

A close-up, profile view of a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white dress shirt, and a light-colored tie. His hands are clasped in front of him. The background is a warm, golden-brown bokeh.

*Endless  
in love*

MAVERICK BILLIONAIRES BOOK 8

BELLA  
ANDRE  
AND JENNIFER  
SKULLY

# *Endless in Love*

~ **The Maverick Billionaires** ~

**Book 8**

Bella Andre & Jennifer Skully

# *Endless in Love*

~ **The Maverick Billionaires** ~

**Book 8**

Bella Andre & Jennifer Skully

# Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

About the Book

A note from Bella & Jennifer

*Chapter One*

*Chapter Two*

*Chapter Three*

*Chapter Four*

*Chapter Five*

*Chapter Six*

*Chapter Seven*

*Chapter Eight*

*Chapter Nine*

*Chapter Ten*

*Chapter Eleven*

*Chapter Twelve*

*Chapter Thirteen*

*Chapter Fourteen*

*Chapter Fifteen*

*Chapter Sixteen*

*Chapter Seventeen*

*Chapter Eighteen*

*Chapter Nineteen*

*Chapter Twenty*

*Chapter Twenty-One*

*Chapter Twenty-Two*

*Chapter Twenty-Three*

*Chapter Twenty-Four*

*Chapter Twenty-Five*

*Epilogue*

Excerpt from *Breathless in Love*

Excerpt from *The Look of Love*

Books by Bella Andre

Books by Jennifer Skully

About the Authors

*Chapter Twenty*

*Chapter Twenty-One*

*Chapter Twenty-Two*

*Chapter Twenty-Three*

*Chapter Twenty-Four*

*Chapter Twenty-Five*

*Epilogue*

Excerpt from *Breathless in Love*

Excerpt from *The Look of Love*

Books by Bella Andre

Books by Jennifer Skully

About the Authors

**ENDLESS IN LOVE**

~ The Maverick Billionaires, Book 8 ~

© 2023 Bella Andre & Jennifer Skully

**ENDLESS IN LOVE**

~ The Maverick Billionaires, Book 8 ~

© 2023 Bella Andre & Jennifer Skully



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **A note from Bella & Jennifer**

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

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

With love,

***Bella Andre and Jennifer Skully***

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

## **A note from Bella & Jennifer**

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

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

With love,

***Bella Andre and Jennifer Skully***

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

## Chapter One

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

Dane couldn’t tell if that was envy in her eyes. Or terror. Knowing his sister, who was thirty-six and a couple of years younger than him, it had to be terror. She didn’t flinch in boardrooms, and a ferocious game of soccer didn’t alarm her. But babies struck fear into the hearts of all the Harrington siblings—his two sisters and two brothers.

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

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

And today was important to him.

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

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

Dane caught Cammie’s eye, and she gave him a thumbs-up. With her hair shimmering red-gold in the sunshine, Cammie’s green eyes seemed to sparkle, something he swore he could see even from this distance. Am

women on the sidelines, she formed the Harrington cheering section—with T. Rex, the long-haired mini dachshund they shared, who'd run the moment Dane unleashed him.

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

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

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

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

Gabby was right there, taking control of the ball, dribbling it down the field, even though she could have kicked it to one of her brothers. It was Gabby, totally focused on the goal. Youngest of them all at only sixteen, she was blond like their mother, while all the males of the family were a lot of hair. Ava, with her red locks, was a throwback to their grandfather.

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

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

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

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

His team—his family—moved the soccer ball rapidly down the field toward the Mavericks' goal net. While Clay played goalie, Troy aimed and kicked the ball back and forth, but soon Gabby would move in for the goal. Cal and Gideon yelled instructions from the sidelines while Matt, also a player, tried vainly to steal the ball. They hadn't a clue it was no secret. Dane had Gabby went for the goal. Sebastian Montgomery dove for the ball, but it made it into the net, his fingers falling an inch short.

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

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

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

Dane had suggested the soccer game.

“Sounds perfect,” Will said. “Afterward, we'll grab a pint in the c

joined talk.” After a beat, he added, “We feel there’s great potential in playing all some business ventures with all of you.”

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

They got in position for the Mavericks’ turn at the ball. Now they’d taste of the Harringtons, the Mavericks would be on guard and not as usual life beat.

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

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

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

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

His gaze drifted once more to her on the sidelines. She watched the holiday as avidly as the Maverick ladies, all of them shouting encouragement. The men kicked the ball between them, moving it swiftly down the field, envied Gabby nor Ava able to check their momentum.

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

She amazed him with her dedication. She’d taken care of her uncle for years after he was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer’s. Seven years later, the disease progressed to the point that she’d had to put him in a memory care facility.



ursuing facility. He'd lived far longer than most Alzheimer's patients. A few ago, however, it became clear he was close to the end of his journey; would had insisted Cammie take family leave when he found her sleeping desk. The only person who could calm her uncle, she'd been traveling had and forth to the care home several times a week. But caring for her easy to managing her job at the same time was affecting her health.

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

t. Who Except today, when Dane needed her.

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

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

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

That was his girl Friday.

