen for her, but if their initial eight-week marriage hadn't worked, why did Hugh think a second go-around would have better results? But it wasn't his problem, so he kept his thoughts to himself.

"I didn't expect to see you here." As usual, Tula got straight to the point.

"Hello, Tula," Andrew said.

"Is something wrong?" Her face creased with a frown.

“No problem. I’m just here to see”—Clara stepped out of a room—“her.” He pointed to Clara.

“Oh, I see.” Tula and Clara passed some sort of look between them.

He wondered what that was about but decided to let it go without comment. “Clara, do you have a moment?”

Tula spoke up. “We’re finished. She’s all yours.”

If only...

Clara sent him a brilliant smile, like one of those she used to share with him when they were together. His heart careened into his ribs as his pulse raced. His gaze dipped to her rosy lips. A pang of longing shot through him like a hot arrow. He couldn’t believe it only took a smile to get a reaction out of him.

He quickly shoved away the unwanted emotions. That wasn’t his reason for being there. Besides, if she caught a glimpse of the roadmap of scars tattooed all over his body, she’d head for the closest door. And he wouldn’t blame her. He felt like Frankenstein’s monster.

Clara stopped next to him, still wearing that smile, but now he noticed how it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “What can I do for you, Mr. Cross?”

Really? She was going to stand on formality after all they’d once meant to each other? That stung more than he’d been expecting. “I need to discuss the bachelor party arrangements with you.”

“No problem. I have a few things to clarify with you, too.”

Tula wore a smug smile. “Clara, call me when you have information on the table settings.”

“I will.”

Once Tula departed, Clara turned back to him. The smile was gone, as though it’d never been there in the first place. “Now, Mr. Cross—”

“Clara, it’s just us now. Enough with the mister stuff. And besides, Tula knows about us—”

“She does?” Clara’s eyes darkened. “How could you?”

“How do you think you got this job?” He pressed his lips together to stop the flow of words, but it was too late. He’d uttered far more than he’d ever intended to say. He inwardly groaned.

“You did all of this?” The light went out in her eyes. “And now you’re here to take credit?”

Now he had to do his best to extract his size twelve shoe from his mouth. “That didn’t come out how I intended.”

“How dare you!” Clara glanced around to make sure no one overheard her outburst. When she appeared confident that she hadn’t been overheard, she turned back to him. “I don’t need your charity. I’m doing fine on my own.”

“Clara, I’m sorry. That came out all wrong.”

“It sounded quite clear to me.” She fidgeted with her heart pendant. “If it wasn’t for you, Tula Fox wouldn’t have hired

me.”

He sighed as he raked his fingers through his hair. “Don’t tell me you’re going to quit over this.”

A long awkward pause ensued. “I should. I don’t need you easing your guilty conscience over our breakup by bringing me work.”

“Come on, Clara. I said I was sorry. And if you weren’t up to the task, trust me, nothing I could have said would have made any difference to Tula. You earned your right to plan this wedding. Now please tell me you’re not going quit.”

She pressed her hands to her hips and leveled her shoulders. “You obviously don’t know me if you think I’d back out of an obligation, not to mention the contract I have with Tula.”

He breathed easier. “I just thought that, what with... Oh, it doesn’t matter. I’m just glad we got that straightened out. We’re good, aren’t we?”

She arched a fine eyebrow and stared at him, making it abundantly clear that nothing was straightened out. “Just so you understand, we have a working relationship. That’s it. So it doesn’t matter whether we’re good or not. As long as you can be professional, so can I.”

It might not matter to her if they patched up their relationship, but it did to him. When he left San Francisco, he wanted the reassurance that she no longer hated him. He held out his hand to her. “I’m willing to be professional. Let’s shake on it.”

She looked hesitant. He wasn't so sure she'd shake, but at last she slipped her much smaller hand into his. As her fingers slid over his palm, his will was severely challenged. The desire to tighten his hold on her and pull her close grew within him.

His gaze shifted to her shimmery lips. He'd dreamed about those lips many, many times since the night they broke up. And he'd never been tempted by any other lips. No other woman had ever made him feel one-tenth what Clara could stir within him with just a look.

He'd never wanted to kiss her more than he did at that moment. He was doomed... Unless he were to steal just a quick kiss. It'd put this silly notion out of his mind.

He glanced down, noticing that her hand was free of rings. She was still unattached. The revelation struck him profoundly. For some reason, he'd been imagining her all of this time with her own family, happy and loved.

She deserved a full life filled with all things good. He wanted to ask if she was seeing anyone, but he'd just finished promising her that he could be professional. He couldn't mess this up already.

As though sensing the direction of his thoughts, she quickly extracted her hand. "As for the bachelor party, you didn't give me many details to work with."

"That's because I've never been in charge of a bachelor party. I've been to some, but most were tacky. I don't see my brother wanting something scandalous, especially with a

chance that it'd get leaked to the press. He wants to be taken seriously as a director and businessman.”

“Understood. I have some venues lined up for you to see. I was just about to call you after my meeting with Tula to arrange a time tomorrow to go over some party options.”

“Oh. I guess you're busy today.” Disappointment settled over him.

“I am.” She paused, fidgeting with the pendant once more. “But I suppose it's nothing Brooke can't handle. And since you're here, it might be best to get the ball rolling since these plans are all last minute.”

“Great. Thanks for fitting me in.” He smiled, happy to be able to spend more time with her. “That's a pretty pendant.”

She glanced down as though she hadn't realized she was fidgeting with it. Immediately, she lowered her arm. “Thanks. I found it when I was out shopping with a client. I thought it would be a nice accessory since I'm a wedding planner.”

So it wasn't from a guy. Suddenly his steps were a little lighter. “It must be quite valuable.”

She glanced around as though not wanting to be overheard. Then she whispered, “They aren't real diamonds.”

Andrew's smile broadened. “Well, I was certainly fooled.”

A pleased smile lit up her face and warmed his chest.

The field was wide open, but he'd just given her his word that he'd be professional. He inwardly groaned. He needed to

pretend he was back at his old desk job, and she was just another co-worker. A very beautiful, very tempting co-worker. A co-worker he desperately wanted to kiss.

He was in so much trouble.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

HAD SHE REALLY AGREED to spend the rest of the day with Andrew?

Clara headed toward the chapel's exit, hoping the sunshine and fresh air would clear her mind. Her body still tingled, not only from Andrew's touch, but also from the way he'd looked at her. There'd been more than general curiosity in his lingering glances.

She'd swear that at one point he'd been entertaining the notion of kissing her. The most shocking part was that for a moment she'd wanted him to do it. What had she been thinking? Or maybe the problem was she hadn't been thinking—at least not clearly.

She should have waited until tomorrow to take him around the city like she'd originally planned. But regardless of whether she put off this outing, sooner rather than later, she'd have to do it. And since they didn't have much time before the party, sooner was better.

Just pretend that he's Mr. Cross. A paying client. Not the man who broke my heart.

Clara swallowed hard. “Okay. I have a list of venues. I thought we’d visit them in person. Since you’re not quite sure of the entertainment you want, an in-person tour would give you a feel for what each place has to offer.”

“Sounds good.” There was a definite note of approval in his voice.

She breathed easier as she headed for her car. When she realized he wasn’t beside her, she turned around. “Are you coming?”

“In that?” He pointed to her car.

She glanced at her convertible with its white leather upholstery. It had been a splurge, requiring a loan, but the price had been too good to pass up. Less than half of the blue book value, but that was because it had been rebuilt from two wrecked cars. But as a bonus, she’d been able to choose the paint color—a pale metallic pink. Her signature color.

Her father would be appalled that she’d sunk to such a level of purchasing not only a used car but one merged from two totaled vehicles. Her father insisted on new vehicles. She’d never noticed until she’d supported herself that all of those status symbols her family worried about weren’t that important to her.

She wondered if her father would be impressed by her ability to stretch a dollar. She’d like to think so. She’d learned to shop sales and second-hand goods. It had been quite an adjustment at first, but now it was just part of her life.

“Sure, in this car.” She did her best not to laugh at Andrew’s squeamish expression. He wasn’t the first guy put off by her love of pink. “I know my way around the city. It’ll be much faster if I drive.”

He continued to stand on the sidewalk, looking undecided. Just when she thought he was going to refuse to ride in her pink convertible, he relented. When he climbed into the passenger seat, the space shrank considerably. It was a good thing it was a warm day so she could leave the top down.

She shifted into reverse. “Any special requests?”

“None that I can think of.” He turned to her. “I didn’t know you could drive a stick shift.”

She smiled, liking the ability to surprise him. “There are a lot of things you don’t know about me.”

She revved the engine, enjoying the power the car exuded. She skillfully down-shifted as they approached a stop sign. Seconds ticked by until there was a break in traffic. At last, there was just enough room for her to squeeze in. She tramped the gas while letting off the clutch. Once merged into traffic, she glanced at Andrew, finding him smiling.

She didn’t bother to mention that her father had taught her to drive a stick shift when she first got her driver’s permit. She missed those times. But she knew about the tension between the two men so the less said about her father, the better.

With the top down and the air rushing past them, it made it difficult to make conversation. So they remained quiet as she

guided the car across town to their destination. The first place they stopped was a fine dining establishment. With it being the middle of the day, the place was empty, making it easy for the manager to show them around. They had a large banquet room, which was decorated in reds, browns, and blacks. It had a very masculine style.

At the end of the brief tour, Clara turned to Andrew in the parking lot. “So what do you think? Is a formal dinner a possibility for the party?”

Andrew shrugged. “It’s not really what I had in mind. I was thinking something more than a fancy dinner.”

“Understood. I just wanted to give you the option.” Clara climbed back into the car. “I have something else in mind that you might enjoy.”

She remembered how he used to be a sports fan. It didn’t matter what kind. He enjoyed watching it on television or playing it himself, especially hockey. He had been on an amateur team back in New York. Luckily, they’d played late in the evening so he could make it to practices and games. Was that how he’d been injured?

Maybe now that they were getting reacquainted, he’d open up to her. When she pulled to a stop at a red light at a major intersection, she turned to him. “I know it’s none of my business, but what happened to you?”

“Happened to me?” He acted like he didn’t know what she was referring to, but she didn’t believe his innocent act.

She inhaled a deep breath and barreled ahead. “Listen, I can’t help noticing you have a limp, and there’s the scar on your jaw.”

“You like it?” He flashed her a too bright smile. “I heard scars make a man more mysterious. Is it working?”

The stoplight switched to green, and traffic surged forward. She inwardly groaned with frustration as she quickly accelerated from first to second gear. Why couldn’t Andrew level with her?

Their next stop was only a few blocks away. She guided him into a sports bar. There were televisions mounted on all of the walls. Even though it was the afternoon, young people were milling about.

As they walked around the large complex, Clara drew on her memory from the research she’d done the night before. “There’s a bowling alley, pool tables, darts, and even a climbing wall. It would certainly give your party lots of choices for activities. And best of all, there’s food but it’s not formal. Their selection is more of the finger food variety.”

He nodded in approval. “But will you be able to shut down the entire facility for a private party?”

“Are you willing to pay a hefty price?” When he nodded, she added, “Then wait here and let me seek out the manager.”

She had no idea what they’d say to the idea of closing down the place. She hadn’t thought Andrew would go to such great expense. It would appear his financial career had skyrocketed

since they'd parted ways. There was no other explanation for his extreme generosity.

After a chat with the manager, Clara caught up with Andrew as he was throwing darts. He smiled when he saw her walking in his direction. She automatically smiled back while her insides fluttered with nervous energy. How was it possible that he still got to her? After he'd called off their wedding just days away from the big event, she should be immune to his charms. And yet that giddy feeling in her chest wouldn't leave her.

"Whatcha doing?" It wasn't until the flirty words left her mouth that she realized how silly she sounded.

"Playing darts. Why don't you join me?"

Darts? In the middle of the day? "I... I don't think so. There's still work to be done."

"All work and no play makes for a dull Clara. Aren't you the one who used to say something similar to me?"

"And how often did you listen to me?"

"You have a point. I didn't listen often enough. It was definitely my loss. I've learned a lot since then."

A poignant wave of sadness came over her. Too bad he'd learned that lesson way too late to help them. To be fair, they'd had more problems than just his job. Their unwillingness to sacrifice their individual goals for the welfare of their relationship had been the biggest hurdle. And perhaps that's why she hadn't seriously pursued another romantic relationship.

“Are you happy with your life now?” She shouldn’t have asked. It was none of her business, but that didn’t seem to stop her from nosing into his life without an invitation. The truth was she’d never wished him any ill will. She honestly wanted him to be happy.

He shrugged. “I’m working on it. How about you?”

She got the feeling he wasn’t asking just to be polite but because he really cared. “I’m working on it, too.”

“Good. I’m sure with your determination, all of your dreams will come true. Now how about that round of darts?”

She noticed how he didn’t even hint at anything between the two of them. Not that she wanted him to mention it—it wasn’t like she’d be interested in reigniting an old flame. But was it wrong that she sometimes wondered if he regretted how they’d let things end instead of fighting for their relationship?

“Clara?” Andrew’s deep voice drew her from her meandering thoughts. “Did you hear me?”

“Um, yes. It’s just that I’m not sure you’ll want to play darts after you hear what I say.”

“Is it about the party?”

She nodded. “I’m afraid I don’t have good news. The manager is unwilling to rent out the complex. Are you sure you wouldn’t still consider this place? You could have a private room for dining. And it shouldn’t be too busy if you have it during the week.”

Andrew hesitated. His lips pursed together as though he were torn over what to do. “I think we’ll have to pass. It would only take one person to recognize my brother and post it on social media for the entire evening to be ruined.”

He was right. She wished he’d have mentioned the privacy issue when he’d first brought up the party, but she wasn’t giving up. San Francisco was a huge city. She’d find something that would work.

“I’m sorry this place doesn’t work for you. I didn’t know about the privacy issue when I added it to my list.”

Surprisingly, Andrew shrugged off the news as though he’d been expecting it. “It’s no big deal.”

“Really?” She’d thought for sure he’d love this place with all of its entertainment opportunities. And yet he dismissed it so readily. “This doesn’t bother you?”

“I’m sure you’ll find something equally as entertaining. The most important element being that my brother is able to relax and not have to worry about the paparazzi.”

Andrew thought that highly of her? A warm spot started in her chest and spread outward. And then she told herself not to get distracted. She still had a job to do.

She tucked a few loose strands of hair behind her ear. “Thanks. I have some other ideas in mind. Shall we go?”

“Not until we play a round or two of darts.” He retrieved another set of darts for her. “Let’s see if you are as good as you were back in college.”

When he handed over the darts, their fingers brushed. A wave of goose bumps washed up her arm. She swallowed hard, trying to ignore her body's automatic response to him.

Concentrate on the game. Ignore him. Yeah, right.

“That was a long time ago.” Her voice sounded off. A little higher than normal. She pulled her hand away.

“Not that long ago. I remember how you'd give me a run for my money.” He lightly elbowed her. “What's the matter? Are you afraid you've lost your touch?”

Her gaze narrowed in on him. “Are you challenging me?”

His eyes lit with mischief. “Why, yes, I am. So what do you say?”

“I say how much do you have to wager?”

A smile pulled at his lips. “How about the loser buys dinner?”

She really shouldn't do this. She had work to do. But she'd never been able to walk away from a challenge. And she'd forgotten how much she enjoyed darts. In the past few years, she'd been so focused on building her business that she'd utterly neglected her private life. What would it hurt to take a few minutes and have fun with an old friend?

She straightened her shoulders and tilted up her chin. “You have yourself a bet. Prepare to be beat.”

He motioned for her to step up to the line. “Ladies first.”

As she moved into position, she realized she'd let her ego get the best of her. It'd been too many years since she'd done this. She would be quite rusty, while he probably played every weekend. She shrugged off the worry. It was all for fun.

She threw all three darts. On the plus side, she hit the board each time. On the negative side, she missed the bullseye by large margins. Definitely rusty.

She turned to Andrew. "Your turn."

He moved with his ever-present limp to the line. It wasn't until he held up a dart that she realized he wasn't using his left hand, his dominant hand. Something major had happened to him if it affected both his leg and his arm and left a scar on his jaw. But why wouldn't he talk to her about it? What had him all knotted up inside?

It might not be her place anymore, but that didn't stop her from worrying about him. Maybe it was a habit from the years they'd been together, or perhaps it was something else. Whatever it was, she didn't want to explore those emotions too deeply.

When he lifted his arm to throw, the breath caught in her throat. He tossed the dart. It surprisingly hit the board. The air whooshed from her lungs. Not quite as good as her throws had been, but still she was impressed.

He smiled at her, making her stomach flutter. "I guess I need to warm up a bit."

This was her opportunity to try to get him to level with her.
“You did pretty well.”

“Just not well enough.”

“So I—”

A group of rowdy college-age guys moved past them, their robust voices drowning out her words. They stopped at the dart board next to theirs. Their boisterous laughter and jovial voices made it impossible to have a quiet, intimate conversation. Her questions about Andrew’s injuries would have to wait until later.

“What were you saying?” he asked. “I couldn’t hear you.”

She shook her head. “It’s nothing. I was just thinking about grabbing an early dinner after we’re done playing. What do you think?”

“You want to collect on the bet already?”

“Why wait? All of this walking around today has worked up my appetite.”

A glint of surprise sparked in his eyes before an easy smile lifted his lips. “Sounds good to me. What do you have in mind?”

“I thought we could just eat here. I hear they have amazing burgers.”

“With bacon and cheese?”

“Of course. I checked the menu before bringing you here.”

His brow arched. “You remembered?”

“How could I forget? It’s practically all you ordered when we went out. And it didn’t matter how fancy the restaurant.” Their past came flooding back. She tried to stop the images, but there were too many.

“Can a man be faulted for knowing what he likes to eat? Burgers are better than all of your salads.”

Not about to get caught up in the very old debate, she attempted to steer the conversation back to business. “I have a unique place you might want to consider for your bachelor party. Can you meet me at the office tomorrow at five?”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Was it possible he was hoping she’d actually asked him out, as in a real date? *Nah*. That couldn’t be the case. After all, he was the one who had broken off their engagement. He was just being friendly.

As they continued to play darts, Andrew’s mood lightened again. They talked and laughed. And if Clara wasn’t careful, she’d forget all of the reasons they’d broken up.

That couldn’t happen. It’d taken her all of this time just to piece her heart back together. And right now, her entire career was riding on making this star-studded wedding a huge success. That was where her attention needed to be, not on the very handsome man standing next to her. As he leaned past her to grab his drink, a crisp, fresh scent caught her attention. She knew it. She inhaled deeper. It was Andrew’s cologne. He still wore the same enticing scent. Oh, she was doomed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

THEIR EVENING TOGETHER HAD been more than he'd hoped for.

The following day, Andrew set off on the long drive back to his brother's place in Santa Monica. He took the interstate instead of the Pacific Coast Highway to save time. There wasn't much to see along the way so he let his mind wander back to his evening with Clara.

He couldn't believe Clara was finally letting down her guard with him—not completely but enough for him to get a glimpse of the woman he used to know. Though he'd enjoyed their time together, it made him realize just how much he missed what they'd had together—how deeply he missed having her in his life.

And maybe that was what was driving him to make decisions he might not otherwise make. Still, he'd made his mind up, and he wasn't going to change it. First, he needed to speak with his brother.

And so he'd returned from his short visit in San Francisco to Hugh's beach house. By then, it was late in the evening. He

didn't expect to run into anyone at that hour. He figured they'd either be out with friends or asleep. It seemed to be the norm with his brother and soon-to-be sister-in-law. As he used the key his brother had given him to let himself inside, he was surprised to find the lights on.

Instead of heading to the guest suite to crash for the night, he made his way to the living room. If Hugh was up, he might as well get this conversation over with.

He found Hugh lounged back on the couch, munching on some potato chips while watching a late baseball game. Any other time, Andrew would consider joining him, but he was exhausted. After their talk, he was calling it a night.

Hugh glanced up when he heard Andrew enter the room. "Hey, I was wondering when you were coming back."

"Miss me already?" Even though they'd only gotten to know each other a few months ago, they'd rapidly gained a light and easy rapport.

"Not hardly. I just didn't know if I needed to find a new best man."

Andrew lounged back on the other end of the navy-blue leather sectional. "Afraid not. You're stuck with me."

Hugh arched a brow at him. "I thought you were making a quick trip north. Just an overnight trip is what you said. I take it your trip went better than you expected."

The vision of Clara's bright, cheerful smile filled his mind. "It was bumpy at first, but things are getting better."

Hugh smiled. “That’s good. I take it having your ex plan our wedding has helped.”

“Yes, it has.” Then guilt settled over him. “I hope I didn’t push you into something you didn’t want.”

“No, man, we’re good. This way Tula doesn’t have to stress about every single detail of the wedding.”

Andrew nodded in understanding. “So, you both think Clara’s doing a good job?”

“I haven’t had much to do with the wedding, but I haven’t heard Tula complain. Let me tell you, that’s saying a lot.”

Relief washed over him. “I’m glad to hear it. Clara is very good at what she does.”

He didn’t doubt Clara’s abilities as a wedding planner, but he also knew Tula liked to have things done her way. He’d hoped the two women wouldn’t disagree about everything and instead would be able to work together.

Hugh turned a questioning look his way. “For being her ex, you seem very invested in helping her.”

Andrew shrugged as he glanced away. His gaze landed on the huge flat screen television where an ad for an upcoming action movie was playing. “I just want to see things go well for her.”

Hugh studied him for a moment. “I think it’s more than that. Does my big brother still have a flame burning for his ex?”