\* \* \*

the game

as their

neither

and Daniel.

would

Lyssa

circle for

years ago,

every care

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

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

Having taken her seat again, Cammie ran her fingers through Rex's

months she climbed once more into her lap. Ava and Gabby were the Harringtons' surprise advantage. "They're pretty good."

Letting out a big laugh, Lyssa gushed, "They're out of this world. They could go pro. I mean, my brothers are no slouches." She put a hand on her belly. "And look at Cal out there. He's crushing it." The pure love on her

face made Cammie's heart stutter. Cal Danniger, the Mavericks' business manager, though quite a few years older than Lyssa's twenty-six, was extremely attractive and fit, with a hint of silver in his dark hair.

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

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

The Harrington brothers were definitely a handsome lot—all of them tall, with thick, dark hair and blue eyes that seemed to see everything and stop you. At least, Dane's gaze did. Once, long ago, Troy had asked her back. On a dare, she'd turned him down. Working for Dane, it would have been awkward, even if she'd been interested. She was fairly certain Dane had

Troy the riot act for trying to poach one of his employees. He'd apologized for Troy's harassment, though Cammie had scoffed at his apology. Troy had asked, she'd said no, they'd both been fine, and Clay, of course, had never even thought about dating her. They might as well be drop-dead gorgeous like their older brother, but no way did she need any kind of complication.

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

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

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

Fernsby, now busily passing out his baked treats, had been with Dane

ngtons' years, long before Dane bought the townhouse in the fashionable  
borough of Chelsea. Cammie always suspected that baking was how I  
d. They showed his love, though you certainly couldn't tell from his manner. V  
on her ageless face of a person who neither smiled nor frowned, he co  
Lyssa's anywhere from forty to sixty. Wearing his ever-present stern expressi  
business with his tall frame and cultured voice, he was the epitome of th  
was still manservant, always at Dane's side no matter where, be it the London  
the manor in the English countryside, the Pebble Beach estate, t  
erhood Francisco flat, or even the small Caribbean island Dane owned.

wedding But Kelsey didn't let the subject go. "Come on, Lyssa, don't tell  
didn't think about a little—" She fluffed her ponytail of tawny blond-s  
l let me hair and grinned instead of saying exactly what. "—for just a moment  
dding at that first meeting with Dane in his fabulous London home."

Hands on her baby bump, Lyssa's gaze fastened on Cal as he mas  
ver six controlled the ball. "You know Cal was always the man for me." H  
g inside reflected the dreamy note in her voice. And she nudged Kelsey. "You  
er out, one who should date Dane. He's perfect for you."

ve been Kelsey visibly shuddered. "No way. He's too rich, powerfu  
ad read handsome. I want someone I don't have to compete with."

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

rageous. On the field, Dane stole the ball from Cal, and the Maverick  
erupted in catcalls. Of course, Cammie jumped to her feet cheerin  
led her accidentally dumped on the ground, barked his joy, too, then abruptly  
just dieto beg Fernsby for a treat.

e a cat. Kelsey had said she didn't want someone too rich, power  
handsome. But she'd forgotten one adjective—perfect. The things  
'Dane's said about Dane didn't bother Cammie. She wasn't proprietary ab  
ld be in boss. She certainly wasn't jealous. She was just a little uncomfortab  
nted to Kelsey talking about Dane as if he were a prize piece of beef. Even if

Cammie had done her best not to notice that over the years she'd wor  
ane for him. She'd had her uncle to think of, who'd relied on her for so lo

London couldn't remember a time when he hadn't. And she'd always been the  
Fernsby him.

With the But even if she had absolutely no designs on Dane—their v  
ould berelationship was too important—she liked the way he'd introduced her  
on, and not *just* as his assistant, but adding, "I can't do anything without her."  
e loyal With all the jeering from the Maverick ladies, Cammie chee  
house, Harringtons. Staid Fernsby, incapable of even cracking a smile, c  
he Sancouldn't do it.

Cammie punched the air. "You go, Dane. Crush those Mavericks."  
me you Suddenly, she was the target of all the Maverick females, battle  
treaked their eyes, ready to squash the opposition.

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

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

al, and Wistfulness fell over Cammie, even as she wiped tears of laught  
her eyes. They were all so happy. And their children would be so c  
learned age. The two boys, Matt's son, Noah, and Rosie's son, Jorge, both  
y—had seven, were dying to be big brothers. One huge happy family, the  
known wonderful to watch.

ie years And the burst of laughter they'd all shared made Cammie long to  
mother of them.

c ladies  
g. Rex,  
ran off

ful, or  
Kelsey  
out her  
le with  
he was.  
ked for  
ng she

couldn't remember a time when he hadn't. And she'd always been there for him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## *Chapter Two*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still, it had been a hard decision to leave Uncle Lochlan, even for a short time. He’d first shown signs of something wrong when she was a senior in high school, and it had been terrifying. She’d planned to start college that fall, but yet, she couldn’t leave Uncle Lochlan when they didn’t even know what was wrong. Instead, she’d taken a job with Clyde Westbourne, a good friend of her uncle’s. That turned out to be the best decision of her life. It eventually led her to Dane—or rather, to her job with Dane.