“No!” The answer came far too quickly and with too much force. Andrew swallowed hard. “It’s not like that.”

Leave it to his brother to go straight for the jugular. This was a subject Andrew’s thoughts had danced around and avoided on the drive home. Just because he wanted good things for Clara didn’t mean he still had feelings for her.

“Like what?” Hugh asked.

“We were over years ago. There’s no going back. No do-over.”

“Uh-huh.” The look on his brother’s face said he didn’t believe him. It was okay, though, because Andrew didn’t believe a word he was saying either.

Andrew decided to turn the subject around on him. “Are you still sure a do-over with Tula is the right thing?”

Hugh’s eyes widened. “Deflection, huh?” He paused as though considering the question. “She says she’s changed—that she’s done a lot of maturing since our first marriage.”

“It wasn’t that long ago.” Andrew stopped himself when he realized he was supposed to be there to support his brother, not rain down a bunch of doubt on him.

And as much as they enjoyed bantering back and forth as though they’d been in each other’s lives forever, the truth was their relationship was new to them. It was fragile. He had to proceed carefully, even if he did have serious concerns about this upcoming marriage.

“Tula and I are good. She’s really trying. I appreciate you trying to look out for me, but I’ve got this.”

And now it was time for him to say what he’d gone there for. “Good. Then I hope you don’t mind if I head up to San Francisco and stay a while. With the wedding there, I can handle any loose ends that come up.”

Hugh’s brows rose. “I have the feeling this move north has less to do with the wedding and more to do with the wedding planner.” When Andrew went to argue the point, Hugh held up his hand, stopping him. “Don’t worry. We’re good. I just hope you find what you’re looking for and recognize it when you see it.”

That was a bit cryptic for his brother or maybe it was the lateness of the hour and too many hours driving. “Thanks. Call me if you need anything. And I’ll let you know when I have the bachelor party planned—”

“I told you that wasn’t necessary.”

“You might not think so, but I do. It’s the least I can do for my little brother before his big day.”

“Just remember no publicity.”

“Already taken care of.” Andrew got to his feet and stretched. “You’ll probably be gone by the time I get up so I guess I’ll see you at the bachelor party.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

And with that Andrew walked away while his brother raised the volume on the television. He had no doubt his brother

would fall asleep right there on the couch. Sleep was something Andrew was craving. And he had no doubt Clara would tiptoe through his dreams—like always.



It was taking longer than hoped for...

...But at last the wedding was starting to take shape.

Clara stood in Maria Ortega's downstairs, which had been converted into a large kitchen area to run her catering business, Classic Elegance Catering. It wasn't a huge space, but Maria made sure to use every square inch of it. From four ovens to two six-burner stoves and three fridges. There was a lot crammed into the space and yet everything was neat and orderly.

She'd met Maria not long after her move to San Francisco. There had been a convention of wedding vendors, and Maria had been there. Clara had visited to try to make contacts for her up-and-coming wedding business. As soon as they'd met, they hit it off.

"And that's the whole menu," Clara said as her gaze skimmed down over her digital notepad. "And you'll be able to circulate the finger foods before the dinner on the beach?"

"Yes." Maria sent her a reassuring smile. "This isn't our first wedding together."

"True. But this wedding could make or break us."

“Clara, I never heard you so worried about a wedding before. Is everything okay?”

Clara nodded, though her insides were knotted up. “It’s just that I’ve never had the whole world peering in at a wedding I’ve planned.”

Maria’s gaze narrowed. “Is that the only reason you’re so worked up?”

“Of course. What else would it be?”

“Well, I did hear about your ex being in town for the wedding. I bet that was a shock.”

Heat swirled in Clara’s chest. She opened her mouth to ask how she’d heard about Andrew’s appearance, but then it came to her—Brooke had told her. A group of her friends had a favorite coffee spot, Lacy’s Java ’N Tea. With everyone’s schedules so busy these days, it wasn’t often they all had time to meet up. But every now and then, luck played a part, and they’d arrive at the same time. It appeared Brooke had met up with Maria there recently.

There was no point in denying it, so Clara said, “Yes, Andrew is here for his brother’s wedding.”

“And I hear he won’t let anyone else help him but you.”

The heat in her chest worked its way up her neck and settled in her cheeks. “It’s... Uh, just that he knows me.”

Maria arched a sculpted brow before sending her a knowing smile. “Or maybe it’s more than that.”

Just then Clara's phone rang. She'd never been so happy to hear the jingle of a call. "Sorry. I have to get this."

Maria nodded as she moved away to stir something on the stove. Clara glanced at the caller ID and saw it was Mabel. The sweet woman didn't call her, well, ever, so she wondered what was on her mind.

"Hello, Mabel. Is something wrong?"

"Oh my, why would you think that?"

"I, uh, never mind. What did you need?"

"I was hoping you could stop by. I have something to discuss with you."

Clara had a lot of things to do that day. "Can we discuss it on the phone?"

"I'd prefer to discuss these matters in person, if you don't mind."

"Uh..." She was already out and about, so why not? "I'll be there shortly."

"Oh, good. I'll put the tea on."

"See you soon." Clara ended the call and glanced up at her friend. "Sorry about that. Looks like I'm needed elsewhere."

"Too bad it's not with your handsome client." Maria paused and looked at her. "He is handsome, isn't he?"

Clara pursed her lips together as the amusement played over her friend's face. "Yes. He's handsome. But that doesn't mean anything. We're over. We're way over."

“You just keep telling yourself that.” Maria wiped off the counter. “What else do you need as far as the wedding?”

“I’ve checked off most of my list, well, almost everything.”

“What’s left?” Maria asked. “Is it anything I can help you with?”

Clara shook her head. “You’re already doing enough. Don’t worry I’ve got this.”

“You look worried about something.”

She sighed. “It’s just this bachelor party. Andrew sprang it on me at the last minute, and I can’t seem to find the right location for it. Everything I show him is either too boring or it’s too public.”

“I know you’ll find just the right spot. You always do.” Maria sent her a reassuring smile.

It was true. She always found the right settings for events, but this time there was so much pressure to get it right. The more stress she put on herself, the harder it was to think outside the box. And with Andrew being her client, her pride refused to come up with a new setting that was anything other than impressive.

“I hope you’re right.” Clara slipped her phone back into her purse.

“I am. You’ll see. Now when do I get to meet Andrew?”

Never. Clara held back the spontaneous answer. “I... I don’t know.”

Maria's smile broadened. "I'm looking forward to it."

"I should be going. I need to go take care of something." Clara stepped toward the door. "Let me know if you have any problems with the menu."

"I will. And Clara?"

"Yes?"

"Relax. Everything is going to work out."

"Thanks. I'll see you later." Clara made a hasty retreat, not wanting to discuss her relationship with Andrew any longer. He was her past. Nothing more.

It was what she kept reminding herself of on the short drive to the wedding chapel. When she parked and got out of the car, the lull of the ocean called to her. It was the perfect day: not too hot and not too cold. She longed to go for a stroll along the beach.

As she stood there next to her car, she realized she didn't have time for such luxuries as feeling the sun-warmed sand between her toes. She needed to find out what was so important that Mabel called her over there. Hopefully, there weren't any problems with the chapel.

Her gaze moved to the building, and that was when she saw the big red real estate sign hanging in front of it. She turned and noticed there was one out at the road. Her stomach knotted up. Her perfect wedding spot was about to be sold.

It was a special spot—a very special beachy spot. Brides loved the location. Some had married in the chapel, and some

had married on the beach; either way it was a popular draw for her business. And now it was ending.

Not that she could blame Mabel. She knew her friend was getting older, and caring for the chapel was just too much for her physically and probably financially. Its location alone would draw in top dollar. After the sale, Mabel would be able to live anywhere and do anything. Clara was happy for her friend but worried about possibly losing this as a wedding venue.

She made her way across the parking lot, crossed the yard, and headed for Mabel's door. She didn't even have a chance to knock when the door flung open.

"Oh, good. You're here." Mabel sent her a cheery smile as she backed up. "Come in."

Clara now knew why she was there, and it saddened her. Still, she'd known the day was coming. Mabel hadn't made the eventual sale a secret. She'd let Clara know the very first time she'd contacted her about holding a wedding at the chapel. And yet, the end had come much too soon.

Mabel showed her to the kitchen. "I'll get your tea."

The truth was Clara wasn't interested in tea. In fact, she didn't want to stay. Her business would take a big hit by losing this exclusive wedding setting.

She couldn't bring herself to drag this out. "I saw the For Sale signs when I pulled in."

Mabel frowned. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I had no idea they were going to act so quickly. I’m sorry. I meant to tell you first.”

“It’s okay.” It wasn’t okay for her. Not at all. “I understand. You need to do what’s best for you. And it isn’t like you didn’t warn me this would happen.”

The tea kettle whistled. Mabel filled their cups with hot water and then placed them on the table. She sat across from Clara. “It’s just that I’m not getting any younger. And this property is just too much for me. When my Tom was around, he would take care of it. But now there’s just me.”

Clara added some sweetener to the tea and stirred it. “What will you do when it’s sold? Move?”

Mabel frowned. “I don’t want to. I want to stay right here. This is my home. I’ve lived in this house my entire adult life. My memories of Tom are here.”

Clara’s thoughts shifted from her own problems to those of her friend’s. “You shouldn’t move unless that’s what you truly want.”

“I just don’t know if living here would be the same once the chapel is sold.”

“At least you don’t have to make the decision now.”

“That’s true.”

As they sipped their tea, Clara filled Mabel in on the plans for Tula’s wedding. Mabel had been sworn to secrecy. As they talked about it, some thoughts came to Clara about small

decorating details she needed to look into. She pulled out her phone and typed herself notes.

“Well, I should be going.” Clara got to her feet. “Good luck with the sale.”

“Wait.” Mabel’s gray brows drew together as she searched her sweater pockets. “Here it is. I wrote down the price the real estate agent determined the chapel is worth.”

Clara accepted the folded piece of paper. She didn’t dare open it in front of Mabel, who was quite observant. Clara didn’t have to unfold the paper to know the chapel—the beautiful chapel that had joined countless hearts—was far more expensive than she could ever hope to afford.

They hugged and Clara walked away. She didn’t look at the chapel as she made her way to her car. She knew if she gazed upon it that the tears she’d been holding at bay would spring forth. Because there was something special about the little chapel that had drawn her in. A sense of peace and happiness. She’d foolishly even imagined holding her own wedding there. Not that she was getting married or anything. She didn’t even have a potential groom.

And so when she climbed into her car, she hesitated. The little piece of paper felt as though it were burning a hole in her palm. She should toss it aside and forget about it. She needed to focus on the things she could control.

And yet, she found herself unfolding it. Curiosity had gotten the best of her. And then her gaze landed upon the figure. It was eight-figures. *Eight!* She scanned the paper, making sure

she hadn't missed a decimal point. She hadn't. Her heart sank right down to her perky pink pumps.

The chapel was so far out of her reach that if she approached a bank, they would laugh in her face. Tula's wedding would be the last wedding she planned there. The thought weighed on her, but there was absolutely no way she could raise that kind of money. Unless she called her father.

She halted her thoughts. There was nothing that would make her do that. Nothing at all. That bridge had been burned.

She started her car and drove away. Clara refused to look back, just like when she'd left everything she'd ever known in DC—including her family and the man she'd once loved—to start a new life in California. She had to keep looking ahead or else she might falter—and that was unacceptable. Harrington's didn't fail. At least that was her father's mantra her entire life. She just had to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THIS EVENING WAS SUPPOSED to be about business.
And yet the night felt so much more like a date.

The next day, Clara sat next to Andrew on a pontoon in the San Francisco Bay. They were being ferried out to the platform housing the restaurant she highly recommended. But it wasn't the underwater culinary experience that had her anticipating the evening. It was spending time with Andrew. He was even more handsome and more charming than she recalled.

Maybe they'd been too young back then to take such a big step. Or maybe she'd been too stubborn and foolish to realize what it took to meet a person halfway. But she was in absolutely no position to start a relationship. With the imminent sale of the chapel, her business needed her full attention.

“What are you thinking about?”

The sound of Andrew's voice drew her from her thoughts. She glanced over at him, their eyes briefly meeting. A spark of

awareness ignited in her, but she quickly tamped it down.

She turned away as the pontoon neared the pier. “I really hope you like this place. I’ll make sure to inquire about renting it out for the evening—if you enjoy it.”

“I’ll let you know.”

“It’s unique. The dining room is underwater. You definitely won’t have to worry about the paparazzi taking any photos through the windows, unless they’re into snorkeling.” She smiled broadly. “Anyway, it’s something to consider for the bachelor party. An underwater restaurant is not something you experience very often.”

“I’ll give it some thought. Lead the way.”

She led the way onto the pier and over to the restaurant’s entrance. To reach the dining room, they had to go down a flight of steps. The décor of the restaurant was much like what she imagined the interior of an old ship might be like, with wood beams and lanterns on the walls. It was cozy and most definitely unique.

They were immediately seated at a small table. The glow of a candle and fresh flowers added a romantic ambiance to the evening. Clara shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Maybe this was a mistake.

“What’s the matter?” Worry reflected in Andrew’s eyes.

“Nothing. Let’s go over the party plans.”

He continued to gaze at her as though he were reading her thoughts. “There’s definitely something bothering you.”

She needed a diversion. “It’s the chapel.”

“The chapel?” Worry lines creased his brow. “Isn’t it available for the wedding?”

“Oh, no, that isn’t what I meant. I’m just worried about its sale and its eventual demise.” And then she realized it felt good to open up to someone. “It’s my edge. It’s what makes me stand out from other wedding planners.”

“Is that what you really think?” Doubt echoed in his voice.

“I know the chapel needs a little bit of work, but even as it is now, it’s unique with all of its windows and hand-carved trim work—”

“That isn’t what I mean. Do you really think that’s why couples seek you out?” When she nodded, he continued, “As one of your clients, I can say the chapel is only a small part of it. Your edge is your passion for your work, your eye for details, and your willingness to listen to your clients. You are your edge. And don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Her eyes misted over. She blinked repeatedly to clear them. No one had ever said such touching words to her. She’d thank him, but she was all choked up.

Andrew reached out and touched her hand. “I meant every word I said.”

She swallowed hard. “Thank you. I never knew you thought so highly of me or my work.”

“And that’s my fault. In the past, I was so focused on my career that I was blind to everything else. I’m sorry I didn’t

say it before, but I've always been proud of you and your work."

She squeezed his hand as she blinked again. She hadn't known until now how much those words would mean to her. And if she didn't steer the conversation to a safer subject, she'd end up a blubbering mess, and that wouldn't do for a professional wedding planner.

She gently cleared her throat. "I'd still like to preserve the chapel that united countless couples throughout the years."

"Well, what can you offer the owner that would make you stand out from the other buyers?"

"Nothing." She toyed with her linen napkin. "The beach front property will sell for millions, and I don't have that kind of money. And before you say it, I know my family could afford to buy it, but I refuse to ask them. Even if I did, I don't think they'd give me the money."

He nodded. "I understand. But there has to be something else." He leaned back in his chair, removing his hand from her own. "You're friends with the owner, aren't you?"

"I am. She's the sweetest woman. Her grandfather and father built the chapel. And then it was passed down to her father and then to her and her husband. But they didn't have any children, and there are no nieces or nephews. Now that she's getting older, the property is too much for her."

"So she's not selling it for the money?"

Clara took a sip of ice water. “I don’t know. She seemed really sad to part with the chapel. It means so much to her.”

“What if you promised to preserve the building? Isn’t that your plan—to fix it up and use it for weddings?”

“I’m sure others will make the same promise, well, until they own the land and then they can do whatever they want with it.”

Just then their salads and fresh baked bread were delivered to their table. It gave Clara a chance to think through the situation with the chapel. Andrew might be on to something.

Clara loved that little chapel almost as much as Mabel did. That was what Clara could offer that the other buyers couldn’t. But it still wasn’t enough.

Andrew’s gaze met hers from across the table. “Is the chapel registered with the historical society?”

She paused to think about it. “Not that I know of.”

“Maybe it’s something to consider to protect it.”

She liked the idea. In fact, she loved the idea. The little chapel by the ocean would be around for future generations. She smiled at him. “I like the way you think.”

“See you do have something unique to offer—the protection of the chapel backed up with registration with the historical society.”

“But I still can’t offer her much financially—certainly not market price.”

“I could help you out—”

“No.” It was important to her to do this alone, even if it meant not buying the chapel. And then seeing the hurt reflected in his eyes, she said, “Your offer means a lot to me, but I hope you’ll respect the fact that I need to do this on my own.”

He didn’t look happy about it, but he nodded. “I get it.”

The rest of the meal, their conversation moved to more casual topics, but all the while hovering at the back of her mind was the fact that Andrew thought she should try to buy the chapel.

His encouragement meant a lot to her. A part of her was leery of letting him get too close. Another part was happy to have her friend back in her life. She hadn’t realized until that moment how much she’d missed him.



This hadn’t been the evening he’d been expecting.

It was better. So much better.

Soon Andrew was standing next to Clara outside on the little island. Evening had settled upon the bay, and the setting sun sent brilliant hues of orange, pink, and purple across the sky.

Clara’s face beamed with excitement. He followed her gaze to the black and white lighthouse with the bright light at the top. A nearby sign let them know it was open to visitors.

Uneasiness churned in his gut. His leg wasn't up for that climb. He didn't even want to imagine how many steps would be involved.

She turned to him. "Do you want to visit it?"

He was all set to back out when the words that came tumbling out of his mouth were totally different than he'd been thinking. "Sure. Lead the way."

He desperately wanted to physically be the same old Andrew she once knew. He followed her inside the lighthouse. She took off up the twisting stairs, quickly leaving him behind. He inwardly groaned.

He'd dodged her questions about his injuries up until this point, but he knew Clara wouldn't give up. Sooner or later, he'd have to delve into those painful memories and tell her what had happened. It looked like that confession was going to be sooner rather than later.

Clara's excited voice drifted down to him. Soon she'd realize he wasn't right behind her. The thought of her having to wait up for him, or worse, having to backtrack, pricked his already wounded pride. Still, he kept putting one foot in front of the other, doing his best to ignore the throbbing pain.

There was a rush of footsteps, and then Clara appeared before him. "I'm sorry."

"No apology necessary. Go on ahead. I'll be there shortly."

"Nonsense. I should never have suggested this."

“Yes, you should have. I don’t want my slowness to hold you back.” When she didn’t move, he took on a serious tone. “I mean it.”

She crossed her arms. “Quit being so stubborn. Let’s go catch the pontoon back to the mainland.”

He shook his head. “Not before I see that sunset.” Still, she didn’t move. “Well, if you’re not going up, step aside.”

She sighed and moved off to the side. He gritted his teeth. He hadn’t made it through rehab in record time by wimping out. When he set a goal, he stuck with it. Today would be no different. He would not let Clara feel sorry for him.

He continued concentrating on one step at a time. The muscles of his injured leg protested, but he knew he could do this. He told himself it was mind over matter, though he knew it was a bit more than that. Behind him, he could hear the click of Clara’s heels.

“You don’t have to keep an eye on me.” His voice rumbled, hiding his embarrassment over his flaws. “I’ll be fine.”

“Who says I’m worried about you? I’m going to see the sights is all.”

He didn’t believe her, not for one moment, but he didn’t bother to argue the point. His concentration was on taking the steps one at a time, leading with his strongest leg. He held on to the railing just in case his injured leg decided not to cooperate.

At last, he stood at the top, where Clara joined him. Shoulder to shoulder, they stood looking out at the last of the sun's rays bouncing over the dark water. It was peaceful and serene, unlike the turmoil of emotions raging inside him.

"Tell me about it." Clara's voice was soft and coaxing.

He knew what she was asking. She wanted to know what had turned him into the shell of the man she'd once known. It'd gotten to the point in rehab where he'd been able to talk openly and honestly about it. But he'd been with other guys who'd had similar experiences. They had some idea where he was coming from. Talking to Clara was different.

On his flight to California, Andrew had thought long and hard about what he'd tell her. A brush-off answer? Just hit the highlights? Or the unvarnished truth? He'd decided on just the highlights. No one wanted to hear all of the painful details.

His mouth grew dry and his palms damp. Andrew rested his forearms against the railing and stared off into the darkening sky. "It happened more than nine months ago. I'd been visiting my father's place, and I was returning to the city." In actuality he'd been at his father's cleaning out the house and preparing it for sale. He just wasn't ready to discuss his father's death, so he decided to gloss over the subject. "It was late, and I was tired. I could have stayed over, but I wanted to get into the office early on Sunday morning. You know me, never one to pass up a chance to get ahead."

Clara moved close to him, leaning her side against the white-painted rail. And though he didn't look at her, he could

feel her steady gaze on him.

He cleared his throat. “It was dark that night with no moonlight. Anxious to get some sleep before I headed into the office, I was in a hurry. It was a divided four-lane highway. I’d just crested a rise in the road when I was blinded by oncoming headlights in my lane. I swerved, but it hadn’t been enough to avoid the collision. And what happened next is still a blur.”

A horrified gasp filled the warm evening air. “Oh, Andrew. It’s a miracle you’re still alive.”

“That’s what I’ve told myself many times.” Thanks to Jerry, his physical therapist, knocking some sense into him, he was taking advantage of the second chance he’d been given. He missed his friend, but he was happy to be out of rehab.

Clara reached out to him, but he refused to turn into her embrace. He just couldn’t let himself lean on her. She wasn’t a part of his life anymore.

Instead, her hand landed on his forearm. She squeezed tightly, letting him know she did genuinely care. “I wish you’d gotten in touch. I would have been there for you.”

Not so long ago, he’d longed for her comforting words and touch while he’d been in the hospital undergoing numerous surgeries on his face, arm, and leg. However, he was now glad she hadn’t had to go through the ordeal. If any good had come out of their breakup, it was the fact that she’d been saved the horror of seeing his torn and mangled flesh. But, boy, had he missed her. She’d filled all of his dreams with her sweet voice,

gentle touch, and stirring kisses. Thinking of her was what got him through those long, agonizing days.

He cleared his throat. “You were busy building your business. And you’ve done a great job of it. Soon, you’ll be the biggest name in the wedding business.”

“That might be pushing it just a bit.”

“Okay, the biggest name on the West Coast.” He glanced over and caught the pink staining her cheeks. “You were always destined to be great.”

“I think you’re talking about yourself.” She sent him a reassuring smile. “Can you tell me more? About what happened after the accident?”

He could, but he didn’t want to. The bits and pieces he recalled were excruciating and horrific. Then again, maybe it was best if he got it out there. It would remind him that he was there on a mission and not to win back his ex—though that was becoming more tempting with each passing moment they spent together.

Andrew attempted to clear his throat, but this time it didn’t work. When he spoke, his voice was raw and full of emotion. “I learned the driver was drunk and had been going down the wrong side of the highway for a couple of miles before plowing into my car. I was trapped inside for quite a while.” He paused as he gathered his thoughts. “I was in and out of consciousness. More out than in. I don’t have any recollections of this, for which I am grateful. After they used the Jaws of

Life to extract me, they found my body was as mangled as the car.”

A horrified gasp came from Clara. He didn't glance her way. He knew what he'd find in her eyes—sympathy and pity. Two things he just couldn't stomach. He didn't want to appear less in her eyes—that would totally do him in.

He continued to stare out at the inky black bay as the moonbeams danced across the swells of the water. “Apparently, after they extracted me from the car, my heart stopped. Once they got it started again, they life-flighted me to the nearest hospital.”

“Your father, he must have been beside himself with worry. I can't even imagine what either of you went through.”

Andrew intentionally left out the part about his father having passed away before the accident. He didn't want her to know just how alone he'd been. His family had consisted of him and his father. It had been so different from her vast family, complete with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Andrew didn't want to but he obliged Clara's curiosity by opening up to her about the fractures to his face and the multiple injuries to his left arm and leg. The doctors had been doubtful about the amount of mobility he'd regain with his leg, but he'd been determined to get out of the wheelchair. One surgery was followed by another, and yet another, until he was basically pinned together like a toy construction set. Followed by months of rehab.

“If only I’d known, I’d have caught the first flight.”

He’d dreamed about Clara there by his side, when he wasn’t engulfed by nightmares of the accident. “It wasn’t your responsibility to sit by my bedside. You had your own life to lead.”

She reached over and placed her hand on his cheek, guiding his face toward hers. Old memories and newfound emotions collided within him, setting his world off-kilter. How was it possible after all of this time, she could still touch him so profoundly?

Her voice grew soft, so soft he strained to hear her words. “Things didn’t work out the way you and I planned, but that doesn’t mean I don’t still care...”

Her gaze met and held his. The breath caught in his lungs. He’d never wanted to feel her lips pressed to his more than he did in that moment. But he couldn’t—he shouldn’t.

As though she could read his mind, she lifted on her tiptoes. She leaned forward, and in a heartbeat, her mouth pressed to his. His hands automatically reached out, slipping around her waist, pulling her close. He was like a drowning man, and she was air, breathing life back into him.

During all of those long, miserable nights he’d spent alone in his hospital bed, he’d envisioned this moment. Although, he’d never thought those fantasies had a chance of becoming reality. And yet it was happening.

With Clara in his arms, he imagined he was still the man she fell in love with years ago. As her lips moved beneath his, he wanted to be that man for her. He wanted to wipe away the last few years.

But as he moved toward her, closing the gap, his leg protested. His limb sent shooting pain clear down to his toes. His body wouldn't let him forget that he was different now. He was no longer the athlete who could go jogging with her in the mornings. Even his rehabilitation had its limits. He would never be able to keep up with her now, and he refused to hold Clara back.

The pain had him jerking back and gasping for air. This couldn't happen. He couldn't set them both up for another fall. He'd already hurt her enough for one lifetime. He'd only come here to... What? Say he was sorry? Try to make up for the pain he'd caused her? He wasn't quite sure anymore. The lines were all blurring, leaving him utterly confused.

Clara's eyes fluttered open. Confusion was written all over her face. He couldn't blame her. He was just as surprised by the kiss. One moment, he'd had control of the situation, and then the next they were kissing like there was no tomorrow.

"Sorry." His gaze dipped low. "I shouldn't have let that happen."

"You didn't." Her unwavering gaze met his. "I initiated it. And I'm not sorry."

What? His gaze lifted, meeting her determined stare. "You don't mean that—"

“I do. You’re an amazing man. You have so much to offer the right woman.”

But she wasn’t that woman. She didn’t have to spell it out for him. He understood perfectly clear. “I may not be the same man you once knew, but I won’t let that stop me. I intend to keep up with my therapy and push my boundaries.”

A faint smile pulled at her lips. “You’re definitely the same man I once knew. You’d never let anything stand between you and your goals.”

“Thanks. I think.”

Her smile broadened. “You’re welcome.”

His gaze momentarily strayed to her lips. They were rosy and looked as though they’d been properly kissed. Her cheeks were pink, and her eyes sparkled.

It was so tempting to pick up where they’d left off. But he knew it’d be a mistake. Instead he said, “It’s getting late. We should be going.”

Clara hesitated. Then with a resigned sigh, she nodded in agreement.

As they turned to leave, he branded the memory of this very special evening upon his mind. Clara had no idea how much that kiss meant to him. She’d made him feel like a whole man once more.

CHAPTER NINE

THE FOLLOWING DAY CLARA paced back and forth in the foyer of the wedding chapel. She was waiting for Tula to show up for her dress fitting. She was actually relieved to have a little alone time to put her thoughts in order. Her evening with Andrew had certainly gotten off track.

She tried to tell herself that the kiss—the most amazing kiss—didn't mean anything. Why should it? She was over him. She'd left that part of her life behind when she'd turned her back on her father's ultimatum of his way or the highway.

She'd decided that her fresh start needed to be out of her father's influential reach. The West Coast had seemed just far enough. Plus, she knew there'd be no chance of bumping into Andrew. His business kept him anchored to the East Coast. Or at least it had until now.

What had drawn him to California? Was it to connect with the brother he'd never known? Had his accident made him look at life differently? She couldn't even imagine all the trauma he'd been through.

That had to be it, because there was no way he'd followed her. He'd made his choice years ago, when he'd chosen his work over her. There wasn't going to be any do-over.

But then there had been that kiss.

As much as she tried to convince herself that it had been nothing more than a moment of compassion, the truth was she'd felt every bit of it—intensely. So much so that it scared her.

Perhaps she should cancel their contract for the bachelor party and recommend another event planner. Yes, that was a good idea. After all, Andrew hadn't liked any of her ideas for the party so far.

"Here we go again." Liza's voice drew Clara from her thoughts. "How much do you want to bet she changes her mind...again?"

"Oh, please, don't even think it." Clara placed her big white tote with pink flowers on it next to a chair. She kept her digital notebook in hand. It kept her life organized and on schedule.

"Sorry. I know how important this wedding is to you." Liza unzipped the wedding dress. "I'm sure the ceremony will be beautiful."

"I hope." Until Tula walked down the aisle, Clara would worry. "So how's Rob?"

"Rob who?" Liza frowned as she set a pair of dyed purple canvas tennis shoes next to the dress.

"Rob, the guy you're dating."

“Was dating.”

“Oh, no. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. We just weren’t right for each other. Better to find out sooner than find out when we’re about to walk down the —” Liza’s face paled as she pressed a hand to her lips as though to stop her runaway mouth.

“It’s okay. You can finish what you were about to say about walking down the aisle. I totally agree.” She’d had blinders on where Andrew was concerned. She’d wanted to believe she could change him. That he’d become the man she wanted him to be.

“Clara, I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. Well, obviously I wasn’t thinking, or I wouldn’t have said something so thoughtless.”

Clara walked up to her friend and briefly placed a hand on Liza’s arm to gain her attention. “It’s really okay. Honest. It was a long time ago. I’m way past it now.”

“Are you? I mean now that he’s in town, that must be awkward.”

“Surprisingly enough, it’s not.” Clara opened the cover on her digital notebook and checked her email, hoping to drop the subject of Andrew.

“Really?” Liza’s voice drew out the one word until the air hung with a million unspoken questions.

Clara glanced up to see the worry in her friend’s eyes. “It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like?”

“I—”

“Sorry to keep you waiting.” Tula breezed into the chapel, saving Clara from having to answer that question. “I really hope this is our last meeting. The flight between here and LA takes up far too much time. And I know that’s why we picked this location, with it being far from the paparazzi, but I have to make this quick. I’ve got to get back for a photo shoot to promote my upcoming movie release. Funny, I don’t recall my first wedding taking up so much time.”

Clara wanted to point out that her first wedding hadn’t been much of one. She and Hugh had eloped to Vegas. There hadn’t been invitations to send or a dress to pick out. Instead, Clara said, “I understand. We’ll do our best to hurry this along.”

Tula smiled at her. “I knew you’d understand.”

Clara decided it was best to change the subject. “Liza has kindly laid everything out for you. And I believe everything is the right size.”

“Perfect.” Tula moved to the rack where the white dress hung. “How did things go with Andrew?”

“Yes, Clara,” Liza said with amusement glittering in her eyes. “How are you and Andrew doing?”

What? Surely, he hadn’t told people about the kiss. Clara’s back teeth ground together as she tried her best to maintain a smile. Talk about a difficult feat. At last trusting her voice, she said, “We visited a few venues.”

Tula nodded before turning to examine the dress. Her fingers traced the delicate embroidery on the bodice. “What have you come up with for the special evening?”

“Nothing specific, but we’re narrowing things down.” Clara gave her the highlights while leaving out their talk about Andrew’s accident and the earth-tilting kiss.

“You have to come up with something really special,” Tula said. “I want my guy to have the best night of his life, though I guess that won’t be possible since I won’t be there.” Tula’s little laugh filled the awkward silence as Clara forced a smile.

She wished her assistant would ring her phone, but then she recalled leaving instructions that under no circumstances was she to be disturbed while meeting with Tula. And since she’d handed her other clients over to Brooke, there wasn’t anyone to rescue her from this moment.

She’d even gone one step further and given Brooke instructions not to give out her location to anyone, especially Andrew. She couldn’t see him again—not yet. Not until she trusted herself around him. She needed some time to sort out what had compelled her to kiss him.

Whatever had come over her couldn’t happen again. She didn’t trust him with her heart.

elle

He needed to speak with Clara.

Andrew entered the office suite of the Perky Pink Wedding Company. The walls were white. He was certain if he were to ask, the paint color wouldn't be a generic white. If he knew Clara—and he did, quite well—the paint would be called fluffy cloud or marshmallow.

The décor was dotted with pink accents here and there. The room wasn't overdone, but rather tastefully decorated. On the far wall of the reception area were two illuminated glass cases displaying invitations, champagne flutes, table settings, and more. Clara had definitely put a lot of thought into the image she wanted to project.

Brooke smiled. “Hi.”

“Good morning. I'd like to see Clara, um, Ms. Harrington.”

“I'm sorry, but Ms. Harrington isn't available now, but I can set you up with an appointment.”

“Thanks. But this really can't wait.” The prior evening had been awkward after the kiss, and the conversation, what little of it there was, had been stilted.

“I can pass along the message as soon as I talk to her.”

Andrew didn't have time to waste. The bachelor party was coming up fast, and he wanted things with Clara to be straightened out before he returned to the East Coast the morning after the wedding.

His gaze moved to Clara's closed office door. Could it really be that easy? He knew he shouldn't, that it wasn't right to just

barge in on her, but if he didn't square things away soon, he worried he'd lose his nerve.

He glanced down, remembering the two coffees he'd brought at Java 'N Tea. He extended one. "Can I bribe you with a coffee?"

Brooke's face lit up with a smile. Andrew's chest filled with hope. She eyed up the tall cup with desire, but then she shook her head. "Sorry. I can't."

"Are you sure? It's caramel macchiato." He couldn't believe he'd been reduced to this level. What was happening to him?

"Thanks, but no. I can't break Clara's trust. Not even for that coffee, which smells delightful."

He was impressed by Brooke's loyalty. He set one coffee on the desk. "I understand."

A look of relief swept over her face. "Not everyone does."

"I'm sure." His gaze strayed back to the closed office door.

Without giving the thought its due diligence, he moved to the door and swung it open.

"Hey! Wait!" The rapid succession of Brooke's heels clicked across the tiled floor, alerting him to her pursuit. "You can't go in there."

He frowned at the empty office space, but then he noticed the homey details. A collection of framed photographs of her family rested on the credenza, and on the handle of her closet was an assortment of dry cleaning. Colorful coffee mugs sat

atop her desk. There were even more on the file cabinet as well as a pink and white ceramic cookie jar. He smiled, knowing without looking that it was filled with chocolate chip cookies.

He thought for sure that Clara would be there. He was determined to catch up with her to... What? Apologize? To promise it wouldn't happen again? Or to follow up that steamy kiss with another one?

The last thought was definitely tempting. He glanced down, catching sight of his injured leg. Every doctor had told him it would never work quite right. He would never be the man Clara deserved. How long would it take him to make peace with that fact?

He recalled how Clara used to daydream about their children. One boy and one girl. If he were to have kids now, he could never play with them like he wanted to. He'd never be able to toss a football in the backyard or play tag or take them swimming or make them laugh as he chased them around the house.

The last thought jarred him back to reality. He turned around to find Brooke glaring at him as she crossed her arms.

He ducked his head, knowing he was in trouble. "Sorry. I just had to know if she was in here."

"I told you she wasn't."

He took comfort in knowing that someone had Clara's back since he couldn't do it himself. He followed Brooke to the

outer office. “I just really need to talk to Clara. It’s important.”

“When I talk to her, I’ll tell her you stopped by. I’m sure she’ll call you back as soon as she has a free moment.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” It wasn’t until the words crossed his lips that he realized he’d vocalized his thoughts. Perhaps when you kept things bottled up for too long, they started to bubble up and burst forth at the most inopportune times. He’d have to be careful in the future, especially when he caught up with Clara.

Brooke studied him as though unsure about him and his relationship with Clara. But the questions were never verbalized.

“I guess Clara told you about me.” He didn’t know why he’d said that. It wasn’t like he wanted to strike up a conversation, especially one where he’d be the villain. He was certain that Clara’s version of their breakup cast him in a very unsavory light, and rightly so.

“Um, no. Not really.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure whatever she told you is the truth. That’s why I need to catch up with her. I want a chance to make amends before I fly out.”

It was the truth. He wasn’t in California to win her back—was he? He gave himself a mental jerk. Of course not.

It appeared the longer he was in San Francisco, the more confused he was becoming. It was best to wrap things up quickly, except there was the wedding. There was nothing he

could do to speed that up. And he couldn't abandon his brother, not after he'd agreed to be the best man. He refused to walk out on his family like his mother had.

With a resigned sigh, he headed for the door.

"Hey, you forgot your coffee," Brooke called out.

He paused and turned. "No, I didn't. You enjoy it."

Her eyes lit up with surprise before a smile pulled at her lips. "Thanks."

He had one foot out the door when Brooke said, "You didn't hear this from me, but she's at the chapel."

"Do you know when she might be back?"

"She has another appointment after Tula's fitting. She's pretty much booked back-to-back the rest of this week."

"Is that unusual?"

"Not for her."

He didn't like the sound of that. Was she working too hard?

"If you hurry, you might be able to catch her between the fitting and her next appointment."

"You're the best." He dashed out the door.

CHAPTER TEN

AT LAST, A QUIET moment to gather her thoughts.

For the very first time, Clara could breathe easy after a meeting with Tula. The young woman had actually liked everything she'd picked out. That had never happened before. Clara smiled. Things were looking up.

Both Tula and Liza were gone by the time Clara had updated her spreadsheets. She made her way outside into the fresh, warm air. One of the things she loved best about the wedding chapel was the incredible view of the ocean. It was so relaxing. Exactly what she needed at that point in time.

She checked the time, finding that her meeting with Tula had been much shorter than she'd anticipated. And now she had some free time before her next appointment.

A gentle breeze rushed over Clara's skin. She moved to the side of the chapel and took a seat on a bench. She lifted her face to the warm sun. At last this wedding was truly coming together. The smile finally returned to her lips. Soon her business would take off in ways she'd only ever imagined.

Her thoughts rolled back in time to the preparation for another wedding—her own. She'd been so excited to marry Andrew. Her gown had hung in her bedroom at her parents' house for weeks before the big day. A frown pulled at her lips as she recalled how things had fallen apart so quickly between her and Andrew. One minute they were planning on exchanging their wedding vows, and in the next moment, Andrew was backing out of the whole wedding.

But was that really how things had happened?

Had it really fallen apart so quickly?

She'd had a long time to think it over. Sometimes when she was in bed late at night, she'd recall the events leading to their breakup. She remembered how the signs were there all along—signs she'd chosen to ignore.

Neither one of them had been in a proper place to consider saying, "I do." They'd been too caught up in their fledgling careers. Their priorities had been their own goals instead of their relationship. The truth was that they'd had some growing to do—okay, a lot of growing to do.

"Clara?"

She glanced to the side, finding Andrew approaching her. It was as though her thoughts had conjured up his presence. There had always been some sort of unexplainable link between them, almost as though they could read each other's minds. Was that what had brought him there today?

She gave herself a mental jerk, realizing she was being foolish. She was certain Brooke must have told him where she was. The young woman was a bit of a matchmaker at heart. But in this instance, Brooke's efforts were misguided.

When he caught sight of her, he smiled. The breath caught in her throat. Oh, my, he was so handsome. Even more so than when he was younger. And he kept staring right at her. Her heart thump-thumped.

"Andrew." Clara jumped to her feet, sending a slip of paper with some notes Tula had written out for the wedding fluttering to the ground. "I, ah, didn't know you'd be here."

He stopped next to her. Before he could bend over, she knelt, grabbing the paper from under the bench. When she stood back up, his smile had vanished. His face was now marred with lines bracketing his eyes and mouth.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"I should have been able to pick that up for you, but my leg just doesn't cooperate like it should."

"It's okay. After all, I dropped it."

His lips pressed together in a firm line, and a muscle in his jaw twitched. But he didn't say anything. He didn't have to. It was all written in his rigid stance and deep frown. He was frustrated by his limitations. She couldn't blame him. She didn't know how she'd react if she'd sustained such tremendous injuries. Her guess was that he'd far surpassed any

prediction the doctors had made about his recovery. That was Andrew for you, always pushing himself.

Maybe the problem was that no one ever told him how inspiring he was by living his life on his own terms and not giving in to his injuries. “You know, you’re doing amazing. After hearing your story, it’s a miracle you’re even walking. You are—”

“Not the man I used to be. Not even close.”

Well, if that’s the way he wanted to play it, she could, too. “You’re right.” When his brows rose, she realized she had his full attention. “You’re a better man.”

He shook his head. “Don’t, Clara. I don’t need to hear a pep talk. I had my head filled with those well-intended platitudes while I was in rehab.”

What was up with him today? Was it the kiss? Did he regret it? Either way, she wasn’t going to put up with his defeatist attitude. This wasn’t the man she’d once known so well. “This isn’t a pep talk.”

“Whatever it is, I don’t want it.”

“What you need right now is a swift kick in the backside.” And she was quite tempted to deliver it.

The corners of his mouth lifted ever so slightly. “I’m surprised you haven’t done that yet.”

“Trust me, I’ve been quite tempted.”

A small smile lifted his lips. “Still the feisty Clara I used to know.”

This was her opening. “But you aren’t the Andrew I used to know.”

He shrugged. “Things happen.”

“I’m not referring to the accident. At least not directly. The man standing before me has grown.” When he frowned at her, she added, “The Andrew I used to know wouldn’t have flown to California to support his brother. That Andrew would have been too busy building his career and not had time to take an extended vacation.”

“Do you really believe that?”

She nodded. “I do.”

He rested his hands on his trim waist. “And here I was just thinking you’ve changed, too, working more and not having time for a personal life. Or perhaps you’re just using your work to avoid it.”

She didn’t like how well he could read her. Her defenses went up around her. “How would you know? You haven’t been here that long.”

“It doesn’t take much for one workaholic to recognize the signs in someone else. First, there’s your caffeine addiction. I saw your collection of mugs in your office. Some things don’t change.”

She shrugged. “That doesn’t mean anything. A lot of people love coffee.”

“And then there’s the lack of a significant other.”

“I... I haven’t wanted to get serious with anyone. Not after what happened with us.”

“And there’s your office. It’s made up like a mini-apartment with all of your essentials. I bet if I was to look in the closet, I’d find a few changes of clothes.”

She didn’t say a word. How could she? He’d nailed her down perfectly. She’d become the very thing she’d accused him of being—a workaholic. It was easier this way. Her career couldn’t hurt her in the same way a relationship could. It also kept her from dwelling on her shortcomings as a fiancée and a daughter.

Realizing she had to leave soon to meet a potential client, she almost sighed in relief. This conversation with Andrew had gone far deeper than she’d ever intended it to. “I really must be going. I have a meeting.”

She’d started past him when he said, “Aren’t you even going to ask what I’m doing here?”

She turned to him. “If it’s about the bachelor party—”

“It isn’t. Listen, I realize things between us are complicated. I didn’t come to California to confuse you, or to confuse myself.”