The Alzheimer’s diagnosis had been a terrible blow, but thankfully, her uncle’s progression had been uncannily slow. The doctors said he was the record books. He’d been able to live in his own home, with her help, for seven years ago, when the police found him wandering more than

from home. She thanked God every day for Dane's help, and for Av owned retirement communities, elder care homes, and memory care f all over the country and internationally. Ava had found Uncle Lo place.

But now his time was finally running out.

moment, Rosie laid a gentle hand on Cammie's arm. "If you ever need e : today, smallest bit of help, don't hesitate to call one of us. We're always h people we care about."

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

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

As the first half of the game ended, the teammates rushed Fernsby ear. "Uncapped bottles of water and laid out an array of tea sandwiches ie, and players' fortification.

utifully Gabby sniffed one of the sandwiches, looked at Fernsby, then smil it's need so sweetly. "I'm sure the sandwiches are totally amazing, dear Fernsl e." only thing that would make them even better is if there were no eggs o t in her and the bread was gluten-free."

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

Gabby shrugged, laughter dancing in her eyes as she got right up he day. face. "I think you and I need to have our own little bake-off one c in high days."

all, and Catching Dane's eye, Cammie shared a smile with him. Ferns hat was Gabby had a longstanding rivalry. Vegan and gluten-free for years, iend of had started her own conglomerate, a franchise of bakeries speciali ntually vegan and gluten-free products. She managed her own franchise in C

But even after her great success, Fernsby loved his butter, eggs, illy her manner of dairy products.

one for Kelsey leaned close. "Is he just Fernsby? Or does he have a first na lp, until Cammie smiled, shaking her head. "If he does, I've never heard it. a mile he was just born as Fernsby. He's been with Dane for-like-ever, sinc

ra, who bought that first resort.”

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

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

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

And ever Leaning around Kelsey, Lyssa asked, “Did I hear you say the aunt bought the Fernsby resort? The Fernsby has worked for Dane since he bought his first resort?”

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

“As I understand it,” Rosie said, “Dane was, what, only twenty-four when he bought it, dear time?”

Butter are Cammie wasn't giving away secrets when she answered, “Yes, he worked at that resort for a couple of years after his parents died. I

But the owners ran into financial troubles, and rather than see it go out of business, Dane pulled together the financing to take over. That was the beginning of how he owns resorts all over the world.”

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

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

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

I think Cammie had to agree. But they were no more incredible than Dane. In that moment, Dane looked up from an in-depth conversation with



Franconi, as if divining he was the topic of conversation.

She and Dane were simpatico. Each knew what the other thought. That look, he thanked her for moving among the ranks of the Mavericks.

learning all she could. Which was why Cammie had done a lot more listening than talking today. She was gathering intel. And it was obvious to her, of course, that the Mavericks' loved ones had given a thumbs-up to a business link.

As the teams went into action on the field, the women shouted with even enthusiasm, screaming for their men to score points. Again. Cammie was unashamed to yell her support for the Harringtons.

Rex chose that moment to run to her, careening into her lap. Cammie's careenuzzled him. "You're such a sweetie. And I've missed you." He'd have it running between her and Fernsby for most of the game.

Kelsey leaned in to say, "Is he your dog, then? I thought he was Dane's." Fingers buried in the mini dachshund's long hair, Cammie quick-answers—"He's actually our puppy. Together." She smiled. "Well, not exactly. He's seven years old."

Kelsey settled an appraising gaze on her. "I didn't realize you and he were..." She trailed off.

Cammie blurted, "Oh, we're not like that. No. I work for him, that's all." Then she laughed, hoping it didn't sound uneasy. "It's just that T. Rex

owns both of us." She buried her face in the dog's soft coat, not wanting Kelsey to see the blush that had crept into her cheeks.

What on earth would the Mavericks think if they knew she lived in business, Dane's house? Or that she had her own suite of rooms in each of the homes, so they could more easily work together when he traveled? And she was his personal assistant. Not a lot of people, though, would understand that.

there was nothing going on between them.

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

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

The Mavericks and Harringtons jogged to center field, shaking hair

giving hearty claps on the back.

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

stening The Buena Vista Café served a famous Irish coffee, claiming that they brought the drink to the US. The Maverick ladies darn near squealed at the pregnant ones. Cammie assumed there’d be nonalcoholic offerings for them. Dane caught her eye, and she felt that familiar thrill up and down her spine. That was another of the things she’d never tell anyone.

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

When they video-chatted tonight, she’d tell him everything. “I’ll tell you the things she’d never tell anyone. *Especial*ly not him.”

ly said,

puppy.

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fernsby's respect. And his loyalty.

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

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

When he was finally chosen as a contestant on *Britain's Greatest* —and vanquished his nemesis Digbert, Mr. Westerbourne's butler, or Irishalso applied, drat the man—she would naturally have to sing a differer to San He did, however, respect her unconquerable spirit. She excelled things. But she couldn't possibly outdo him.

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

After all, that was loyalty.

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

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

a bar."  
g, Lord  
course,

es back  
to that

even a  
rim. As  
ove all,  
ne—he  
during  
everyone  
earned

Fernsby's respect. And his loyalty.

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

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

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

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

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

After all, that was loyalty.