He was confused, too? Somehow she found comfort in his spontaneous confession. She wasn’t the only one who realized an old flame still flickered between them. But should they fan the flames? Or snuff them out?

But now wasn't the time to explore the answers. That seemed to be a growing theme in their relationship—bad timing.

Her business had come so far, and now her biggest wedding was just on the horizon. She couldn't let herself get distracted. She couldn't let Andrew find his way back into her heart. After all, his future was in New York. Hers was in San Francisco.

She cleared her throat. "You don't have to worry. We're good."

"And last night?"

"We got caught up in the past. Just, um, forget it."

His gaze probed hers. "Is that what you've done?"

How did she answer him? Did she tell him the truth about how she'd stayed awake most of the night, staring into the dark, recalling every delicious detail of that kiss? Or did she brush off his question, letting him know she wouldn't be swayed by one simple kiss?

She glanced down at her papers. "I'm a busy person with a major wedding event in a couple of weeks. I don't have time to dwell on it."

"Or you're afraid to admit there's something between us."

"Don't do this. Not here. Not now. It was a kiss. Nothing more."

He sighed. “If telling yourself that makes you happy, then so be it—”

“It does.”

His gaze said he didn’t believe her, but he didn’t argue.

She took a deep breath, realizing she was letting her emotions get the best of her. That couldn’t happen. Because when it all boiled down to it, Andrew was a client, part of the biggest wedding of her career. She had to keep him happy.

She tilted her chin. “I was going to call you later today to discuss the party plans. I have an update for you that I think you’re going to like.”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “What is it?”

“That’s the thing. I’d rather show you.” In truth, spending more time with him was dangerous. Because no matter how much she denied it, they had a boatload of chemistry bubbling just beneath the surface. “I don’t have time now, but would you be available tomorrow morning?”

He hesitated. “I’m afraid that won’t work for me. Would another time work for you?”

“We’re running out of time. The party isn’t far off.”

“What about later today?” When she paused to recall today’s agenda, he added, “I promise no kissing this time.” He smiled at her, sending her heart tumbling in her chest. “I’ll be a perfect gentleman.”

“In that case, it’s a date.” *Ugh!* She would have to be more careful with her words going forward. She needed to treat him like any other client. And that meant no more kissing—absolutely none.

His eyes lit up, but he let her slip of the tongue slide without a comment. “Shall I meet you at your office?”

She nodded. “Would four o’clock work for you?”

“Yes. I’ll see you then.”

He turned and walked away. She couldn’t help but follow him with her eyes. His limp wasn’t as pronounced today, leading her to believe that, just like everyone else, he had his good days and his bad ones. This must be one of the good ones.

As he climbed into his car, she doubted she’d ever be able to treat him like everyone else. Andrew was special, and even though it hadn’t worked out for them, that didn’t mean she was able to fully disengage her heart.

But that didn’t mean she loved him. Okay, well, she would always love him, but she wasn’t in love with him. There was a difference. Wasn’t there?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HE'D FAILED.

There was no other way to put it.

Later that afternoon, Andrew sat in the back of the taxi as it zipped along the four-lane road. In this part of the city, he could actually see the skyline, instead of a wall of buildings. With the sun shining, the city was picturesque and inviting. Perhaps this place could grow on him. It wasn't like there was anything waiting for him in New York, not even a pet.

But soon his thoughts returned to Clara. He'd failed to do what he'd set out to do that day—apologize to her for the pain he'd caused her and make a clean break. He told himself it was because once things were settled between them, he wanted to convince her to return to her home in DC to be near her family. Even though she had her differences with her father, Andrew knew just how much she loved them all. And he couldn't imagine being isolated on the other side of the country had been easy for her.

He had so many regrets where his own father was concerned, things he should have said but never did. And now,

there was no chance for him to make up for all of the time he'd lost with his father, all of the holidays they'd spent apart. He didn't want Clara to experience the same regrets.

Minutes later, the taxi pulled to a stop in front of the older building containing Clara's office. Again, he came armed with coffee, but this time he had a carrier holding three cups. Brooke's face lit up when he presented her with a cup.

"Thank you. Clara's expecting you. Go ahead in."

"Thanks."

He rapped his knuckles on the open door. Clara glanced up from her desk and waved him inside. He extended his hand, presenting her with a caramel macchiato. "I hope this is still your favorite."

"It is." A fleeting smile crossed her face. "I thought you were worried I drank too much of this stuff."

He cleared his throat as he figured out a way to backpedal out of this sticky situation. "Perhaps I spoke without thinking."

"Oh, I think your brain was working just fine."

"Okay. I apologize for the harsh words, but that doesn't mean I'm not worried about you."

"Isn't that like the pot calling the kettle black? When you return to New York, you'll work just as long and hard as I do, if not more so."

He wanted to tell her that was no longer the case, that his eyes had been opened to all of the things he'd been missing in

life. But he could tell she wasn't in the mood to truly hear what he was saying. And that was his fault.

“You're right.” His admission seemed to cool her ire. “I didn't bring you coffee with any ulterior motive. I wanted one, and I thought you might enjoy one, too. If you want me to toss it out, I can do that.”

“Um, no, that's not necessary.” She pulled the coffee close to her chest. “There's no point in wasting some good brew.”

Eager to steer the conversation to a safer topic, he said, “I'm anxious to hear what you came up with for the party.”

She took a sip of coffee before getting to her feet. “I think I've nailed down exactly what you want.”

“Great. What do you have in mind?”

She grabbed her purse and headed for the door. “Let's go.”

“Go where?”

“It'll be easier to show you. Come on.” She continued out the door, leaving him to follow.

He knew she'd insist on driving, and that was why he'd left his rental car back at the hotel. Clara was a strong woman, not afraid of taking charge, and San Francisco was her town.

He considered teasing her about riding in her pink convertible, but he resisted. He couldn't risk upsetting her again. But that pink car really was a bit much. Thankfully, no one knew him in San Francisco.

He knew he was worrying about something trivial, but it was a guy thing. Guys he knew didn't ride around in a pink sports car. It just wasn't done. But then again, any man who turned to check them out would be utterly distracted by the gorgeous blonde next to him. After all, he certainly was distracted to the point where he thought he might be falling in love again.



She'd nailed it.

Clara smiled after walking Andrew through her plan for the bachelor party. Instead of a limo, she'd arranged for a helicopter to circle the city and deliver them to the helipad atop the building where the party would be held. The evening would include a surf-and-turf dinner with all of the trimmings, a favorite of Hugh's. When you were famous, it was amazing what information was available online.

For the entertainment portion of the evening, she'd done some investigating and found out that the groom was a fan of card games, Texas Hold'em to be exact. So, there would be beautiful women at the party, but they would be the dealers.

She struggled to hold her excitement at bay. "So what do you think?"

Andrew joined her on the sidewalk. He didn't say anything right away. Her excitement faded as anxiety settled in. She'd thought for sure that she'd nailed it this time.

She mentally started reviewing the plan, trying to think of anything she might have missed, when Andrew spoke up. “I’m impressed.”

A pent-up breath whooshed from her lungs. That was a huge relief.

He nodded. “You do excellent work. And I think the proceeds from the evening should be donated to a charity—something my brother supports.”

“When I was doing research on him—you know to figure out the entertainment for the party—I learned that he supports a wildlife refuge.”

Andrew paused. “I like it.”

“You do?”

“I do. Thank you for everything you’ve done to make this evening perfect for my brother. He’s going to love it. It’s fun but classy. And nothing that Tula would throw a fit about. At least I don’t think so, but who really knows with her.”

Clara clasped her hands, resisting the urge to tell him she’d worked the last forty-eight hours on the plans, even calling in a personal favor or two. Thankfully, it had paid off. A smile pulled at her lips. “Let’s head back to the office to sign the paperwork.”

Andrew’s gaze scanned the area. “First, I think this deserves some sort of celebration, don’t you?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“I’m thinking some ice cream would be perfect.”

“Ice cream?” She hadn’t indulged in some creamy sweetness in far too long. But then, the sensible part of her said she still had that stubborn five pounds to lose. “I don’t know. We just had a latte.”

“That was a long time ago. And I remember just how much you love ice cream. Don’t tell me you’ve given it up.”

“I haven’t. Not really—”

“Good. I see an ice cream shop just across the street. Come on.” Without waiting for her agreement, he set off down the sidewalk.

She pressed her hands to her hips as she stared at his back. He didn’t slow down. In fact, she was impressed by his speed. It just proved to her that if a person was motivated enough, they could do anything.

Clara set off after him. She practically jogged to catch up to him, which was difficult in her heels. It’d been so long since she’d indulged in an ice cream cone that she didn’t know which flavor to pick. They all sounded so good. Her mouth watered.

Andrew stopped on the sidewalk in the middle of the block, waiting for a break in traffic to cross the road. He reached out, taking her hand in his own.

“We can’t cross here,” Clara protested. “There’s no crosswalk.”

Andrew glanced at her and smiled. "I'd forgotten what a stickler you are for rules."

"Well, I don't intend to get ticketed for jaywalking." She attempted to pull her hand from his, but his grip tightened.

"Do they really do that?" When she sent him a puzzled look, he added, "Ticket people for jaywalking."

"I don't know. But I don't intend to find out."

"Oh, come on. Live a little."

The traffic had let up, and he gave a tug on her arm. She really shouldn't. Andrew's warm gaze met hers, melting away her resistance.

Hand in hand they dashed across the street. The ice cream shop had a long line, but now that she'd had a glimpse of the treats within, she wasn't budging without a waffle cone. Andrew proceeded to make small talk about the party and the little details he would like added. None of his requests were outside the realm of possibilities. In fact, she really liked some of his suggestions.

"I hope your brother enjoys the party. I'm just sorry I'll miss it."

Andrew's eyes widened. "You like poker?"

She shrugged. "To be honest, I never tried it. But it sounds like it might be fun."

He chuckled and shook his head in disbelief.

She huffed. "What's so funny?"

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“You don’t think I can let loose and have some fun?”

“No. Not really. You’ve gotten so serious since...since we broke up.”

She crossed her arms and frowned at him. “I can still have fun. I just don’t have time while building my business.”

Before he could respond, the young girl behind the counter asked, “What can I get for you?”

“Salted caramel pretzel,” Clara said.

“We don’t have that flavor.”

“Oh.” This was a disappointment. “Give me a moment.”

Her gaze moved to the menu. She hemmed and hawed while Andrew placed his order. Finally, she settled on triple chocolate delight with some pecans and mini marshmallows added in for good measure. If she was going to splurge today on calories, she might as well go all out.

Once they had their ice cream in hand, Andrew guided her over to a table in the corner. Not many customers took advantage of the indoor seating. Most got their ice cream and headed out into the sunshine.

Was it wrong to admit she was enjoying this afternoon outing and most especially the company? Her gaze strayed to Andrew as he licked the ice cream cone. It was so easy to forget the business portion of their outing.

Behave, Clara. This isn’t a date. Not by a long shot.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHO KNEW ICE CREAM had such magical powers?

As Andrew marveled at the transformation in Clara, he assured himself that her now cheerful disposition had to do with the sugary treat. Not him. His smile faltered.

She sat across the little table from him, licking her cone in between chatting and laughing. She'd really gotten excited about the plans for the bachelor party. He was happy she was so passionate about her work.

He didn't have to say much, merely nodding at the appropriate intervals. When at last she quieted down, he said, "You're amazing."

"Why, thank you." She once more smiled, and the whole room seemed to light up around her. "But you have to realize that it's my job, so it comes naturally to me. I have reliable contacts and known resources. Once we have the theme and the setting, I was able to fill in the rest."

"I wasn't referring to your party planning, though what you came up with for the bachelor party is spot-on. When I said

you were amazing, I meant you. You moved to the other side of the country and built your business from scratch. I noticed how everyone we spoke with today has great respect for you. That isn't easy to do. But is this all you want in life?"

Her gaze met his. "Isn't this enough? Do I need more?"

He shrugged. "I was just curious. You're so far from your family, and I know how close you all used to be."

She shook her head. "Not anymore. They couldn't respect my decision to go off and do my own thing."

"All of them?" Andrew wanted so badly to help her. "Or was it just your father?"

She paused and stared out the window. "He might have said the words but none of my family disagreed with him."

"It doesn't mean they didn't want to. Maybe they were worried about making a bad situation worse."

Clara shrugged. "Maybe you're right. But it's all said and done now."

"And you have no intention of calling them?"

Her narrowed gaze landed on him. "They could call me, you know." Her voice rose. "The phone works in both directions."

Maybe getting into all of this wasn't such a good idea. "Understood."

"The frown on your face says otherwise. Wait... Is it your leg? Did we overdo it today?"

“My leg is fine.” He gazed into her eyes. What he found reflected in her eyes surprised him. It wasn’t sympathy or pity, but rather, there was warmth and tenderness. “Thanks for caring.”

She reached out and squeezed his hand. “I’ll always care.”

His heart thumped in his chest. When she went to pull away, he tightened his hold on her fingers, needing the warmth of her touch for just a moment longer.

It was only then he realized that for the first time ever, he hadn’t taken offense to an inquiry about his leg. Ever since his accident, he’d been defensive whenever anyone mentioned his injury or how he couldn’t keep up with others.

But right now, the caring in Clara’s eyes and the gentleness of her touch were like a balm on his injured pride. Until that point, he’d never noticed how his injuries extended beyond the physical. Who’d have thought the injury to his ego would be just as difficult to heal?

But they weren’t there because of him. They were there for Clara. She just didn’t know that yet. In a comfortable silence, they enjoyed their ice cream cones. Clara made quick work of hers. He still had half of his cone to eat, and it was starting to melt, so he gobbled it down. If he wanted to help Clara, he was going to have to tell her the truth—the whole truth. His truth.

And somehow he had to get the words out before they got tangled in his mind. He just couldn’t screw this up. While he’d been laid up in the hospital, he’d gone over and over the words

in his head. However, now that he was sitting there with Clara and staring into her eyes, his mouth grew dry and his pulse raced. Maybe he was making a big mistake. Why should he ruin a good thing?

The push and pull of his thoughts raged within him. His body tensed, including his hand—the one that was holding Clara’s hand.

Her face pinched just before she pulled her hand free. “Okay, now I know something is wrong. Talk to me.”

He sighed. “Where do I even begin?”

“That’s easy. At the beginning.”

Sure. Why not? “Some of this you already know, but here goes. You know my father raised me after my mother ran off. At the same time, he managed the convenience store in our small town.”

Clara nodded, but then got a puzzled look on her face. “You said he managed, as in past tense. Did something happen? Did he retire?”

Andrew frowned at her. “Whose story is this?”

“Okay. Okay. Continue.”

“No matter how hard my father worked, the money never went far enough. But each day he bought one lottery ticket. He always picked the same numbers, over and over again. When I got older, I asked him why he did it. I just couldn’t understand why he kept wasting his hard-earned money on something that never paid off. And do you know what he said?” When Clara

shook her head, Andrew said, “Because you never know when luck will strike.”

“Your father always was an optimistic man.”

“He was. I guess I was more like my mother, because I never believed in luck. I always subscribed to the fact that hard work paid off, and a person could make their own luck. That’s why I studied hard and played harder, earning a full-ride scholarship by playing football in college.”

“Maybe life is a little of both. But I do know that you made your father very proud of you.”

He swallowed down the lump forming in the back of his throat, knowing what he must say next. “Just before my accident, my father... He died.”

“Oh, Andrew. I’m so sorry.” Clara jumped to her feet, rushed over and wrapped her arms around him, giving him a firm hug. Her voice was soft and full of emotion when she said, “I always liked him.”

“He liked you, too.” Andrew blinked repeatedly as his eyes misted over. “He made sure to let me know when we broke up that I’d let the best thing in my life slip through my fingers.”

Clara moved back to her seat. “He... He said that?”

“He did.” Andrew missed her soothing touch.

Clara dabbed at her eyes. Andrew glanced away, trying to maintain his composure to get the rest out. He threaded his fingers together and stared at them. If he looked at her—if he saw her tears—he would most certainly lose it.

He cleared his throat. “When I went home for the funeral, I... I was surprised by the tremendous outpouring of respect and love from the community. These were people I’d never met, and yet they knew my father. They had fun stories about him, and I started to see my father in a different light, as a man who loved life and enjoyed spending time with others.”

Clara nodded. “Your father was certainly an easy man to like. I’m so sorry I missed the funeral.”

“That’s my fault.” Andrew chanced a glance at her. “I thought about calling you, but I figured you wouldn’t want to hear from me after, well, after what happened.”

“You should have called. I would have come. I’m so sorry you didn’t think you could reach out to me, that you thought I’d turn you away.”

That was exactly what he’d thought or worse, that she’d come out of pity and duty. He hadn’t wanted to put her through any more pain. But in the end, he now realized, he’d hurt her more by not giving her a chance to say goodbye to his father. “I really made a mess of things. It’s I who should be apologizing. My father would have wanted you there. He always admired you and thought that we—well, it doesn’t matter now.”

“And this is why you reached out to your brother?”

“Not exactly. It appears I needed a couple of more lessons. Big lessons to get my head screwed on straight.”

This time Clara didn't say a word. She sat there, patiently waiting for him to tell her the rest.

“While I was taking care of my father's estate and closing up the house, I had one of the biggest shocks of my life. I learned my father was rich—”

“What? But how?”

“One of his lottery tickets had won the jackpot. And yet he never said a word. In fact, he continued to work every day, going to the convenience store and putting in his hours as though he still needed the job to survive.”

“And he never told you about the money?”

Andrew shook his head. “I wonder if he felt he needed the job because it provided him with a chance to communicate with his friends, the only family he had besides me. And as you know, I wasn't around much.”

“He wouldn't have known what to do with himself at home alone all day.”

“I was thinking about that when I had my accident.”

Her eyes shimmered with sympathy. “You haven't had an easy time of it.”

He glanced away, focusing on the big picture window and the cars going up the street. “When I woke up in the hospital, I had to face some stark facts, more painful than my injuries. I was alone. Totally alone in life. I... I'd driven away the only people left in this world who'd once cared about me.”

This time she reached out with both hands, cupping his hands in her own. “I’m so sorry you felt as though you were that alone. But you don’t have to feel that way anymore. I’m here for you.”

“I had a lot of time lying in that hospital bed to think about the decisions I’d made. First, turning away my brother when he called to tell me that our mother died. I kept thinking her death didn’t matter to me. She was the one who left, not me. And my brother, well, I was angry with him. I know it doesn’t make sense, but I just couldn’t deal with him at the time.”

He waited for Clara to say something, but she didn’t. Nor did she pull her hands away. She simply waited for him to gather his thoughts and continue.

“I guess growing up and coming way too close to dying gives a person clarity. I was angry at my brother for something that was totally out of his control—the fact that my mother raised him after abandoning me. She’s the one I should have been upset with, not him.” He turned in his chair so he could look directly at Clara. “It took me losing most of my family before I realized how much they matter. Promise me you won’t do the same thing with yours.”

This time she did pull away. “Is that what you think I’m doing, pushing them away?”

He shrugged, letting her draw her own conclusion. “And then there’s you. Back then I was a fool for thinking you’d drop everything to support my career. I was so self-centered that I didn’t realize how unhappy I’d made you.”

“You weren’t alone in that manner. I was stubborn, too.”

“I don’t want to start a blame game. I just want to tell you I’m sorry it took me until now to realize how much I hurt you, making you choose between me and your career. At the time, I couldn’t understand why you were making such a big deal about your job when you had a trust fund to fall back on.”

For a moment, Clara didn’t speak. She didn’t look at him. In fact, she didn’t move at all. This was what he was afraid of. That opening up old wounds would bring up the pain and resentment.

Andrew cleared his throat. “I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just that when I was lying in that hospital bed, I promised myself that if I ever got out of there, I would make amends with you and my brother. And tell you both just how sorry I am.”

She didn’t say a word.

When the silence dragged on to the point of being uncomfortable, he got to his feet. “We should be going.”

She got to her feet, and before he knew what was happening, she threw herself into his arms. She hugged him tightly. His arms automatically wrapped around her. And he buried his face in her hair, breathing in the gentle floral scent, the scent that he used to know so well.

When they pulled apart, Clara gazed up at him. “Thank you for that.”

“We’re okay, then?”

She mustered up a smile. “We’re okay.”

He breathed out a sigh of relief and smiled back. “Does that mean I don’t have to call a taxi?”

“As long as you don’t mind another ride in my pink convertible.”

“Um, no. Not at all.”

She laughed. “You really don’t hide your dislike of my car very well. I think your brother is going to beat you at poker.”

It was good to have his old friend back. As they made their way back to the office, they talked like old friends again. He’d forgotten how much he enjoyed listening to her. She’d been his best friend, always able to finish his sentences.

And in that moment, he wondered if it was possible to piece together their romantic relationship. He glanced over at Clara as the wind tousled her golden locks. Was he pushing his luck? Probably. But could he just turn his back on her and walk away again without at least trying?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IN THE FOLLOWING DAYS, Andrew couldn't help but think that maybe, just maybe, there was a chance for them to have a do-over. He'd made a point of stopping by her office once a day with a coffee in hand.

It was just after lunch on Wednesday when he stepped into Clara's office. Brooke glanced up and smiled. "No coffee today?"

"I thought it was time for a change." He held up a nondescript brown bag and lowered it to her desk to reveal a pint of ice cream. "Is she around?"

Brooke nodded. "You're in luck. She's just about to leave for Gabi's Posies."

"Excuse me?"

A big smile lit up Brooke's face. "Sorry. It's a florist."

"Gotcha. I better hurry. Can I go in?"

"Sure. If you don't mind me saying, she's lucky to have someone like you in her life."

“It’s me who’s the lucky one.” He meant it with every fiber of his being. He treasured this second chance with Clara. He just wished it hadn’t taken something so severe to make him see what he was missing in life.

Clara’s door was open, but her back was to him. Her head was bent as though she was looking at her feet. He followed her line of vision, finding her wearing pink heels. Interesting.

He rapped his knuckles on the wood door. She spun around. She smiled and signaled him to come in. “Hi. I wasn’t expecting you. Did I forget an appointment?”

“No. But I thought I’d drop off the list of names for the bachelor party.” He watched as she quickly slipped off the heels and placed them in a box on her desk.

“A new purchase?”

“The shoes?” When he nodded, she said, “They’re not mine. A designer sent them over for Tula’s wedding, but they didn’t work out. When I tried to return them, the designer claimed they were used and wouldn’t take them back. Now I’m not sure what to do with them.”

“Sounds to me like they’re yours now.”

“Mine? But what would I do with them?”

“Whatever you want. After all, they’re your favorite color.”

“They definitely are.” She accepted the piece of paper from him and glanced down at the list of partygoers. “Are there any last-minute changes you want?”

“None that I can think of.”

“I’ll be here if you need anything.”

“Actually, there’s something I can do for you.” He handed over the bag.

She glanced inside. “This certainly doesn’t look like coffee.”

“Well, if you don’t want it, I can keep it.”

“It’s ice cream, isn’t it?” When he nodded, she glanced back in the bag. “What flavor is it?”

“Cotton candy?”

“What?” Her face creased with a frown. “Why did you choose that flavor?”

He smothered a laugh at her pout. “Because it’s pink. And we all know you love all things pink.”

She sighed. “Maybe not my ice cream.”

He couldn’t resist laughing out loud. She looked so cute with her bottom lip sticking out. He was so glad to have her back in his life. He’d really missed these moments.

“It’s not funny.” Her voice had a grumpy tone.

“It’s okay. You can eat it. It’s your favorite.”

Her doubtful gaze met his. “Are you being serious?”

“Would I lie about your favorite ice cream?”

That’s all he needed to say to spur her into action. She removed the small container from the bag. She peeled off the

lid and smiled when she found her favorite flavor, salted caramel pretzel. “Now this is some good ice cream. Thank you.”

“I knew you were disappointed when they didn’t have that flavor at the ice cream shop.”

“You are so thoughtful to remember.”

He remembered everything about her. Like how she enjoyed rainy days. And how she loved cats but didn’t have one because she wasn’t home long enough. When she was feeling down, she indulged with canned pasta—the kind in the shape of *Os* was her favorite. And then there was the way her emerald eyes twinkled when she was excited. No matter how old he got, he’d remember these things. Clara was unforgettable.

“But I can’t eat it now.” Her voice drew him from his thoughts. “I have an appointment with the florist for the wedding. Tula changed her mind about the color of the flowers, and the florist Tula selected has washed their hands of this wedding. They complained that Tula changes her mind too much, and I couldn’t argue the point. I don’t know if Gabi will have enough time before the wedding. If she doesn’t, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Can’t you just tell Tula her idea isn’t going to pan out and she has to stick with the original flowers?”

Clara shook her head. “Not until I’ve tried absolutely everything to make her wish come true.”

“But you can’t just drop everything you’re doing because she changed her mind.”

“My job is to make the bride’s wishes come true for her big day.”

“And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“When is it time to make your wishes come true?”

“This is my wish, my dream. I’m doing what I love.”

“And wearing yourself out in the process.”

Clara grabbed her purse. Her gaze caught his. “Thank you for the ice cream. You’ve been very sweet. I don’t deserve it. But I really do have to go.”

Each day he thought up a new excuse to visit her. Most days he was able to think of something to inquire about with either the wedding or the bachelor party. He’d made himself available to his brother and his bride to run errands since he was in San Francisco and they were in LA.

Being on the go was so much better than thinking about how much he’d sacrificed—and for what? A career that had ended when he’d had his accident. Sure, he could find a new position, but now that he was out of the frantic-paced, all-consuming job, he wasn’t sure he wanted it back. It was still under consideration.

“I know.” He moved to the doorway. “You can eat it on the way.”

She shook her head. “There’s no way I can eat it and drive.”

“Then let me drive. My car is right out front.”

Her eyes widened. “Do you think of everything?”

“I try to. Come on. There’s a spoon in the bag and napkins. You’re all set.”

“I don’t know—”

“Afterward, perhaps you could show me the way to the Golden Gate. Would you believe that I’ve been here all of this time and have yet to visit it?” Clara frowned, definitely not the reaction that he’d been hoping for. “Is there something wrong with the bridge?”

“Not that I know of, but I can’t go. After stopping by Gabi’s, I have an appointment with a new client.”

“Oh.” He was starting to realize how she must have felt when they were together—when he spent almost every waking moment working. It didn’t feel good—not at all. He felt awful for making her feel like an afterthought.

“But I’ll take the ice cream. Hopefully, it won’t melt right away, and I can eat it between meetings. I didn’t get a chance to have lunch.” She moved next to him, lifted up on her tiptoes, and pressed a kiss to his cheek, sending his heart racing. Before he could pull her close and taste her sweet lips, she moved away. She paused at the doorway and turned back. “Just use the GPS on your phone. It’ll get you to the bridge.”

“I’ll do that. Good luck.”

“Thanks. I’ll need it.”

So far things were going well between him and Clara, but she still insisted on keeping him at arm’s length. He knew she didn’t want to be hurt again, but could there be more to her distance? He glanced down at his leg. She hadn’t seemed to be put off by his injury. Maybe he was just being supersensitive about it. After all, there were many reasons for her to want to keep her distance.

Perhaps she was just too tired to think about romance. As Hugh and Tula’s wedding grew closer, Andrew noticed Clara’s face looked paler and shadows were cast beneath her eyes. She was working too hard and worrying about inconsequential details for the wedding. She needed to loosen up and take a break. And he had an idea to get her to relax, though it would take a bit of arranging. But thanks to his father, he was able to work a bit of magic. He was certain if his father were around, he would approve of Andrew’s plan.



Only one more week to go.

And everything was going according to plan.

How was that possible?

Sitting cross-legged on her living room floor, Clara gazed down at the invitation list.

Warning bells were going off in her head. Ever since Tula had selected the wedding dress, the rest of the preparations had

gone smoothly—too smoothly. She'd worked on a lot of weddings between San Francisco and DC, and there was always a flurry of last-minute changes.

She knew she shouldn't court trouble where there was none, but she just couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right. She yawned. Then again, maybe it was her tired mind playing tricks on her.

After a large gulp of coffee, she forced her attention back to the invitations. Why exactly had she volunteered to address each one, especially when it wasn't part of her services?

Oh, yes, to keep her celebrity client happy. It was a good thing she'd taken a class in calligraphy a few years back.

The elaborate purple and pearl invitations were to be hand-delivered by an army of couriers the day before the ceremony. Tula had already made sure the guests had saved the day for a preview party for her new film. Clara couldn't imagine what it must be like to have to outsmart the paparazzi in order to have a little privacy.

The first of the wedding festivities was taking place tonight. Clara hoped the bachelor party went off without a hitch. And considering her phone hadn't rung, she was going with the saying that *no news was good news*.

Buzz-buzz.

Perhaps she'd spoken too soon.

She reached for her phone sitting on the glass coffee table. Before she could say a word, she heard, "Clara, thank

goodness. I need your help.”

She sat up straighter. “Andrew? What’s the matter?”

“There’s been a huge mix-up with tonight’s plans. I need your help to straighten everything out.”

“What? But why is this the first I’m hearing of it?” Her mind spun with a flurry of frantic thoughts.

“I don’t know. But I really need you.”

If the matter wasn’t so serious, she might question the true intent of his words. But she knew he was referring to a debacle with the bachelor party. “What’s wrong? Maybe I can fix it from here.”

“You can’t. It’ll have to be dealt with in person. I’ve sent a car to bring you to the helipad.”

“If it’s the helicopter ride, I can call the pilot—”

“No, it’s not that. Just come. Please.”

She glanced down at her clothes. She was still wearing the same thing she’d worn to the office, a pink skirt that stopped a couple of inches above her knees and a white blouse. They were a bit wrinkled, but nothing too outrageous. Besides, who would notice her attire when there was a problem to straighten out?

“Okay. I’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

“Good. The car should be there shortly. I’ll be waiting for you at the helipad.”

Clara ended the call before jumping to her feet.

So much for the wedding going too smoothly.

A quick glance in the mirror had her doing a swift touch-up to her makeup and sweeping back a few loose strands of hair. If this call had come from anyone but Andrew, she would have pressed for answers over the phone, certain that events were being blown out of proportion. But Andrew didn't overreact. If he said she had to be there, she believed him.

She was out the door in a flash. Just as Andrew promised, there was a car waiting for her. With it being later in the evening, the traffic congestion in the city had lightened. She was anxious to find out what had gone wrong with her plans. *Please don't let it be anything major.*

When they pulled to a stop in the parking lot, she rushed to the office at the helipad where she found Andrew. He was alone. She glanced all around. Where was his brother? Had it been so bad that he'd left? *Say it isn't so.*

"What's going on?" She did her best to sound calm, even though her insides were twisted with nervous tension.

"Come with me." He took her hand and headed for the door leading to the helipad.

"Andrew, I don't understand."

"You will soon. Trust me."

She shouldn't, but she did. No matter what had happened between them, she trusted him with her life. She firmly believed he would always protect her.

He stopped next to a helicopter whose door was propped open. When he stepped to the side, as though waiting for her to climb inside, she sent him a puzzled look.

“Where’s your brother?”

“Not here.”

“Obviously. But why not? Is he already at the party?”

Andrew’s smile broadened. “You were always the curious sort. Just climb in, and you’ll find out.”

She crossed her arms. “Andrew, I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s going on.”

He sighed and shook his head. “I should have known you would be stubborn.”

“Stubborn? I rushed here because you said there was a problem—”

“There was, but it’s fixed now.”

“But how?”

“Just by you being here. This evening is for you.”

“I don’t understand. What about the bachelor party?”

Andrew sent her a knowing smile. “There was a conflict. I rescheduled it for tomorrow night. So this evening is a trial run. And just so we don’t keep the pilot waiting, would you like to climb in?”

When he held his hand out to assist her into the helicopter, she hesitated. “But I can’t. I have invitations to address.”

“And they’ll be there tomorrow. If need be, I’ll help you.” He paused as though considering what she’d said. “Isn’t that something the bride should be doing?”

Clara shrugged. “In most cases, but your brother’s wedding is a special case.”

Andrew nodded in understanding. “I’m just worried that you’re doing too much.”

“And that’s what tonight’s about? Making sure I don’t burn out before the big day?” Part of her wanted to believe he was merely watching out for her welfare. It would keep everything safe between them. But another part of her wanted him to say he was trying to impress her because he was still in love with her.

He gazed deeply into her eyes, causing her stomach dip. “Tonight is about you having some time off to enjoy yourself. You know, if I recall correctly, it wasn’t so long ago you were saying those words to me.”

“And you never listened to me—”

“Ah, but see, you’re smarter than I am. That’s why you’ll accept my offer.”

Was that a challenge? It sure sounded like it to her. It was the little nudge she needed to accept his offer. “Okay. Let’s go.”

He smiled as though knowing she couldn’t resist his charms. But he was wrong. She could resist his heart-thumping smile. Couldn’t she? And where exactly was this

evening going to lead them? She had to admit she was intrigued.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE QUICKLY PLANNED EVENING was thankfully going according to plan.

Andrew glanced over at Clara as the helicopter flew past the Golden Gate with the last rays of sunshine in the background. Talk about a spectacular view. His gaze was no longer on the landscape, though, but rather on his beautiful date. Clara was simply the most stunning woman he'd ever known. He had no idea what she'd ever seen in him. He could only hope she might see it again.

A few minutes later, they touched down on the helipad atop the building Clara touted as housing one of San Francisco's swankiest nightclubs. He wished she was looking at him so he could gauge her reaction to his plans. Had he made a mistake in taking her on a date she had planned? But she had said she wished she could be involved. That had to mean something, right?

It wasn't until they were out of the chopper and making their way to the stairs that she turned to him. He wasn't able to read her expression.

His muscles tensed. “Did you enjoy the flight?”

She smiled. “I loved it. Seeing the city from the sky, all lit up with the sunset in the background, was amazing. It was very helpful for me. I’ll be sure to personally recommend it to my clients in the future. I hope your brother will enjoy it just as much. Do you think so?”

“Tonight isn’t about your business or your clients, which includes my brother. Tonight is about you letting loose and enjoying yourself like you used to do.” He reached for her.

Clara stepped back and narrowed her gaze. “What are you doing?”

“Trust me.” When she didn’t protest, he reached forward, releasing the big hair clip holding her hair back. Her blond curls tumbled down around her shoulders. “Much better.”

A frown marred her beautiful face. “I don’t have time to enjoy myself. I have to make my business a huge success.”

“You can worry about that tomorrow. Right now, you have a party to attend, and you’re the guest of honor.”

“But I can’t stop worrying. I just hate the thought of losing the little chapel. I can’t afford to buy it outright, but I’ve been considering your idea about applying for it to be an historic designation. It would protect it from some developer coming in and demolishing it in order to build beach condos.”

He smiled. “Sounds like you’ve been busy.”

“I have been. And I can’t stop now. I’ve been putting together a pitch to buy the wedding chapel.”

“At least give me a few minutes of your attention. I promise it’ll be worth it.”

Clara hesitated. “Okay. Just a few minutes.”

She preceded him down a flight of steps. At the bottom, she waited for him. Her words nagged at him. He couldn’t let go of the thought that she was putting so much pressure on herself. If she wasn’t careful, she’d burn out. He believed that was what happened to him—what had caused his car accident. If he hadn’t pushed himself so hard, he’d have been more alert, and his reaction would have been faster.

There was something else bothering him. He moved next to her. “Why does your business have to be a huge success?”

She waved away the question. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter. Talk to me.”

She quietly fidgeted with her purse strap.

“Come on, Clara. We used to be able to share everything with each other. Are you going to pretend like we’re strangers now?”

She sighed. “If you must know, I can’t go back to DC as a failure. That’s what my family thought would happen when I told them I was going to start a wedding-planning business. They couldn’t understand why I would do something like that when I could work at the family’s foundation. They thought it was a waste of my education.” She caught her lower lip between her teeth and glanced away as though she’d said more than she’d intended.

“I can’t imagine they thought that—”

Her gaze narrowed in on him. “Are you saying I’m lying?”

“No. Of course not. What I meant was that I know how much your family loves you.”

Sadness reflected in her eyes. “But I just couldn’t live with my father’s disapproval and, worse, his disappointment.”

This was definitely not the time for this conversation. But seeing as how he was the one to start it, he needed to keep going. “I’m so sorry he made you feel that way. But I know he loves you.”

“I know that, too. That’s what made it worse. Disappointing people who don’t matter to me is one thing, but disappointing those I love is almost unbearable. First, there was my career choice, and then there was the embarrassment of the wedding cancellation.”

“And that’s my fault. I’m sorry.” Guilt weighed on him. “I never meant to come between you and your family.”

She shook her head. “You didn’t. I had to get away and have a chance to make a future for myself, someplace where people don’t make a big deal out of me being a Harrington.”

The maître d’ appeared, wearing a pristine black and white suit. “Sir, the room is all set up, and your table is ready.”

It took a moment for Andrew to gather his thoughts. He’d almost uttered his feelings for her and how much he wanted her back, but he wasn’t sure she felt the same way. And by confessing his feelings for her, he might scare her off. That

was the last thing he wanted to do. Having Clara in his life was important to him, even if it was just as a friend.

He held out his arm to escort her to their table. “I hope you enjoy this evening.”

She didn’t move, staring at him as though she could read his mind. Were his feelings that obvious? The breath caught in his lungs. Did she know he’d never stopped loving her?

When her hand slipped into the crook of his arm, a pent-up breath rushed past his lips. Maybe she couldn’t read all of his thoughts. He guided her into the private dining room that had been decorated with white twinkle lights. Their table was illuminated by tapered candles. In the background, the crooning of a sax lilted through the room.

“This is beautiful.” There was a note of awe in Clara’s voice. “But I didn’t request all of this.” And then she stopped walking and turned to him. “Was this your doing?” When he nodded, she asked, “For me?”

Again, he nodded. “I thought with all you do for others that you deserve a special evening.”

After he’d held the chair for her and then taken a seat across the table from her, she gazed into his eyes. “No one’s ever done something like this for me. But you shouldn’t have been so extravagant.”

“What’s the point of having money if you can’t make people happy with it? You are happy, aren’t you?”

She smiled. “Very much so.”

The thump-thump in his chest picked up its pace, keeping time with the music. One by one, the courses were served—shrimp cocktail, wild mushroom tortellini, and spring salad with a side of fresh-baked bread and cinnamon butter, all of Clara's favorites.

"This is delicious," Clara said, making quick work of devouring the tortellini.

"I agree. I'll have to eat here again."

Her refilled fork hovered above the plate. "Do you think you'll ever make it back here again? I mean once you get back to work?"

He'd been giving that a lot of thought. With his father gone, there was nothing holding him in New York. If he was going to make a change, now was the time to do it. But without something concrete, it was best to keep these thoughts to himself. He wasn't even sure Clara would welcome the idea of sharing this beautiful city with him on a permanent basis.

He used his fork to move the food around on his plate. "You never know with my brother living on this coast, it might become a regular stop for me. Would that be a problem?"

Clara immediately lowered her gaze. "It isn't for me to say. You should talk to your brother."

Was she dodging the real meaning of his question? Or was she saying that she wasn't open to seeing where this thing between them was headed?

The last thought ruined his appetite. He pushed aside his nearly empty plate.

“Thank you for such a lovely evening.” Clara wiped her mouth and then folded her linen napkin before setting it aside. “That was amazing, and I am absolutely stuffed.” She glanced at his plate. “Didn’t you like yours?”

“What?” He followed her gaze to his plate. “It was fine. I just wasn’t all that hungry.”

“Thank you for everything. We should probably get out of here so they can clean up.”

“Clean up? But we haven’t even had dessert.” He couldn’t let her go, not yet. If this ended up being his last chance to spend some alone time with her, he wanted to make the most of it.

“Dessert? After all of that food?” She patted her still-flat stomach. “I honestly don’t have room.”

He was running out of time to get his feelings across to her. “Clara, there’s something I need to say to you.”

The smile faded from her face as her fine brows drew together. “What is it?”

“I’m sorry.” When she went to speak, he held up his hand. He had to get this out there because he was afraid he wouldn’t have another chance. “I really mean it. I was too young or too foolish... Whatever it was, I made the biggest mistake of my life letting you go.”

Her glossy pink lips gaped open. “But you already apologized—”

“Not for being such a fool and letting you go. I should have fought for you—for us. We were good together. The problem was, toward the end, we weren’t together enough. I lost focus on the important things in life. I should have worked to fix our circumstances instead of giving up.”

Clara’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “Andrew, I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything. I just wanted you to know how bad I feel, and if I had it to do over again, I would make different choices.” She hadn’t said anything about feeling the same way, about regretting their breakup. It was obvious she no longer had feelings for him. “Someday you’ll find a guy who’s willing to fight for you and your love.” Jealousy sliced through him as he thought of Clara walking down the aisle and into another man’s arms.

“Thank you for those very kind words. They mean a lot. But, Andrew, I have a confession.”

Her voice was soft, and he strained to hear what she had to say. A gut feeling told him that it was important, that change was afoot. He just had no idea if it’d be for better or worse.

“It wasn’t just you who didn’t fight hard enough for our relationship. I let my pride get in the way. With my family breathing down my neck to give up on my wedding-planning career, all I could think about was proving them wrong. I was so certain my way was the only way.”

Andrew squeezed her hand. “Sounds like we were lacking on the communication, too.”

She nodded. “Before you called it quits, I had my own doubts about making a long-distance marriage work. If you hadn’t called off the wedding, I... I would have.”

He knew she was trying to make him feel better about the past, but the knowledge that she’d been thinking of dumping him before their wedding hurt—deeply. Still, it was in the past. And it had nothing to do with them now. They were once again friends. Nothing more.

“Thank you for telling me that.” He almost choked on the words. *Wow!* He’d really messed up back then. “Enough with the serious stuff. Why don’t we have some fun before dessert?”

“Fun? I don’t know. I still have work to do.”

“Didn’t we just get done discussing how all work and no play really messes up lives?”

“Yeah, but—”

“No buts, come on.” He got to his feet, hoping she liked what he had in mind.

A beeping sound caught their attention. It sounded like a cell phone, but it wasn’t his. Clara reached into her purse and pulled out her phone. She frowned. “My battery is almost dead.”

“No worries. Mine works. And you don’t need yours right now. You can charge it later.”

Her worried gaze moved from him to her phone. With a shrug, she slipped it back into her purse. “Let’s have some fun.”

He smiled as a light came on in the corner of the darkened room. He led her over to an oval table with a green felt top. A young woman in a long-sleeved white blouse with a black vest and bow tie smiled at them.

When Clara sent him a puzzled look, Andrew said, “You’re the one who said you wished you could play Texas Hold’em. Well, this is your chance.”

“But I don’t know how.”

“No worries. I’ll show you. But the big question is what shall we play for?”

“You mean as in a wager?”

He nodded. “Something fun.”

“How about if I win, we dance?” Her eyes lit up. The frustration over his physical limitations must have registered on his face, because before he could say anything, she said, “I’m sorry. I forgot about your leg.”