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

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

## *Chapter Three*

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

The waitstaff put together several tables in the tented curbside area to accommodate their group. Cammie was sandwiched between Dane and Ava, with Dane's thigh resting along hers, his body heat doing things to Cammie's stomach. Something like butterflies. Which was not nothing.

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

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

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

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

"Those might even look better than Fernsby's offerings." Summerfield rubbed her hands together, while Daniel Spencer leaned over and whispered something into her silky black hair, making her laugh, the other hand on his hip. If those two weren't engaged yet, they soon would be.

Dane jumped in. "Don't let Fernsby hear you say that. You'll need to eat one of his treats again."

Gabby's eyes sparkled. "That's really why Fernsby left right a

game. I told him I was bringing yummy gluten-free vegan goodies, fled in horror.”

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

“But we’re not vegan,” Matt Tremont said, tugging on his hair as if the glass might pull it out were he forced to eat a vegan pastry.

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

He’d always supported everything Gabby did, just as he had supported her siblings.

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

The boy nodded dramatically. “I’m not a fraidy-cat.”

Side the Gabby pulled out a box within the box and set it on the table. Flipping the lid, she leaned close, pointing to a scone.

“This one has an herb that’s good for the heartburn pregnant women can’t eat. And here I’ve got some ginger scones that help the digestion.” She pointed to another box for all of the pregnant women to see. “And this pastry here will help you

worsened. keep your feet from swelling. It’s savory, with dill and sun-dried tomatoes. Always

Ari, her hazel eyes alight, said, “I can’t decide which one to try. Do you have any about we share?” She looked at Gabby. “They won’t cause any reactions, will they?”

And a full Gabby smiled. “Everything here is good for you. And, of course, no cheese.”

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

Tasha With one taste of the savory pastry, Paige groaned. “Oh my. That’s so delicious.”

And then a Murmurs of appreciation sounded all around. “Thank you so much for thinking of this,” Lyssa said to Gabby as Cal tried swiping a piece from her plate. She swatted him. “These are only for those of us who are pregnant.”

You don’t get one.”

After the Once again, the group burst into laughter.

and he But the Mavericks were a harder sell. Pushing the bigger box to the  
of the table, Gabby introduced the delicacies. "This is a cheese blintz."

Sebastian snorted. "If it's vegan, how can it have cheese?"

If he thought he could shoot Gabby down, he was wrong.  
as if heHarrington had always held her own around strong men. She simply  
and said with a slight drawl, "It's vegan cheese. You have heard  
fect onright?"

n-free," "Isn't that an oxymoron?" Daniel said in a dry tone.

Gabby wasn't fazed. "You'd be surprised at the vegan and glut  
all hisproducts we have these days. And more are arriving all the time. This  
made with nuts. And it's delicious." Her gaze challenged them all.

usband. Even Cammie, who didn't know them well, understood the Ma  
of hairwould never back down from a challenge.

" Troy leaned his elbows on the table, clasping his hands. "I've got  
a cruller, so don't any of you even think about it. Gabby's raspberry  
ing heringle the tastebuds." He broke into a grin. "And the fudge glaze is  
muffin.for."

can get. Beside her, Dane was grinning, while Ava kept silent, though a  
held upsmile played on her lips. The Mavericks were going down.

will help Dane reached for Cammie's hand under the table, squeezing her  
toes." before he pulled away. He couldn't know what his touch did to he  
y. Howshe'd made sure he never guessed.

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

there's Gabby had baked muffins, croissants, crullers, cinnamon rolls,  
cake, zucchini bread, Danish pastries, and more. Each Maverick cho  
em all,one, while most of the ladies decided to share. There were no dup  
hem onGabby was a smart cookie, not wanting them to think any one trea  
fluke.

is sooo Just as Sebastian had been the first to choose, he was also the first  
a bite, his mouth pinched as though he might have to spit it out.  
uch forchewed thoughtfully. And took another bite. Finally, he looked at Gab  
off hercoffee-colored eyes gleaming. "Gabby, where have you and your d  
egnant.goodies been all our lives?" He held out the fork for his fiancée,

Ballard, to try. "You're going to love this, sweetheart." Of course, she

Daniel cast a sideways glance at him, as if he suspected Sebas

center trying to pull a fast one.

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

The boys were bouncing in their seats. “Can I, can I, can I?” they chanted in unison.

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

Noah chose a frosted cupcake. But Jorge wanted to taste his gluten-free vegan treats. Rosie gladly shared.

“I never thought I’d say it,” Evan admitted, a huge bite missing from his cinnamon roll, “but vegan and gluten-free—at least the way you bake, the Mavericks—are amazing. I second Sebastian. Where have you and your treats taken our lives?”

And every Maverick chimed in with praise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A dab of whipped cream remained on his lips after the first sip. Cammie



reached out to wipe it away, as if it were an automatic gesture. But to had never been automatic between them. So she simply pointed. “W cried incream.” Dane licked it off, sending shivers through her that she managed to contain.

etching What was up with these weak moments? Maybe it was the month one youspent away from Dane, making everything as fresh as the first time seen him.

mother’s But she was tough. She had amazing control. Things would go normal.

rom his Will Franconi drummed his fingers on the table, breaking the Gabby “We’ve been thinking a lot about your family.”

een all Dane grinned, and Cammie looked away quickly before his smile l back those butterflies. “We’ve been thinking about yours a lot too.”