“I can try.” He honestly hadn’t even entertained the thought of dancing with anyone since that long-ago night at the party celebrating their upcoming nuptials. After they broke up, he’d thrown himself into his work, blocking out the pain of losing the one woman he could have been happy with for the rest of his life.

“I know.” Clara squeezed his arm. “Whoever loses gets to buy coffee tomorrow.”

Andrew grudgingly agreed, hating that he couldn't comply with her one simple request. Once again, he was reminded of the reasons why he didn't have a chance of making Clara happy anymore. He couldn't even twirl her around the dance floor. If he continued pursuing her, he'd do nothing but hold her back.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

S HE COULDN'T REMEMBER THE last time she'd smiled this much.

Clara had forgotten what it was like to let her hair down and have fun. It was all thanks to Andrew. She really enjoyed having him back in her life. Maybe a little more than was wise.

If she were smart, she'd be back at the office, triple checking every detail for the wedding. She'd be on the phone with vendors, making certain there were no last-minute glitches. She'd follow up with the bride to make sure no detail had been overlooked. And yet she didn't make any attempt to end the evening.

Instead, she was sitting next to Andrew, tossing down her cards. "I win!"

"You cheat." He sent her a teasing grin.

"I did not. I won fair and square."

"I think we should play again," he said. "I think it's just beginner's luck."

“Beginner’s luck, huh? You do realize I beat you six times in ten hands.” She sent him a big smile.

“Okay, so you’ve got me.” He checked his watch. “It’s still early. What would you like to do? And don’t say work.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” It was the truth. She had no desire to go home and work. “I don’t know how you did it, but you totally distracted me this evening. Thank you.”

He smiled broadly. “Looks like I haven’t lost my touch.”

She shook her head. “Not at all, but don’t let it go to your head.”

“Never. Why don’t we have some coffee and dessert?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t tell me you’re worried about your figure, because you’re as stunning now as you were when we were dating. Actually, I take that back, you’re even more beautiful.”

Her heart fluttered in her chest. He still thought she was beautiful. Her smile broadened. “You don’t have to say that.”

“I know I don’t, but I mean it. I don’t know what I was thinking when I let you get away from me.”

Clara stood and walked back to the dining table. He’d touched on a tender subject. For so long, she’d felt devastated when he’d chosen his work over her. She’d been telling herself she was over it—over the entire wedding debacle. Now she wondered if that was the truth. Was she over him?

Maybe she'd done too much thinking already. Maybe it was time to just live in the moment. Maybe she needed to take a chance instead of playing it safe with her perfectly planned life.

When her gaze met his, she was drawn to him. The pounding of her heart drowned out her reservations, allowing her to follow her heart's desire.

She sat down. He sat across from her. The server arrived and poured them both coffee. A couple of minutes later, the server returned with the dessert cart. Clara had a hard time selecting one thing from the delicious selections. She settled on the banana flambe while Andrew passed on dessert.

When the server began to prepared the treat at their table, she was impressed. A light of the torch and the sauce flamed, warming her face. As the flame went out, a scoop of ice cream was added.

When dessert was placed in front of her, she said, "You know since you came back into my life, I've been eating a ton of ice cream."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"I'm going to have to buy a whole new wardrobe, if I keep this up."

"You don't have anything to worry about. You look fantastic. Besides, with the way you're always on the go, you'll never gain an ounce."

“Uh-huh.” She smiled and shook her head. She’d forgotten just how good he was with flattery. “You might want to tell my scale that.”

But none of the banter kept her from spooning some of the sweet treat into her mouth. The thought of calories faded away. One delightful spoonful led to another and another until the plate of empty.

She wiped her mouth and set aside the napkin. “Thank you. Not just for the dessert but the whole evening. It’s been a very long time since I had that much fun.”

“The same for me. The last time I remember having this good of time was”—he paused as though giving his answer serious consideration—“well, I guess it would be the time you talked me into taking that yoga class with you.”

Her mind rewound to what felt like another lifetime. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

“I can’t believe you thought I’d forget it. That was quite an evening.”

“You mean because you dropped me?”

“Only once. And as I recall, you landed right on top of me.”

She smiled and nodded. “I was so embarrassed.”

“But at least they didn’t ask you not to come back.”

They both laughed. It was as though all the bad stuff had fallen by the wayside, and they were two old friends reminiscing. Her gaze lifted to meet his. As she stared deep

into his eyes, she realized that whatever was going on between them went much deeper than friendship.

Her pulse raced, and her heart pounded. She'd missed the deep soothing tones of his voice, the way his smile made his eyes light up, and how just a look from him could make her forget everything else in the world.

He reached out his hand, placing it over hers. "Thank you for tonight. You don't know what it meant to me."

She should move her hand but didn't. Instead, she enjoyed the warmth of his touch as they continued to stare into each other's eyes. "But why are you thanking me? You're the one that planned all of this."

"But you didn't have to agree to join me."

"Excuse me?" a male voice said, breaking the moment.

Andrew didn't pull his hand away as he turned to the server. "Thank you. Everything was delicious."

"Yes, it was," Clara added.

The young man nodded and then collected their dishes. "Will there be anything else?"

Andrew's questioning gaze moved to her. When Clara shook her head, Andrew turned back to the server. "That will be all. We should get out of your way."

Clara normally would be anxious to get home and go over her plans for the next day, but tonight disappointment came over her. And it was amplified when Andrew withdrew his

hand. The coolness of the evening seeped into her skin, making her miss the closeness they'd shared.

The chauffeured sedan ride back to her apartment was much too quick as there wasn't much traffic at that late hour. All the while, they tiptoed through the past, picking out their favorite stories. There was laughter interspersed with recounts of touching moments. They were things Clara hadn't thought of in years—things she'd refused to think about. Because thinking about them meant missing Andrew. And until now that wasn't something she'd been willing to do.

Normally, she would have refrained from this whole evening, but she knew as soon as the wedding was over that he'd be flying back to New York—far away from her. And this whole experience would be just like a summer afternoon dream.

The car pulled to a stop, and the driver opened her door. She turned back to Andrew to thank him, but she found he had already exited the vehicle.

He met Clara on the sidewalk. Side-by-side they made their way to the front door of her apartment building. He stopped and turned to her.

Taking both of her hands into his own, he said, "Tonight was more than I had ever hoped for—more than I deserved. Thank you for giving me a second chance."

His thumbs stroked the back of her hands, causing her heart to launch into her throat. Was this a second chance? But for what? Their romance? Their friendship? Or a little of both?

Before she could string words together and form a sentence, Andrew leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. Oh, this definitely felt like so much more than friendship. She knew she should be cautious because he'd already broken her heart once, but as his mouth moved over hers, she was having a hard time thinking. The only thing she knew was that she'd missed this—she'd missed him.

And then much too soon, he pulled away. “Goodnight, Clara.”

It took a moment for her to gather her senses. By then Andrew was on the sidewalk. Not debating the right or wrong of it, she called out to him. “Andrew, wait.”

He paused and turned. “Is something wrong?”

She shook her head. “I just wanted to know if you'd like to come up to my place for some coffee.”

“It's tempting but I don't think it's a good idea.”

Since when was he one to think about what was good or safe? He'd always enjoyed pushing boundaries. Maybe it was the exhilaration of playing cards, or the sugar rush from the banana flambe, or perhaps it was the thoughtful way Andrew had treated her. Whatever it was, her defenses had come tumbling down that evening. She wanted to push boundaries and explore the unknown. Tonight, she wasn't about to take no for an answer.

“I have some pictures you might be interested in.”

Andrew arched a brow as he approached her. “Pictures of what?”

“My brother’s wedding. I was hoping I’d see you there.”

Andrew shrugged. “William sent me an invitation, but I didn’t feel right about going, not after what happened between you and me.”

“Nobody held it against you.”

Andrew arched a dark brow in disbelief. “I’m sure they did—they probably still do. Especially your father.”

Clara shrugged away the mention of her father, not wanting to ruin the moment. “It was no big deal.”

“Really? Because I know you thought it was a very big deal, and I’d be willing to bet your family thought the same thing.”

True enough. She glanced away. “I don’t talk to any of my family much these days.” The past and her hurt feelings came tumbling out. “After things between us, well, after they ended, my father looked at me and said, ‘I told you so.’ It was so cold, so...”

“Hurtful?” When she nodded, he continued. “I’m so sorry I caused you so much pain. That was never my intention.”

“You have no responsibility for what my father said. That’s totally on him. And so I had to get as far away as I could so I didn’t say something I’d regret.”

“San Francisco is a long way from DC.”

She nodded. “It is.”

“But you decided to return for your brother’s wedding?”

“Of course.” She hadn’t rejected her family. Her father had rejected her. “In fact, I was surprised when the invitation arrived. I knew it had to be my mother’s doing. My brother wouldn’t cross my father, but my mother is forever trying to be the peacemaker.”

Sympathy reflected in his eyes. “Do you think you and your father will ever patch things up?”

“I hope so.” She didn’t want to dwell on the subject and let it ruin the evening. “Enough about me and my family. Come inside and see the photos.” She tugged on his arm, but he didn’t budge. She had one last idea. “And I have pictures of William’s new baby—”

“Baby?” Andrew’s eyes lit up. “Wow. I have missed a lot.”

“It’s a little girl. Her name is Jessica. And my niece has William totally wrapped around her little finger.” She opened the security door. “Come on.”

Andrew followed her inside and up to her second-floor apartment. As she unlocked the front door, she realized she’d rushed out the door without picking up the wedding invitations she’d been addressing.

“Sorry about the mess.” She flung her purse onto the couch before kneeling down and straightening up the papers on the coffee table.

“This isn’t a mess. Although you always were a bit of a neat freak. Some things don’t change.”

“And other things do change.” When he sent her a puzzled look, she added, “For the better.” She noticed he stood awkwardly, leaning on his good leg. “Have a seat. Can I get you anything to drink?”

He shook his head. “I’m good.”

With the invitations gathered into a tidy stack, she moved them to the kitchen counter. “I’ll grab the photo album. I’ll be right back.”

She had the photo album stashed in one of her under-bed boxes. With leasing a small apartment, she had to make the most of every bit of space available. She considered changing out of her skirt. She glanced at her pink terry cloth shorts and comfy T-shirt neatly folded at the end of her bed. Would it really be so bad? After all, it was only Andrew. He’d seen her in a lot worse. She gave into her impulse.

Dressed more comfortably, she moved silently across the floor in bare feet. “Here it is.”

She settled next to him on the couch. She swallowed hard, trying to ignore the way her heart beat faster with his nearness. She flipped open the album, forgetting that the front pages were full of photos of her and Andrew back when they’d been happy together—back when she’d envisioned them having a future together. She rushed past the photos, trying to get to the ones of her brother’s wedding.

Andrew placed a hand over hers. “Slow down. I didn’t get to see those.”

“We’ll, um, we’ll come back to those.” *Where are those wedding photos?* Her hands moved faster, skipping some pages. “Here they are.”

Andrew leaned over, taking in the photos. Photo by photo, they told the story of her brother’s wedding. Andrew paused when they came to photos of her. Up until this point, she’d quickly skirted over her own images. She always felt so self-conscious looking at them.

But as she studied them, she realized she looked, well quite honestly, sad. She’d tried so hard that day not to think of Andrew, but it was hard—sometimes impossible. But until now, she’d had no idea her thoughts had been visible in the wedding photos. *Oh, how awful.*

She quickly turned the page. She took in the smiling image of her mother. She was struck by a deep sense of longing to talk to her mother and look into her eyes. If only her mother was willing to stand up to her father, maybe he would listen to his own wife, because he certainly never heard a word Clara said, unless what she said aligned with what he wanted to hear.

“The baby looks like you.” Andrew turned to look at her.

“She does?” Clara studied a photo of the baby in her sister-in-law’s arms. She didn’t see the resemblance.

She turned to Andrew to question his observation and found him much closer than she’d anticipated. Their lips were just a breath apart. Her heart rapidly pitter-pattered. If she were to lean forward ever so slightly, her lips would press to his. Her pulse raced. Her gaze dipped to his mouth.

Don't do it.

The tiny voice in her head caused her to glance away. She could still feel his gaze on her. She licked her suddenly dry lips, wondering if he'd had similar thoughts. At one time, she might have known, but not anymore.

Andrew cleared his throat. "Can you go back to the beginning?"

She flipped to the beginning of the wedding photos.

"No, I mean the beginning of the album."

He wanted to look at photos of them? He was probably wondering why she still had them. The truth was, at one point right after they'd broken up, she'd considered throwing them out. But when it came down to it, she couldn't.

She stared down at the snapshots of smiling faces as though they were strangers. The images were snippets of their lives before they let their careers take over. How had they lost track of each other? Why had they let go of something so special?

"We were so happy back then," Andrew said, as though reading her thoughts. He pointed at a photo of them on a picnic. "Remember this one? It was such a hot day, but you insisted we needed to go on a picnic."

She let her mind go back in time. She mentally swiped aside the cobwebs from those memories that for so long she'd refused to wallow in. "I had to do something to get you away from your computer. And as I recall, you didn't complain about the fried chicken or homemade potato salad."

“You always were an amazing cook.” He glanced toward her galley kitchen. “Do you still cook?”

She shook her head. “I don’t have the time. And even if I did, it’s no fun cooking for one.”

“Why aren’t you dating someone?”

She glanced at him. His gaze probed her as though he were searching for the answer. Did he know the truth? Did he know the few men she had dated just didn’t compare to the memory of him?

He reached out to her, stroking his thumb down her cheek. When he spoke, his voice was soft and coaxing. “Tell me.”

Her pulse raced as she stared deep into his eyes. “They... They weren’t you.”

He leaned forward, claiming her lips. Her heart pounded in her chest. It wasn’t until then that she realized how much she’d longed for his touch. As intimidating as he could be in his business world, he was just as gentle when he held her in his arms.

Andrew pulled back ever so slightly. “Clara, I have so many regrets, but losing you is my biggest regret of all.”

Her index finger traced the scar running down his jaw. “I’ve missed you.”

He captured her hand, lowering it. “But I have to warn you that the scar on my jaw is nothing compared to the rest of me. It isn’t pretty.”

She looked him in the eyes so he would know her sincerity. “Those scars made it possible for you to come back to me. When I see them, I won’t cringe. I’ll feel a sense of gratitude that we have another chance.”

Andrew blinked away the shininess in his eyes. “You are one of a kind. How did I get so lucky?”

Having talked enough, Clara pressed her lips to his. Any reservations she had about this date had nothing to do with Andrew’s scars, but rather with herself. Her emotions warred within her—logic versus love.

Was she in a place in her life to take the risk of gambling on love again?

Her career was at the point of taking off, if only there were no more hiccups with Tula’s wedding. But it had been so long since she let her guard down and enjoyed a relationship. And secretly, she’d missed Andrew. A lot.

But as he deepened their kiss, her thoughts scattered. The only thing that mattered now was him and her, together again after all of this time. Maybe it was time to live in the moment and let the future take care of itself.

As his lips moved over hers like a well-rehearsed dance, all she could think was this felt so good, but then Andrew pulled back. He rested his forehead against hers. “I should go.”

“Already?” She wasn’t ready to let him go when it felt like she’d just gotten him back.

“It’s getting late.” He kissed her forehead. “Thank you for the most amazing evening. I’ll never forget it.”

When he pulled back, her gaze met his. “You shouldn’t thank me, you’re the one that planned it.”

“But you’re the one who made it special.” He moved to the door. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Don’t go.”

“Is that truly what you want?”

“Of course, it is. We have so much to catch up on.” So much had happened since they’d parted, and she wanted to know everything she’d missed. The good and the bad.

His gaze searched hers. “Are you saying you want to give us a second chance?”

Her mouth opened. The answer teetered at the tip of her tongue. As the gravity of what he was asking her settled in, she pressed her lips together.

They were having a good time—two old friends reconnecting—why did he have to go and complicate matters with questions about the future?

She didn’t have the answer he wanted to hear. She hadn’t slowed down to consider truly letting him back in her life. Oh, who was she kidding? In the dark of the night, alone in the shower and on her drive to work, she’d toyed with the idea of what it might be like if they were to give their relationship another chance.

And in all of those daydreams, she hadn't come up with an answer. Her head said one thing, while her heart longed for the other answer. All she knew was that she couldn't put herself out there, only to be hurt again.

"That's what I thought." Andrew's voice drew her from her thoughts.

"What?"

"You aren't sure about giving us a do-over. And that's okay because I believe in us enough for both of us. But I understand that you need more time."

"You do?" When he smiled and nodded, she asked, "Is that why you came to San Francisco? Did you have this all planned out?"

He shook his head. "When I bought my airline ticket, I wasn't even sure you'd give me a chance to apologize, much less dream of a second chance."

"But now you've decided that's what you want?"

"It is. I hope it's what you want too."

This was all moving so quickly, too quickly. "I... I don't know."

"And that's why it's time I go. You need time to think. But I'm not giving up. You are worth fighting for. I'm sorry I didn't know it sooner." He leaned forward, pressing a kiss to her lips. Much too soon he pulled away. "Good night."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE NEXT MORNING, A dreamy sigh passed her lips. A smile pulled at Clara's lips before she even opened her eyes. Visions of the prior evening filled her mind like a dream that you never want to end.

She'd been too wound up after Andrew left to sleep, and so she'd taken her laptop to bed with her plans to buy the wedding chapel. Every evening since Mabel had put up those For Sale signs, Clara had been brainstorming for a way to convince Mabel that she was the right person to sell it to. And she hoped Andrew had given her the key to making her plan work when he'd mentioned having the chapel designated as a historical site.

He had dropped back into her life at exactly the right time. He hadn't said it and neither had she, but it was obvious this was their do-over. She just hoped it went smoother than Tula's second-chance wedding. Speaking of Tula...

Clara rolled over and glanced at the clock. Almost ten o'clock. *What? No. No. No. That can't be right.*

She shot out of bed. She couldn't be late for Tula's final gown fitting. She was never late for anything. Why hadn't her phone alarm gone off? *Wait. Where is my phone?* She searched the nightstand where she normally left it and the surrounding floor, but it wasn't there. How was that possible?

She never went anywhere without her phone. Her whole life was on that thing. She searched her memory for the last time she recalled having it. At dinner. She remembered the battery dying. She'd put it in her purse, planning to recharge it when she got home, but then things had happened with Andrew. There was the photo album and the trip down memory lane. And the kiss. The amazing, spine-tingling kiss. A momentary smile returned to her lips.

With great effort, she paused the memories of their date. Right now, she was in trouble. Tula was waiting for her. Her biggest account was at risk.

She rushed to the living room, where she found her purse next to the couch. In it she located her phone, but it was completely and utterly dead. Not even connecting it to the charger cord was making a difference. It was going to take a few minutes to charge enough to make a call. She groaned. Could this day get off to a worse start?

She ran to the bedroom and plugged in her phone to charge. While it did its thing, she dashed into the shower, careful not to get her hair wet. There was absolutely no time to dry and re-style it. Her hands were a flurry of motion. She'd never known it was possible to take a three-minute shower till now.

When she stepped out of the shower, her phone chimed. Still dripping wet, she wrapped a towel around herself and ran to the bedroom. She glanced at the caller ID, finding it was Tula.

Clara pressed her finger to the touchpad before lifting the phone to her ear.

“Where are you?” Tula’s anxious voice came over the phone, loud and clear.

“Tula, I’m so sorry. I’m on my way.”

“You better be. Do you have the invitations done?”

The invitations. They were still incomplete on the kitchen counter. What in the world had she been thinking last night? That was the point. With Andrew around, she didn’t think about anything but him. She’d let her heart rule, and in the process, she was about to trash her career.

Clara’s heart pounded. “I... I’m taking care of everything. Don’t worry.”

“I am worried. My bridal shower is this weekend and the wedding is next week. This isn’t the time for my wedding planner to become undependable.”

Undependable? Ugh! Clara had gone above and beyond for Tula. She should be given a medal for putting up with the star, but instead she’d been insulted. Anger and frustration churned in the pit of her stomach.

Still, it wouldn’t help the situation to lose her cool. Clara took a second to choke down her response to Tula’s insult.

They were almost at the finish line. Just a little longer and this wedding would be over.

In a calm tone, Clara said, “I promise this wedding will go off without a hitch.”

There was a long, uncomfortable pause. “Hurry. I’ll wait for you. We have to talk.”

“I will.”

Clara moved with lightning speed. Within minutes, she was dressed in her signature pink color and not a hair was out of place. She rushed out the door. She hit what felt like every red light between her place and the coast. Her fingers drummed the steering wheel.

By the time Clara reached the chapel, she had her doubts about whether Tula would still be around to go over the layout for the reception on the beach. Clara rushed inside and came to a halt, finding Tula walking down the aisle.

Tula’s gaze zeroed in on her. “There you are. I’d almost given up on you.”

“I’m sorry. I—”

“Are you sick?”

“Sick?” Clara shook her head. “Um, no. My, uh, phone died. But I’m ready to go over the final run-through for the reception.”

“There’s no need.”

“No need?” *Oh no!* This was worse than she’d imagined.

“Brooke walked me through it. We worked out the final details.”

A pent-up breath released. “I’m really sorry. I had a late night and—”

Tula waved away her explanation with a folded newspaper. “Have you seen this?”

“No. I haven’t seen the paper today.” She didn’t want to admit that with her hectic work schedule she wasn’t really up on current events like she should be. “What’s in it?”

“Look for yourself.”

Clara unfolded the paper, finding that it was folded to the society section. There was a picture of Tula. The headline read: *Tula Fox and Hugh Steadman Do-Over*.