The table went silent as a cable car rang its bell on the street. The Gabbyby magic, or synchronicity, they all called out in unison, “Merger!”

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

lay was “If we look at the potential numbers,” Will began, only to stop w Harringtons shook their heads as one.

ocolate Troy spoke for them all. “We don’t need to look at numbers. ammie,going to work. Big-time.”

The Harrington siblings had taken a month to think it through and utdrinkover, conducting one-on-one meetings with different Mavericks, ea testing the other’s mettle.

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

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

e could Ava patted her hand, her lips close to Cammie’s ear. “Don’t worry got my people with him all the time.” She held up her phone so that Cammiecould see a text with a photo of Uncle Lochlan sleeping peacefully.

ouching She should have known Ava would make a special effort. “Thank y  
/hipped She would forever be grateful to Dane and Ava for making it pos  
barelykeep Uncle Lochlan with such comfort and oversight. Cammie coul  
have afforded the care home in San Juan Bautista without their suppor  
is she’dkindness brought tears to her eyes even now. She’d sold Uncle Lo  
e she’dhouse right after the move seven years ago and put all the proceeds  
his support. When that was exhausted, she paid whatever she could ou  
back tosalary. Of course, it wasn’t enough. But she would pay them back ovr  
Every penny.

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

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

n, as if When he raised his arms, she’d been sure he was about to envelop  
his comforting embrace. Nothing personal, just gratitude that she wo  
le, shethis for him. It warmed her to know how much he valued her input.

y often Dane was an amazing boss.

warmed She would never leave him. Especially since it would take years  
nal off-him back for all he’d done for her and her uncle.

hen the

\* \* \*

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

l talk it If her touch shot a bolt of lightning through him, that meant noth  
ch side needed Cammie for her smarts, her diligence, her efficiency, her quick  
and her intuition. Anything else took second place. Even if sometimes.

1 Ava’s But now he needed her impressions. Dane wanted this merger  
Cammie family. Badly. And he needed Cammie to agree.

tly, yet His family had good lives. They’d come a long way since losin  
things parents. He and Ava had to quit college back then, but the sacrifice ha  
worth it, because together they’d helped their younger siblings achie

ry. I’ve goals. Troy pursued his dream of Olympic diving, Gabby had vis  
Cammie cooking school, and Clay was their computer geek. Ava, too, had f  
business school, getting her degree in healthcare management. No

you.” never had to want for anything again.

sible to Except love.

d never After meeting Bob and Susan Spencer at Gideon’s New Year’s Eve  
t. TheirDane had recognized the potent, cohesive, loving element that parent  
chlan’s to the mix. His family had so much to learn from these Mavericks, i  
towardbusinesswise, but emotionally.

t of her Their parents had never provided the stability that Susan and B  
er time.Partying in the world’s hotspots, Dane’s parents had left their kid  
indifferent nannies, while Dane and Ava had given their younger sibl  
l talkedthe care they could. How often had he begged his mom and dad to take  
kids with them? Yet, every time, his parents had returned alone to E  
rd withplaygrounds and the ski slopes of Vail or Chamonix or the Swis  
They’d been risk-takers, and in the end, risk had won.

o her in It was no wonder his brothers and sisters were still single. They’  
ould doknown a parent’s love or witnessed real love and commitment.

They’d all been stunted. While they’d reached for the stars i  
careers, none of them had ever found the kind of loving relationshi  
to paysaw in abundance at this table. He wasn’t sure any of them would kno  
to do if the perfect partner came along.

He looked at this impressive Maverick bunch, with the recent addi  
Gideon Jones and Cal Danniger to the fold. Each had found a lo  
surpassed anything Dane had ever imagined. When a Maverick looke  
he bestlady, it was as if love enveloped her. It shone out of their eyes. It s  
in hertheir features. They might be ruthless men in business, but with the  
they brought into their lives, they were compassionate, caring, lovin  
ing. He\_loyal.

k mind, It could only be due to Bob and Susan Spencer’s upbringing. It  
love the couple had felt for the lost boys they’d brought into their  
for hisequal to that for their biological children, Daniel and Lyssa. They’c  
this family in a poor Chicago neighborhood when times must hav  
ig theirunfathomably tough. Yet they’d forged an extraordinary bond with th  
ad beenand raised extraordinary men and women.

ve their He didn’t see the Spencers ever leaving their boys behind, even if  
ions ofhad the money to travel. And now, they’d moved halfway across the  
inishedfrom Chicago to join the family on the West Coast. They were fixt  
w theytheir children’s lives. To their foster sons, they weren’t Susan and B

Mom and Dad.

Dane also had an unbreakable bond with his brothers and sisters. He could call on any of them night or day, and they would be there, just as he would be there for them. They weren't just siblings, they were best friends. But there was so much more out there for all of them. The Mavericks. And Dane wanted it with every fiber of his being. He wanted it for himself and for them.

And for Cammie too.