Her fingers clenched the paper, crinkling it. *Oh no. How did this happen?*

Clara glanced at Tula, whose arms were crossed as she sent her an accusatory stare. Tula thought she was responsible for this? How could that be possible? She would never intentionally ruin someone’s big day—never ever.

“I didn’t do this.” Clara straightened her shoulders and stared directly at Tula, willing her to believe her.

Tula didn’t say a word. The silence was oppressive. She was going to be fired. First, she missed their appointment, and now this. She glanced down at the headline again, and her stomach lurched. Who had done such a thing? Surely no one she knew.

“Is that all you’re going to say for yourself?”

Clara glanced up. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“What about an explanation for how this happened?”

“I... I don’t know. It couldn’t have come from anyone associated with me. I trust them all implicitly.” Clara wanted to suggest it might have come from someone Tula knew, a staff member or a friend, but she didn’t dare make unfounded accusations.

“Fine.” Tula adjusted her purple leather purse strap. “You aren’t fired. This time. Just be careful with the rest of the wedding details. No more slip-ups.”

Clara didn’t know whether to be relieved or insulted. She shoved aside her conflicting emotions. “Do you want to move the wedding now that they know the date and that it’s at the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel?”

Tula shook her head. “We have everything worked out. Just make sure to hire additional security.”

With her wedding dress in hand, Tula turned and walked out the door. She didn’t trust anyone with it. Not even Clara. Though how could she blame her now that news of the wedding had been leaked to the media?

Clara expelled a pent-up breath. She couldn’t believe how close she’d come to losing everything today. She pressed a hand to her pounding chest. That couldn’t happen again. She had no doubt that if anything else went wrong Tula wouldn’t bat an eye over firing her.

She phoned Brooke to let her know what had happened. In turn, Brooke let her know the phone was ringing off the hook with questions from the press. Clara was going to have to formulate a comment—one that didn't say much of anything, but something that might give them a little breathing room.

With this second chance, Clara refused to do anything to jeopardize it. She stepped out into the sunshine. Just then her phone chimed. She withdrew it from the pocket in her purse. The caller ID said it was Andrew. She had absolutely no idea what to say to him, but there was no point in avoiding him.

“Morning, beautiful.” The deep rumble of his voice sent her pulse racing.

“Sorry I couldn't stay longer last night. I had an early appointment this morning with my physical therapist. I don't want to fall behind with my treatment while I'm in San Francisco. And then I had a couple of things to do before the bachelor party. I had to pick up a gift for my brother's birthday. This week he turns twenty-five.”

“Oh.”

“What time should I pick you up for lunch?”

Lunch? He wanted to see her again. Her heart fluttered, but she quickly tamped it down. “I can't.”

“But you have to eat.”

“I have to work.”

“Are you sure I can't persuade you? Maybe with some ice cream—”

“Andrew, don’t. I didn’t finish my work last night, and then I slept in this morning. That can’t happen again. I have to stay focused.”

“Aren’t you allowed any time for yourself—”

“You aren’t understanding. My career is my life. I can’t fail. I have people counting on me. And if I hope to buy the chapel, I have to be on top of everything. Of all people, I thought you would understand.”

“Then meet me for coffee.”

Clara smiled. “You just won’t give up, will you?”

“Not a chance when I might get to spend some more time with you.”

“Andrew, are you flirting with me?”

“I don’t know. Is it working?”

“Maybe.” And now he had her flirting back. “But seriously, I’m grabbing some coffee and heading back to the office. I can’t wait for you.”

“I’m leaving now.”

“I’m serious. I have work to do.”

“See you soon.” And then the line went dead.

Andrew’s determination to see her at any other time would have her smiling, but the thought of her business being threatened by some unnamed source had her clenching her back teeth. But it didn’t keep her from being disappointed about not getting to spend more time with him.

On the way to Java 'N Tea, Clara told herself that as much as she wanted to see Andrew, she wasn't going to wait around for him. She didn't have time to have a casual coffee and donut. She had to get to the office and plug up the leak. Who had told the press about the wedding?

The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that it wasn't anyone she worked with. So who did that leave? Tula's people? Or some third-party that had overheard a conversation about the wedding preparation?

She planned to contact the news outlet and try to get to the bottom of it. Though she realized that the press rarely ever revealed their source. But that didn't mean she wouldn't try, because this could never ever happen again.

Parking was at a premium. It seemed everyone was out enjoying the beautiful weather. Not too hot and not too cold. And yet it didn't lift her mood as she pulled into her parking spot at the office.

She rushed to the coffeehouse. She just couldn't wait around for him. And if she didn't desperately need her morning coffee to get her through this day, she wouldn't have made this slight detour.

She swung open the door. Just then Andrew turned from where he stood at the checkout counter. He was holding two coffees. A welcoming smile lit up his face.

She moved toward him. "Hi."

“Hi.” He held out the large coffee in a to-go-cup. “I got this for you.”

“Thank you.” She couldn’t deny the warmth that swirled in her chest at his thoughtfulness. “But I can’t stay.”

“Maybe just a moment.” Before she could reject the idea, he added, “Because there’s someone that wants to talk to you.”

When he gestured off to the side, she turned and found a table in the corner where her friends were seated. Brooke gestured her over. Next to her were Selena, Gabi, and Marie.

They’d all become good friends via their occupations. Selena Blakely owned Bit of Cake Bakery. Gabi Flores owned Gabi’s Posies. And Maria Ortega owned Classic Elegance Catering.

Together they’d hosted some amazing wedding. But what were they all doing in the coffee shop at this hour?

The rest of the tables were empty as it was the middle of the morning. Most people were hard at work, just like her friends should be doing. So what had drawn them there at the exact same time? Her gaze moved from one to the next, unable to make out their thoughts.

She moved to the table and forced a smile to her face. “Hey, guys, what are you all doing here?”

Brooke ducked her head, avoiding Clara’s questioning look. Selena conveniently took a long, slow sip of her coffee. Gabi’s gaze avoided hers. The fake smile slipped from Clara’s face.

They all knew about her disastrous morning. There was only one person missing from the group, Liza.

Behind Clara the door swished open with the ding of an electronic bell. “Sorry, I’m late,” Liza said. “Just let me grab a coffee and I’ll be over.”

And that left Gabi to explain what was going on. Clara’s gaze zeroed in on her. “So, in the middle of a workday, none of you had anything better to do than take a coffee break?”

Just then Andrew pulled out a chair for her. She didn’t want to sit. All of her friends glanced up at her with worry in their eyes. She suddenly felt like she was on the wrong side of an intervention.

The air went out of her and she sat down. “Would you all quit looking at me like the world is ending?”

“We’re worried about you,” Gabi said.

“You read the headlines?” Clara grabbed her coffee cup but didn’t drink any.

“Everyone has heard.” Sympathy reflected in Selena’s eyes.

“News of Tula’s wedding is trending,” Brooke said.

Clara didn’t know what to say. She wanted to tell them that everything was going to be all right as she had a handle on everything, but that would be a lie. And she refused to lie to her friends who had accepted her into their group and made her feel like she belonged.

Clara sighed. “I don’t know how it happened. I certainly didn’t say anything to anyone outside of our group. And I trust all of you.”

“What did Tula say?” Andrew sat down beside her.

Clara shrugged. “She was upset. She almost fired me. But for some reason she didn’t. I don’t know if that makes me feel better or worse.”

Liza joined them at the table. “I don’t know how Clara deals with that woman. She’s entirely too much.”

Gabi turned to Clara. “What can we do to help?”

“Yes, tell us,” Brooke said. “You know I’ll do everything I can to make this better.”

Selena leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. “Count me in.”

“Me too,” Liza said.

A feeling of gratefulness for having such awesome friends washed over her. Her eyes grew misty, causing her to blink repeatedly. Her biological family may be giving her the cold shoulder, but she’d found a family-of-choice.

These women had their own lives, jobs, and families to deal with, but still they’d taken time out of their day to be there for her. That touched her heart. How did she get so lucky?

Andrew cleared his throat. “And as the best man and brother to the groom, I would like to do what I can to help.”

Clara turned to him as a tear splashed on her cheek. She swiped it away. And then she turned back to her friends. “You all are so wonderful. I don’t have the words to tell you how much your caring means to me. But right now, I don’t need anything. Tula believed me when I said the leak hadn’t come from me. I offered to move the wedding date, but she wants to keep everything as is.”

There were a bunch of questions about the leak. This was followed by theories of who might have leaked the information. And then everyone got up, gave Clara a hug, and headed back to work—everyone that is except for Andrew.

Outside on the sunny sidewalk, he turned to her. “Is there anything at all I can do to help?”

“Thanks for the offer.” It truly meant a lot to her. “But I’ve got this under control. It’s going to be the best wedding ever.”

He stared deeply into her eyes, making her heart flutter. “Just know that I’m always there for you. I’ve got your back.”

She believed him. They’d both done a lot of growing up since their breakup. It was like Andrew was a new man. And she was so proud of the man he’d become.

She lifted up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. When she pulled back, she gazed into his eyes. “Thank you. You’re the best.”

“And about last night—”

“Andrew, please, not now. I just can’t do this right now. I need to get through this wedding.” Her eyes pleaded with him.

When he remained quiet, she said, “Please say you understand.”

A moment of silence stretched out. He nodded. “I do. Take care of the wedding and then we’ll talk.”

“Thank you.”

And then they parted ways. She had work to do. Lots of work. But she found that her focus wasn’t solely on her work but rather she was distracted by Andrew and how things had changed so much for them. Was it possible they had a future together?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DAYS RAN INTO EACH other.
Sleep was a luxury.

But Clara refused to complain. She just had to get through this rough patch, and things would get better. She hoped.

She'd gone over her proposal to buy the chapel at least a dozen times. There were graphics. There was a slideshow presentation. And there was an entire printout of everything.

It was now or never. Clara's insides shivered with nerves. She questioned whether this was good enough or if she should have added something else. But she could keep second-guessing herself for the next year. In the end, nothing was ever perfect. And no matter how hard she tried, she'd inevitably forget to include something. But she would be there to answer any questions and that would work. Wouldn't it?

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been this nervous. Wait. Yes, she did. It was when she'd applied for a business loan to open her wedding business.

She tried to tell herself this was no different. It was just a business acquisition. Nothing more. Oh, who was she kidding? It was a lot more than that.

She'd fallen in love with the little chapel. Its location overlooking the beach and ocean was spectacular. Its small size made it cozy. The woodwork was stunning. And all of the large glass windows made it almost feel like you were standing outside. She could even imagine herself getting married there some day. Not that love or marriage was on her very long to-do list. But it never hurt to dream.

Friday morning, Clara drew in a deep calming breath as she pulled into the parking lot of the wedding chapel. She'd called Mabel early that morning and asked if it'd be all right if she stopped by. She knew time was running out to make her pitch. She just hoped Mabel hadn't already signed an agreement with someone already.

As she walked over to Mabel's house, her knees felt like gelatin. She told herself to get a grip. After all, this was sweet Mabel she was going to speak with, not some boardroom of suits with serious looks pasted on their faces. No matter the outcome, Mabel would be kind.

As Mabel greeted her at the door and showed her to the kitchen, Clara tried to convince herself that this was just like any other conversation with tea and cookies, Mabel's favorites.

And so Clara set up her laptop and talked through the presentation, explaining each graphic and chart. Mabel leaned

in close, taking in all of Clara's hard work. But she had no idea what Mabel was thinking. Clara had a feeling the sweet woman would hand out the same compliments whether she was interested in the proposition or not.

When the presentation ended, Mabel asked, "Did you do all of those pictures yourself?"

"I did. I took a graphics class in college. I really enjoyed it."

"But not as much as you enjoy planning weddings?"

"No. Not that much." Clara turned to the final page. It was the image of a bronze historical placard with the name of the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel on it. "I've been in contact with the historical society and the chapel qualifies. However, if it is listed, the owner must maintain its historical integrity. So that would mean updates would have to go through an approval process."

Mabel arched a brow. "Will that be a problem for you?"

Clara shook her head. "It'll be more complicated, but I think it would be worth the effort. I love the chapel just the way it is. It has an originality that can't be found these days."

Mabel sat back and sipped at her tea, which she'd poured for both of them partway through the presentation. "You've certainly put a lot of thought into your presentation. I'm impressed. And you have one last wedding scheduled for the chapel?"

"Yes. It's in a week. But it could be a lot more if I were to make it part of a regular wedding package."

Mabel nodded. "I do see the appeal."

"But there's one other thing."

"What's that, dear?"

"I'd need your help authenticating the chapel's age. You know all of those details."

Mabel's face lit up as she set aside her tea. "I can do better than that. I have all sorts of records and photos. My father believed in keeping everything just like my grandfather. And when I inherited everything, I just couldn't bring myself to part with any of it. And now, well, you're welcome to all of it."

Excitement welled up with her. "Does this mean you'll sell me the chapel?"

The light in Mabel's eyes dimmed. "I don't know. I hate talking money. My husband used to deal with these kinds of things."

"It's okay. I understand." Her father used to like to deal with all of the family's financial dealings, but that never worked for Clara. Perhaps that was the first crack in their relationship.

"Oh, you are so kind." Mabel reached out and patted the back of Clara's hand. "But I know you have a good head for business. I wish I could have been more like you when I was younger." She sighed. "But all of those opportunities have passed me by. Now I just wander around this house remembering how things used to be. That is until it's sold."

"You're selling the house too?"

A sea of sadness shone in Mabel's eyes. "The offers I've received say they'll need the entire property."

"Oh. I'm sorry." Sympathy welled up in her. She could now see the level of turmoil her friend had kept hidden behind her too-cheery front.

No matter how much she loved the little chapel, she couldn't add to her friend's troubles. She would find another way to make her wedding business stand out.

"I should be going. I promised Brooke I wouldn't leave her managing the office by herself for long."

"Of course. But weren't you going to make an offer for the chapel? I can pass it along to my real estate agent."

"I don't want to bother you with it—"

"Nonsense. I insist."

Clara reached into her oversized purse for the envelope. She'd written out her offer, including her plans to register the chapel with the historical society.

She handed over the envelope. "It's my best offer, but it's only for the chapel. I didn't know you wanted to sell the house too. Not that I could afford it."

Mabel clutched the envelope. "Don't worry. I'm considering all offers."

Clara gave a little wave as she walked away. She told herself not to get excited, because she knew without a doubt that she would be out bid by a large margin.

And she couldn't even get upset with Mabel if she didn't choose her offer. If the roles were reversed, Clara knew she'd go with the bigger offer. Who wouldn't?

Still, she should feel good that she'd put herself out there and made her best offer. After all, her grandmother used to say: nothing ventured, nothing gained.

But could she say the same thing about Andrew? She'd been holding him at arm's length. Should she take a chance with him? Could she risk her heart again?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HE'D KEPT HIS WORD.

He was fighting for her.

Saturday, pink roses had been delivered to her apartment. She'd found them when she'd returned home after overseeing Tula's small bridal shower, which had gone off with only a few minor hiccups. The card had read: *Please give me another chance. Andrew.*

On Monday afternoon, a bouquet of pink Gerbera daisies had been delivered to the office. The card had almost been her undoing: *We were good together. We can be again.*

Instead of reaching for the phone to call him, she kept herself busy answering phone calls and doing paperwork. When she made a decision about them—about their future—she wanted to be one hundred percent certain it was for the right reasons and not a romantic notion spurred on by his sweet gestures.

Early Tuesday morning, Clara leaned back in her office chair, ignoring the creak it made. She shook her head. No

other man had ever showered her with flowers.

Just moments ago, the latest floral arrangement had been delivered. It was a vase of beautiful pink tulips. Andrew had attached another note: *We need to talk.*

He was right. But what would she say? Over the last couple of days with her bid for the chapel now submitted and the bridal shower complete, she'd slowed down long enough to think more clearly. The truth was she still loved Andrew—she'd never stopped. She'd never felt something so strong for anyone. Maybe they'd both grown enough to give them a real shot at making a relationship work this time around. Maybe after all of this, they could still have their happily-ever-after.

But what about logistics? Her life and business were on the West Coast, while his career was on the East Coast. And if by some miracle she was able to buy the chapel, she'd never want to leave. And she couldn't ask Andrew to give up his career. So where did that leave them?

She turned her chair to face the window. The morning sun was still low in the sky. It was a beautiful day to be outside and breathe in some fresh air. Her thoughts returned to Andrew. Perhaps she should return his calls, and they could meet at the park. They could talk some more and maybe it would help her decide about the future.

She reached for her phone and found she had missed some calls. When her phone had kept ringing with inquiries from the press about Tula's upcoming nuptials, Clara had silenced her

ringer after work yesterday. She must have forgotten to turn it back up. She corrected that error.

The first message was from Andrew. “Clara, where are you? I’m at your apartment, but you aren’t here. Something has happened and we need to talk right away. It doesn’t matter what time it is when you get this, call me.”

What in the world was that about?

A knock at her office door had her turning at the same time Brooke opened the door. Her assistant’s face was creased with worry lines, and her eyes spoke of troubles to come.

Clara braced herself. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s something you need to see.” Brooke laid her tablet on the desk.

Surely it couldn’t be as bad as when Tula confronted her about the leak of the wedding details. But the look on Brooke’s face said otherwise.

The air caught in Clara’s throat as she glanced down at the display. Staring back at her was a photo of Tula smiling broadly. Wait. Was she wearing her wedding dress? What in the world?

She dragged her gaze to the headline. *Tula Fox Dumped At Altar.*

Clara gasped. Tula had her wedding?

Part of her felt sorry for Tula. Being left at the altar in front of guests and the press had to be rough—no matter who you

were.

But Clara couldn't honestly say she was surprised. Tula was a difficult, manipulative person. She wanted things done her way, and she didn't worry about the cost to others. Case in point, stringing Clara along while Tula was planning her very own backyard wedding. And not making her final payment on what she owed Clara.

"I'm sorry," Brooke said.

Shock quickly morphed into anger. All of those wasted days. She glanced up at Brooke. "You're not the one who should be sorry."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Clara handed her the tablet. "Not yet. I need a moment to digest this. Then we'll have to do some disaster control. We have to protect our relationships with our vendors. I have no idea how we'll smooth things over. Let me think about it."

"I'm sure they'll understand. This will affect you just as much as them."

"But will they ever trust me again?" It infuriated her that Tula had risked not only damaging Clara's business reputation but also her friendships with Maria, Gabi, and Selena—all of whom were contracted for the wedding.

"They are your friends. They'll understand."

"I don't know. I wasn't the only one counting on using this star-studded wedding for promotion."

“On the plus side, our business wasn’t dragged through the mud with Tula.”

Clara hadn’t thought of it from that angle. “You make a good point.”

“I’m sure there will be other famous clients. You’re very talented. Anyone would be lucky to have you plan their wedding.”

Clara blinked repeatedly. “How did I get so lucky to have such a good friend?”

Brooke sent her a wavering smile. “Do you want me to hold your calls?”

Clara nodded. “Just for a little bit.”

“Will do.” Brooke closed the door on her way out.

Clara pulled up the article on her computer. *Tula Fox was supposed to be married in her own backyard under the guise of it being her fiancé’s twenty-fifth birthday. Instead, the bride was left standing at the altar. Those invited to the festive event included Tula’s co-stars in her upcoming film, Vegas Engagement.*

Clara scrolled down to the photos, wondering what else Tula had taken from the wedding they’d worked so hard to plan and used for her real wedding. And then her eyes caught on a photo of Andrew. *He was there? He’d known? Was this what he’d wanted to talk to her about?*

Had he known all along? No. Surely not. But then she recalled his words to her on the phone... *I had to pick up a gift*

for my brother's birthday. This week he turns twenty-five. It's going to be an unforgettable event.

It certainly had been unforgettable.

Clara searched the Internet, finding all of the news outlets were running the same story. Andrew wasn't prominent in the other pictures, but there were glimpses of him here and there. The ache in her chest became more intense with each vision of him.

How had she missed the fact that Tula was planning this? There had to be signs Clara had missed. As she searched her memories for some telltale sign, her head began to throb. For some reason, the facts weren't adding up. Her biggest question was why had Andrew set her up to plan this wedding?

Clara scrolled through the wedding photos. It was abundantly obvious this wasn't a quickly thrown-together wedding. The photos included a rose-covered arch and an elaborate wedding cake. She'd been duped. They'd all been duped. But why?

And then she realized the answer. Everything Clara had done had been a decoy—a way to throw off the paparazzi. In fact, she wouldn't have put it past Tula to have personally leaked the story to the press about the wedding plans at the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel.

When her gaze returned to the photo of Andrew, it was like a swift jab to the gut. It stole away her breath. Had he known about Tula's other wedding, and he hadn't told her?

She continued staring at the photo. It was a side profile of him. He was talking to his brother and gesturing with his hands. Was it possible they were arguing? She didn't know, and at this point, she really didn't care.

Her phone rang. The caller ID showed it was Andrew. What could he possibly want now? It didn't matter. She didn't want to hear it.

Wanting to make it clear to him to stop with the flowers, notes, and phone calls, she answered. "Andrew, please stop—"

"Clara, I need to tell you something—"

"If it's about Tula's wedding, I know. And we have nothing left to discuss. Please stop calling and sending flowers." And then she disconnected the call.

Her gaze strayed back to the computer display where Andrew's image stared back at her. With a huff, Clara closed the Internet page. As much as she wanted to hide away from the world and nurse her broken heart, she couldn't. In fact, she didn't have time to waste. She had to come up with a statement for the media. But what did she say? That she was duped? It would crush her professional reputation. Then what bride would trust her with their most important day?

Clara typed out a statement. She read it over, and then she pressed *delete*. This wasn't going to be easy to explain and still maintain some shred of respect. She tried typing a new statement.

A short time later, there was a knock at the door. "Come in."

Brooke looked hesitant as she stuck her head in. “I’ve been getting a lot calls from news outlets about Tula and our part in the wedding debacle.”

Clara frowned at the computer monitor and pressed *delete*. Again. “I’ll come up with a statement. I... I just need a moment to clear my thoughts.”

“I understand.” Brooke hesitated in the doorway. “I’m really sorry this happened. It’s not right. If I can do anything to help, just let me know.”

Clara gazed over the top of her monitor at her friend. She knew this debacle wasn’t easy on either of them. “Why don’t you take the rest of the day off and let the rest of calls go to voicemail?”

Brooke hesitated and then shook her head. “I won’t leave you to deal with this alone.”

“Thank you. But it’s best not to say anything in the heat of the moment. We’ll state our position tomorrow morning.” She only got one chance to speak the right words. “You’ve been great. You deserve the time off. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Uncertainty reflected in Brooke’s eyes. “You’re sure? Because I don’t mind staying.”

“I’m positive. Go ahead. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As Brooke closed the door, thoughts of Andrew came back to her. She could understand a spoiled starlet like Tula doing something like this. That didn’t make it right, but it was somewhat understandable. Tula was worried about herself and

her own image. Clara doubted she ever stopped to consider the feelings of others.

However, Clara hadn't expected something like this from Andrew. She wanted to tell herself that he didn't know anything about the secret nuptials, but she wasn't that good of a salesperson.

Her gaze slipped back to the photo of Andrew at the wedding. He was all dressed up in a dark suit, and it appeared he'd just had his hair cut. He'd definitely put some effort into looking his best for the evening—for the wedding.

But then she recalled his message with the flowers about needing to talk. If he wanted to talk about their future, he could save his breath. Did he really think a talk would make up for keeping her in the dark about Tula's real plans and in the process putting her professional relationships in jeopardy?

Impossible. Without trust, there couldn't be love. And to think she'd been ready to tell him that she still loved him. The backs of her eyes stung. She blinked repeatedly. Alone or not, she refused to give in to the tears. She had to focus. She had business relationships to salvage.

Later, when she was alone, she'd pour out her heart. And grieve for the love she'd lost not once but twice.



Her phone rang all day.

And she ignored it all day.

It wasn't that Clara hadn't tried to write an appropriate, non-emotional, perfectly professional statement regarding Tula's surprise wedding, but each time she reread the statement, her disappointment and anger resonated in the tone or the choice of words.

So far, she had: *The Perky Pink Wedding Company would like to extend their sympathy.* No. It wasn't the right word. *Their surprise at the wedding that didn't happen.* No. *Their disappointment at being kept in the dark.* Definitely not.

Each attempt at a statement went off the rails one way or the other. Maybe she just needed a break. A little distance from the office and all of the constant reminders of the star-studded wedding that wouldn't be—the plans that would be tossed—as well as her friends' disappointment over losing such a big account.

Yes, leaving the office was the right answer. And on the way home, she'd pick up a gallon of salted caramel pretzel ice cream. She would smother her disappointment in its creamy sweetness.

As she climbed into her car, her phone vibrated. She wasn't going to answer it. There was no one she wanted to speak to—especially Andrew. That proverbial ship had sailed. Or perhaps it had sunk. Yes, sunk sounded more apropos.

Still, not many people had her cell number. Her business cards all listed the office number. By the time she reached for the phone, it had stopped ringing. She pulled up the missed calls. There were repeated attempts by Andrew, but the last

incoming call was from Mabel. She didn't call Clara very often. It must be something important.

“Hello.”

“Clara, I know you're busy, and I wouldn't bother if it wasn't important. It's about the chapel. We need to talk as soon as possible.”

“I'll be right there.”

Clara inwardly groaned. More bad news. Mabel probably sold the chapel. Clara's heavy heart sank down to her pink heels.

Her grandmother used to tell her that when things got tough to look for the silver lining. Clara was trying, but she just wasn't seeing it.

It was best to get this over with as quickly as possible. And so she headed for the beach. The closer she got to the little chapel, the sadder she got. Her eyes grew misty, causing her to blink repeatedly. She told herself it was the thought of the little chapel being replaced with some modern condos, and it had nothing to do with being betrayed by Andrew. Nothing at all.

When she pulled into the empty parking lot, Mabel was exiting the chapel. Her face was drawn, and her eyes shined as though they held unshed tears.

It was true. The chapel was sold.

A lump formed in her throat. The back of her eyes stung with unshed tears.

Pull yourself together. You knew this was going to happen.

Clara blinked and then checked her makeup in the mirror. She applied some fresh lip gloss to her pale lips. She knew this decision was hard on Mabel. She wasn't going to add to the woman's grief over parting with something that meant so much to her and her family.

She got out of the car and started toward Mabel with a smile plastered on her face. "Hi."

"I hope I didn't pull you away from anything important."

"Nothing that can't wait."

Mabel gave her a watery smile and then dabbed the corners of her eyes. "Let's walk to the house."

Clara's concerns about her mounting problems slipped to the back of her mind as she grew concerned about Mabel's emotional state. "Are you okay?"

Mabel waved off her concern. "I'm fine. I was just having a quick word with my Tom. He said he'd always watch over me, and I believe him. I got a little worked up when I told him about selling the chapel."

Clara's heart went out to the woman. "You know you don't have to part with it. If you need money, I can help you figure out something else."

Mabel shook her head. "It isn't that. My Tom took care of me real well."

“If it’s the chapel’s upkeep, we can hire someone to do the work.”

“It’s partly that and the fact I’m not getting any younger. I need to do this so I know it’s all taken care of, and I no longer have to worry about the chapel’s future.” Mabel stepped onto the porch and instead of going inside, she moved to the porch swing. She patted the cushion next to her. “Join me.”

Clara sat down, and then Mabel started to rock it. “I just love this view. Nothing could beat it.”

They peered out at the surf. The water was dotted with a few sailboats. Their colorful sails bobbed in the water as the sun’s rays bounced off the swells. Mabel was right; this view was priceless.

As much as Clara wanted to relax and enjoy the view, her stiff muscles wouldn’t ease. She knew confirmation of her worst suspicions was coming. She wished Mabel wouldn’t continue to drag it out. Maybe she just needed some help getting the words out.

“Now that you’ve made the decision to sell, you can relax,” Clara said gently. “And whatever you need to make the transition easier, you can count on me.”

“The transition?”

“Yes, you said the buyers wanted all of your land, including the house. I thought they wanted to use it to develop the area into a bunch of beachside condos.”

“Oh, dear, you don’t understand. I’m not selling to them.”

Had she heard her correctly? “You’re not?”

Mabel shook her head. “You made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. It’s the answer I’ve been searching for.”

Clara’s mouth opened, but no words came out. Her mind was racing to process what she’d heard. The chapel... It was hers. All hers.

Tears of joy blurred her eyes as she moved to hug Mabel. “Thank you so much.”

When they parted, Mabel said, “It is I who should thank you. You’ll keep my family’s heritage alive, and many more couples will pledge their love there. I couldn’t ask for more.”

And it was what Clara needed to keep her business viable after the Tula debacle.

When Clara got her voice back, she asked, “Are you sure about this?”

“I’ve never been more certain about anything, except when I married my Tom. I know with you, the chapel will be in good hands.”

“It will be. I promise.” Clara sent her friend a genuine smile. “Thank you for believing in me and my plan.”

Mabel reached out and squeezed her arm. “Thank you for entering my life just when I needed a good friend.”

Clara was so excited that her first instinct was to tell Andrew the news. She reached into her purse for her phone. Her finger hovered over his phone number when she recalled

the way he'd betrayed her at Tula's surprise wedding. The memory pricked her good mood as she returned her phone to her purse.

"I should be going." Clara stood.

"Maybe you shouldn't go quite yet."

"I don't understand."

"There's someone else who wants to speak with you." Mabel gestured to the lone figure standing on the beach.

The breath caught in Clara's lungs. It was Andrew. *What is he doing here?*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN

HE COULD FIX THIS.

He didn't have a choice. He couldn't lose Clara again.

Andrew paced back and forth on the sunny beach. The bright, cheery sunlight appeared to mock his dark, gloomy mood. He didn't even notice the amazing view. His only focus was on his thoughts of Clara. He needed to talk to her but not over the phone. That hadn't gone well at all.

His first step at patching up this mess had been to meet with Mabel and pay off the remaining balance Tula owed for renting the chapel. To his relief, Mabel had already been paid in full.

With the money squared away, Mabel had said she was planning to speak with Clara about her offer to buy the chapel. Andrew suggested Mabel speak with Clara today—in person. The woman's eyes narrowed in on him when she asked if he would be staying for the meeting. He'd said he'd like to stick around, but he would speak with Clara after Mabel had concluded her meeting.

Mabel had eyed him up as though considering his idea. And then she made him swear he wouldn't hurt Clara. He promised. And he'd said if Clara was willing, he'd spend the rest of his life making it up to her. And he'd tell her every day how much he loved her.

Though he'd nervously rambled a bit, he must have said something right because Mabel had agreed to tell Clara that he was waiting to speak to her. It was all she'd been willing to do, but it was enough. The rest would be up to him.

Waiting on the beach beneath the chapel, Andrew raked his fingers through his hair. Somehow, he had to make Clara believe he would never do anything to hurt her. Did he dare tell her he loved her? At this point, would it make a difference?

As though he sensed her presence, he turned.

Clara made her way across the beach toward him. She wasn't smiling. As she drew nearer, he noticed her eyes reflected her distinct displeasure at finding him there. His body tensed. He hoped she'd give him a chance to explain.

"Hello." He attempted to smile, but the motion was stiff and forced. "Thanks for meeting with me."

"I don't have time for this. I need to be doing damage control."

"I'm really sorry about how things went down with the wedding."

She frowned at him. “But not enough to enlighten me about the real wedding. Do you know how inept I look to my associates—to potential clients?”

“I told the press— I told everyone associated with the wedding preparations—that this change of plans was done without your knowledge.”

Her gaze narrowed. “You shouldn’t have gone to the press.”

“Someone had to apologize on behalf of the bride. Tula sure wasn’t going to do it. And since hiring your company was my idea, I figured I should do some apologizing.”

“And they believed you?”

He nodded. “Everyone I spoke with agreed you’re great at your job, and they assured me they’d be happy to work with you again.”

Her voice grew soft. “But why did you lie to me? Even if it was a lie of omission?”

“I didn’t. I swear. I had no idea about the backyard wedding.”

“Are you going to tell me the man in the photos, the one who looks exactly like you, is your long-lost twin?”

“No. Of course not. I thought I was going to Hugh’s birthday party. I wanted to take you with me, but you’d asked for time to think about things with us, so I didn’t want to pressure you.”

The expression on Clara's face was unreadable. Was he finally getting through to her? If so, he couldn't stop now. He had a feeling if she walked away now, he'd never have another chance to tell her exactly how he felt about her.

"Please believe me. I know it looks bad, what with those pictures on the Internet. But the truth is, I was as surprised about the wedding as all of the other guests."

Silence was her only response. She didn't believe him. He supposed those photos taken out of context would look bad. But he wasn't giving up. Not yet.

He pleaded with his eyes for her to believe him. "When I figured it out, I tried to speak with Tula, but she wouldn't listen to a thing I had to say. You know Tula. She's very determined to have things her way. When my brother found out, he wasn't happy. They had heated words, and then my brother left her standing at the altar."

"He did?"

Andrew nodded. "He said they were over once and for all."

"Your brother didn't know about Tula's sneaky plan?"

Andrew shook his head. "He didn't have a clue. He was so angry. I was worried about him. I wanted to come to you right away, but first I had to make sure he was all right."

"Of course. Is he? All right, that is?"

"Upset that he was fooled into thinking Tula had changed."

“That must have hurt.” Her gaze met his. “I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions and doubted you.”

“I have to admit the pictures looked bad. Anyway, I wanted to let you know what had happened. But you weren’t home last night. I waited around for a while, until your neighbors started to give me strange looks.”

“You came looking for me?” Her tone no longer had a sharp edge to it.

“Not before I told Tula what I thought of her callous actions. I know how much you were counting on that wedding to further your career, and I feel horrible because I’m the one responsible for arranging it. But don’t expect an apology from her. From all I can tell, she never apologizes to anyone. But I promise I’ll make this up to you. I don’t know how, but I’ll figure out something.”

In that moment, Andrew realized he’d once again been looking to the future and what this wedding would have meant to Clara... And to him. In the meantime, he was missing being in the present and appreciating how happy they’d been over these past few weeks. And now it was too late. Or was it?

The truth was when his thoughts turned to the future, he couldn’t imagine going back to his lonely existence. He wanted Clara by his side, where she’d always belonged if only he’d been thinking clearly when she’d agreed to marry him.

He cleared his throat. “I never lied to you about anything with the wedding or my feelings for you. Everything I told you the night of our date was the truth. I didn’t come to San

Francisco with the intention of rekindling things with you, but when I saw you, when I remembered how good we were together, I—”

“Andrew, don’t—”

“Don’t what? Say I love you. If I’m honest, I never stopped. Are you going to say you don’t feel it, too?” When she didn’t say anything, he reached out, taking her hand in his. “If it’s my injury that’s holding you back, I understand. I’m not the same man you once knew—”

“No. It’s not that. I think you’re amazing. You are the most thoughtful and romantic man I know. Any woman would be lucky to be with you.”

“Then what is it?”



What was the problem?

Clara didn’t move.

Why wasn’t she throwing herself into his arms?

After all, he’d stood up for her to Tula Fox. No one had ever done something so gallant for her. Andrew really was one of a kind. And he’d salvaged her business connections. He understood how important her business was to her—he understood her.

So what was holding her back?

When it came down to it, she was afraid to give him her heart again. She couldn't stand to lose him again. But if she didn't say something soon, that was exactly what would happen. He was going to walk away, and she would never see him again.

She choked down the rush of emotions. "I owe you an apology, too."

"But you didn't do anything wrong—"

"Oh, but I did. I totally messed up things after our date. When I slept in and missed an appointment, I panicked. I blamed you, and it was all my fault. I had all of my hopes and dreams pinned on that celebrity wedding, and in the process, I used it to hide from my feelings for you."

Andrew moved in close, taking her hands in his. "What are you saying?"

She blinked back tears as she lifted her chin. "I love you. I never stopped."

"I love you, too."

She was getting ahead of herself. "But your life is on the East Coast and mine is here. How will we make it work?"

He sent her a knowing smile. "Actually, the California sunshine is growing on me."

Clara's mouth gaped as she clasped her hands together. "You're staying?"

He smiled. "If you want me to."

“I do. I do. I really do.” Her heart was very full now. It was full of love for the amazing people in her life, appreciation for all of the good things in her life, and most of all for the man she’d never stopped loving.

Andrew pulled her close, capturing her lips with his own. Her heart beat so loud it echoed in her ears. He loved her. Her arms slipped up over his broad shoulders. Her fingertips trailed up his neck and threaded through his hair as she pulled him closer.

It didn’t matter how far away she’d moved or how much time had passed, he was still her soul mate. When they were together, she was complete. This was just the beginning of something beautiful.

When he pulled away, it was much too soon. She didn’t want to let him go, not when he’d just come back into her life.

“I’m not going anywhere. I promise.” He smiled at her.

“And I promise to always put us first. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

EPILOGUE

New Year's Eve Party, San Francisco, CA

IT HAD BEEN THE most amazing year.

Clara glanced over at the dashing man by her side as he talked to some of their friends. In the months since the Tula debacle, they'd been together every free moment. They'd even taken up biking. Andrew claimed it was good therapy for his leg. She wasn't so sure. However, she made sure he didn't overdo it. But he was definitely getting stronger.

While she'd continued to build her business and work her way through the process of buying the chapel, Andrew had gone back to work in San Francisco. They'd never been happier. And now they were about to usher in the New Year together.

"It's almost midnight." Andrew's voice drew her from her thoughts.

"And I can't think of anyone I'd rather usher it in with."

He stepped in front of her and then carefully lowered himself to one knee, making her gasp. The party went silent as all heads turned in their direction.

He smiled up at her as he reached for her hand. “Clara, I love you. And I’m so sorry for ever taking our relationship for granted. I’ll never do that again if you’ll give me another chance?”

Happy tears blurred her vision as she vigorously nodded, not quite trusting her voice.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a black velvet ring box. The box creaked as he opened it. “A new year and a new start deserves new bling.” He removed the ring. “Clara Harrington, will you marry me?”

She pressed a hand to her chest. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

He slid the ring onto her finger before standing. He placed a kiss upon her lips as applause sounded around them.

“I don’t want to wait to marry.” His tone was serious. “We’ve already waited much too long to start our lives together.”

“Andrew, you can’t be serious.”

“Do I sound like I’m joking?”

“No, but…” As much as she wanted to be his wife, she didn’t want to rush this moment. “Do we have to rush the wedding?”

The smile fell from his face. “You’re having doubts.”

“No. Not at all. It’s just that I’d like to enjoy this moment as your fiancée.”

“But wouldn’t being my bride be better?”

How did she get him to understand her need to slow down just a bit without him doubting her love for him? This was a huge moment for her—for both of them.

“Wait,” he said. “I think I understand. You want time to plan our wedding.” When she smiled and nodded, he said, “I should have thought of that. I was excited and jumped ahead.” He pulled her into his embrace. “I suppose I can wait, if you promise not to make me wait too long.”

She gazed up at him, taking in the warmth of his smile. “I promise. But I do have one question for you.”

He arched a brow. “Ask away.”

Clara smiled up at him. “How do you feel about pink?”

“Pink?”

“I have the most beautiful pink heels to wear for the wedding.”

His eyes lit up. “I remember them. They are quite stunning. Wait. Is it bad luck for you to wear them since I’ve already seen them?”

She shook her head. “That only pertains to the wedding dress.”

He smiled. “Then I say they’ll be perfect. Now how soon can we get married?”

“We haven’t even told my family yet.”

His eyes widened in surprise. “You’re going to call them?”

She nodded. “I think so. I heard what you said about your family, and since this is the year of second chances, I thought it was time to reach out to them.”

A big smile lit up his eyes. “I’m so happy to hear you say that. Now what are you waiting for? Let’s tell everyone and get on with the ceremony.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Are you really that anxious to get married?”

“Of course, I am.” He reached out to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. “I love you, and I can’t wait to start our life together.”

“It’s going to be amazing.” She lifted up on her tiptoes to kiss him.

At last, everything felt as though it was working out and her heart was whole again.

Keep reading Clara and Andrew’s story! Sign up for my newsletter and receive a Bonus Epilogue.

Get your bonus epilogue [HERE](#).

And then return to the Pacific coast for the next book in this wedding series...THE BRIDE’S CHRISTMAS DRESS. A wedding boutique owner and a computer programmer are drawn together by an adorable little dog during the holiday season.

OceanofPDF.com

Afterword

Thanks so much for reading Clara and Andrew's story. I hope their journey made your heart smile. If you did enjoy the book, please consider...

- Help spreading the word about The Bride's Pink Shoes by writing a review.
- Subscribe to my newsletter in order to receive bonus reads, giveaways and special sales.
- You can like my author page on Facebook or follow me on Twitter.

I hope you'll continue reading the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel series. Coming next is Liza's story in The Bride's Christmas Dress.

Thanks again for your support! It is HUGELY appreciated.

Happy reading,

Jennifer

OceanofPDF.com

About Author

Award-winning author, Jennifer Faye pens fun, heartwarming contemporary romances with rugged cowboys, sexy billionaires and enchanting royalty. With more than a million books sold, she is internationally published with books translated into more than a dozen languages. She is a two-time winner of the RT Book Reviews Reviewers' Choice Award, the CataRomance Reviewers' Choice Award, named a TOP PICK author, and been nominated for numerous other awards.

Now living her dream, she resides with her very patient husband and two spoiled cats. When she's not plotting out her next romance, you can find her curled up with a mug of tea and a book. You can learn more about Jennifer at www.JenniferFaye.com

Subscribe to Jennifer's newsletter for news about upcoming releases, bonus content and other special offers.

You can also join her on Twitter, Facebook, or Goodreads.

OceanofPDF.com

Also By

Other titles available by Jennifer Faye include:

THE BELL FAMILY OF BLUESTAR ISLAND:

Love Blooms

Harvest Dance

A Lighthouse Café Christmas

Rising Star

Summer by the Beach

Brass Anchor Inn

WHISTLE STOP ROMANCE SERIES:

A Moment to Love

A Moment to Dance

A Moment on the Lips

A Moment to Cherish

A Moment at Christmas

TANGLED CHARMS:

Sprinkled with Love

A Mistletoe Kiss

GREEK PARADISE ESCAPE:

Greek Heir to Claim Her Heart

It Started with a Royal Kiss

Second Chance with the Bridesmaid

WEDDING BELLS IN LAKE COMO:

Bound by a Ring & a Secret

Falling for Her Convenient Groom

ONCE UPON A FAIRYTALE:

Beauty & Her Boss

Miss White & the Seventh Heir

Fairytale Christmas with the Millionaire

THE BARTOLINI LEGACY:

The Prince and the Wedding Planner

The CEO, the Puppy & Me

The Italian's Unexpected Heir

GREEK ISLAND BRIDES:

Carrying the Greek Tycoon's Baby

Claiming the Drakos Heir

Wearing the Greek Millionaire's Ring

Click here to find all of Jennifer's titles and buy links.

OceanofPDF.com