Thank God for Cammie. She was as much a best friend as anyone in the family. He could talk over any idea with her, tell her anything. She could understand him. He knew how much he'd missed calling her at any hour since she'd been in the Alps. Neither the nightly video chats nor the weekly visits he'd had with her check on Lochlan were enough. She had to do this for her uncle, and he'd never had to be supportive. But working without her by his side, it seemed like he'd lost not only his right hand, but the whole arm. And sometimes it felt like a phantom limb.

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

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

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

The new platform was already taking over the web. Clay totally knew he'd been in the market.

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

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

Matt was nodding, and Dane could see the interest flashing in his eyes. He “We’ve talked a bit,” he said. “But we really need to put our heads together as he Dane went on, jutting his chin at Gideon. “Your foundation, Lean ends. is all about veterans, many of whom are fresh out of the forces.” He cks had at his sister, who sat on Cammie’s other side. “And Ava is our expert for all of retirement facilities. You help them when they’re younger. She can support when they get older.”

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

Dane made to stand. Full agreement sparked in Ava’s eyes. “We’ve got a lot to talk about.” Dane Will took over again. “Daniel’s Top Notch DIY conglomerate has helped us in everything we do. As well as The Collins Group, with Evan being the attached finance guru.”

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

Evan popped up with, “And Gabby can feed us.” Echoing As the Mavericks clapped, Dane turned to catch Cammie’s eye. Within a moment, they were thinking the same thing. *Don’t let Fernsby hear that.* Media Will waved a hand between the two of them. “I see lots of connections between you and me, Dane. With Franconi Imports, we can add products we’ve got foodstuffs your guests at DH International Resorts have never even dreamed of.”

As he lifted his hand in the air, Dane stood to high-five him. Oh yeah, the Mavericks and the Harringtons together would be a space act—topowerhouse.

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

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

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

is eyes. “Sounds good,” Dane said. “I see this growing organically. We need to shove ideas down each other’s throats. We’ll work on things on Us, mutually beneficial.”

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

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

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

“It.” The sparkle in her eye heated him as she leaned close, a subtle placescent that was uniquely her own drifting over him. “I’m going to tell you now,” she murmured.

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

unique She shook her head. “You stay here. Talk more. Then call me tomorrow.”

We’ll discuss it all.” Her smile wrapped around him. “But I already know this is going to be the most astounding alliance ever.”

without a

was over

facts and

reameed

and be a

ing. He

ite with

ership.”

suggest

discuss

m.” He

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter Four

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

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

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

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

It still felt odd wandering around the huge house without Cammie. Or sitting at his office desk without being able to look up and see her sitting away on her computer, surrounded by her desk and credenza and the fog that was working on.

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

Rolling his eyes, he laughed even though she couldn't see him. He'd called him Lord this and Lord that since he'd bought the English



house a few years ago. Bradford Park happened to come with a title he never used. Cammie never used the proper honorific, Lord Bradford made up funny names instead. He loved that she always ribbed him about it.

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

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

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

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

She denied the evidence on her face and in her tired eyes. "No. But Lochlan got restless, thrashing about in the bed. It took a bit to calm him down after I got back."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. You know how he gets." She shrugged as if to say that the steadfast loyalty and compassion were nothing more than what anyone could feel or act on.

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

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

le he'd Now, with Lochlan unable to recognize her, even unable to wa  
rd, but sleeping most of the time, Cammie was on the fence, hating to see hin  
out it. but powerless to let him go. It was obvious Lochlan wouldn't las  
ie. Shelonger. And Dane needed to be there for her when it happened.

bedside He hadn't told her what a mess his work life had become since she  
eautiful gone or how subpar her temporary replacements had been. Addi  
was a burden to her shoulders might have crushed her. And yet, without his  
er eyes a word, a few weeks after she'd left, Cammie had contacted her netw  
ie drive personal assistants, and the next candidates had been far more tolerat  
none of them was Cammie. None of them knew him the way s  
anticipating what he wanted even before he said it.

camera, She sighed. "He's been comatose off and on for the last few days,  
etie." If responding."

l. "I've Dane detected the tremble in her voice. She'd told him none of thi  
they were together today. Then again, they hadn't been alone.

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

lm him He wished he could be there to at least hold her. "I'm sure Ava w  
starve someone."

She shook her head, her hair falling across her cheek. "It's not Av  
s if he understand where the doctor is coming from. It's like I'm prolong  
e would agony."

He reached out, as if he could touch her face. "Of course you  
she had You're doing everything possible for him. Don't get down on y  
t. Their You've taken care of him for years."

as look "I know." She sighed, but he was afraid she didn't believe him.  
never thank you and Ava enough for bringing him here."

y Area, "I've told you a million times, you don't have to thank me." He'd  
is oftento know Lochlan, too, after Cammie came to work for him, and he war  
as often best for the old man.

tember, When Cammie realized she could no longer care for Lochlan on h  
Ava had opened up space in her five-star San Juan Bautista facil

lk, and closest one to Dane's Pebble Beach estate. Cammie had balked, knowing she could never pay for it on her own, but he'd convinced her that not taking the offer would reduce Lochlan's quality of life. Maybe that was dirty but he'd needed her to give Lochlan the best, knowing full well she'd be there for the rest of her life if she didn't.

Knowing that Cammie had him deduct a portion of her salary every month, even though she said Dane didn't want the money and Ava had a fund to subsidize the work of those in need. He'd never met a more admirable, caring person in his life. But life. Except perhaps Susan and Bob Spencer.

He did, "Ava's people took such good care of him today," Cammie told him.

"I'm so grateful for that. I talked to her, but will you tell her that for me?" he asked, hardly knowing what he was saying. "Of course I will." Ava admired Cammie's loyalty as much as he did.

"It's been such a struggle for Uncle Lochlan. First, he had to take care of his mother while she was in the hospital after my parents died. And then the Alzheimer's started so early."

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

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

But she'd been lucky to have Clyde Westerbourne, Lochlan's long-time friend, who became like a father figure to her too. It was Clyde who had helped her through the worst of her life.

Cammie told Dane. When Westerbourne decided to retire to his California island estate, Cammie couldn't accompany him, not with her uncle going on his own.

Lochlan reminded Dane of his grandfather, who'd returned from the Second World War a changed man. Dane now knew he suffered from dementia but no one had understood that back then, and it was never treated. He'd gotten stories of the fun-loving, laughing guy his grandfather had been before the war, but Dane had known only the quiet, withdrawn man he became as the war had changed his grandfather. Alzheimer's had changed Lochlan. On her own, Dane understood how difficult it was for Cammie, but he was also glad she'd had all the good years with Lochlan before the disease took him away.

ing she She tapped her temple, obviously having had enough of that convey-  
ing his “Okay, let’s get down to the Mavericks.”

politics, “We can let business take a backseat right now.” Even though  
regret it dying to hear her impressions.

Cammie snorted. “Are you kidding me? I feel like an emotiona-  
though when I’m not working.” Which was why Dane gave her projects to v  
care of even though she was supposed to be on leave. Nothing huge, just en  
s entire keep her mind occupied, like setting up the gallery and museum tour

Correa painting. “So tell me how the temps are doing,” she said.  
ld him. “They’re fine,” he said, working his mouth into a half smile. “But  
e?” three of them to do what you do.”

lid. She smiled. How he’d missed her dazzling smile in the month  
care of been gone. “It’s only because we’ve worked together so long. A  
watched your business grow.”

rother, She’d skillfully sidestepped his compliment, but that smile told hi  
to care much she liked knowing she was irreplaceable. He’d never ha  
Cammie compunction about telling her—in fact, he enjoyed it. She kept his  
when he track. Just as Fernsby kept his houses in order.

of them “Okay, the Mavericks.” He hadn’t wanted to sign any contracts v  
of why Mavericks until Cammie had met them. But she’d given him that no  
wink right there in the café. “What do you really think about this me  
n he’d our two families?”

He included Cammie in that comment. She wasn’t just his assist  
ng time wanted her opinion as if they were peers, as if he weren’t a billionaire  
’d sent to the hired help. What she thought was just as important as his s  
ribbean opinions. The fact was, Cammie had been personally responsible for n  
growing his big deals. He could take her to an exhibition or an art show, an  
find a way to turn something they saw into an idea for a profitable b  
om the venture or a new feature at a resort. The Mavericks had been one of  
PTSD, deals he’d found on his own, but only because of their close associati  
l. He’d Gideon Jones and his foundation.

before Of course, Cammie had brought Gideon’s painting to his attention.  
ne. Just He had to tell her, “Come on, my little idea genie, give me all you  
ochlan. of wisdom.”

d she’d She blushed. “Would you stop with that?” she grouched at him.

He snapped his fingers. “It’s true. Great ideas come like you’ve

sation,them right out of your magic lamp.” He gave her a quirky grin, i  
rubbing a genie’s lamp. “Like buying Gideon Jones’s painting.”

he was As her blush deepened, she made a joke, taking the attention off

“What would the Mavericks say if they knew you were Lord M  
al messMuck?” She couldn’t truly accept compliments.

work on “It’s Lord Bigwig to you.”

ough to She laughed then, the hot color fading from her cheeks. Then  
for thedown to business again. “I’m rubber-stamping what you already kno

this is going to be amazing. The Mavericks will bring new blood to  
it takesfamily ventures, yours included. Will Franconi said it right—w  
Harringtons do complements what the Mavericks do.”

s she’d “You might be rubber-stamping, but I wasn’t about to act on it  
nd I’ve talked to you.”

She huffed out another laugh. “But you did act on it before w  
im howtalked. You brought up a merger right there at the café.”

ad any He shrugged. “You pinched me under the table, giving me permiss

life on She gaped at him. “I didn’t pinch you until after you’d already  
about a merger.”

with the He grinned. “But I could read your mind, and I knew you thought i  
d and a great idea.”

merger of She shook her head at him, as though he were a recalcitrant chil  
whom she didn’t believe a single word. “Whatever. I liked them. And

ant. Heall the Maverick ladies. They might’ve married billionaires, but they’r  
talkingdown to earth. And kind. They didn’t talk to me like I was ju  
iblings’ assistant.”

nany of He jumped in quickly. “That’s because you’re not *just* my as  
d she’dYou’re my girl Friday and my idea genie. I’d be nothing without you.”

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

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

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

r words

\* \* \*

The house was so damn quiet after they said goodbye, even with Rex  
: pulled softly beside him on the couch. Dane wished with everything in h

miming Cammie would come home. Because this *was* her home. The momer decided to sell Lochlan's house where they'd both lived, Dane had set herself with her own suite of rooms in the Pebble Beach house. He'd wanted t uckety-the transition as easy as possible for her. Searching for an apartment the other things on her plate at the time would have been a nightmare was the added bonus that it saved her rent and utilities, especially w she got traveled so much with Dane anyway.

ow, but So he'd cleared out the office space on the San Francisco Penins all themoved his headquarters to his Pebble Beach estate. He'd had the offic hat theonly because it was close to Lochlan's home and therefore cut d Cammie's commute. But Pebble Beach was closer once Lochlan w until Ithe San Juan Bautista memory care facility. And Dane made sure Cammie nor her uncle wanted for anything.

re even He admitted only to himself that Cammie living just down the h been seven years of torture. The need to knock on her door son ion." overwhelmed him, and he'd march to her suite with some crappy idea r talkedhe could talk to her, look at her, smile at her. The worst was resisting l when the darkness was so complete he could barely see his hand in i it was a his face. When he'd lain awake for hours thinking of her.

But of course he couldn't go to her then. He wouldn't. There coul ld fromexcuse for an after-midnight excursion. But damn, it was hard.

I liked Cammie wasn't just his assistant. She was his best friend, as impo e all sohim as any of his brothers or sisters. Cammie had become part of the st yourunit.

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

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

What if there'd been no impediments to a relationship? snoring But there'd been so many impediments. He'd seen his own im that mirrored in her eyes the following morning when she'd walked i

at she'd office. The morning after one of the most incredible nights of his life. It was her up and only night with her.

to make They'd both had to agree their one-night fling could never happen with all He'd badly needed an assistant who would take his work life in hand. There keep him on track. Not one of the umpteen secretaries he'd been through when she could handle it. Fernsby had been ready to desert him if he did anything

something. Then Clyde Westbourne had called, swearing that Camilla and Chandler could do the job. Dane had never met her, had no idea where she looked like. He'd actually imagined someone matronly, in her forties. Because how could a person Cammie's age be such a paragon? What he'd cared about was that she'd totally organized Clyde's life. If Clyde had either have taken her with him on his permanent move to the Caribbean, he would

have. But Cammie badly needed a good job in the Bay Area, where she would have to take care of her uncle, who'd been going quietly downhill.

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

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

everything Over the subsequent years, his belief in the rules had grown only more solid. She turned his chaos into order. He relied on her good sense. She was the one who made sure he added heart to his ventures. They could have met the screwing up their perfect work relationship. Romance was out of the question.

it'd been Besides, if he ever made a move, ever pushed for anything more than a fling, he would totally lose her. And he could not bear to ever lose her.

.. what She'd dated. Of course she had. She was gorgeous, funny, smart, and everyone flocked to her. But he was so damned glad none of those relationships had come to anything. They were all jerks who weren't good enough for her. Shock anyway. And that one creep who'd let her down so badly? Dane could have punched him into his pummeled the guy into the ground. Truth be told, he could even

His onepummeled his brother Troy for asking her out. For God’s sake, she’d b assistant for four years at that point. What had Troy been thinking again. Dane didn’t like to remember how he’d completely lost his cool th and andaccusing his brother of harassing his employees, and a lot worse. Esp throughwhen he learned Cammie had turned Troy down.

In’t do Of course, he’d only ever wanted to protect her from jerks who’c Cammieher over. Sure, he had thoughts. But he never acted on them. He didr hat shewant to. He liked his life just the way it was. He absolutely wasn’t rties orthose jerks.

on? All But sometimes at night—not every night, mind you, maybe once a e couldor once a week—with the darkness surrounding him and her room jus e wouldthe hall, he remembered the softness of her hair, the scent of her sl e couldsweetness of her lips.

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

e at the

ld have

known

too? Or

hers.

oth had

d made

g away

erience

y more

he was

n’t risk

of the

ore, he

nd men

ips had

for her

ld have

n have

\* \* \*

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

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

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

She’d felt guilty leaving him today. But God, it had been good to To see Dane. And how she’d missed Rex. When he’d bounded to her the soccer field and barreled into her lap, all she’d wanted to do was h close and drink in his doggy scent while he slathered kisses all over h She missed her work. She missed her suite of rooms in Pebble Bea



een hismissed Fernsby's cooking. She even missed Dane knocking on her  
;? Still,the late evening to share an idea that had suddenly come to him. The  
at day,was something like homesickness. For Rex, for Fernsby.  
pecially And maybe most of all for Dane.

l screw  
i't even  
one of

month,  
st down  
kin, the

cked in

as only  
, taking  
the last  
e would  
nd once  
tell him  
But he  
n to see  
at he'd

ne was,

get out.  
t across  
ug him  
er face.  
ch. She

missed Fernsby's cooking. She even missed Dane knocking on her door in the late evening to share an idea that had suddenly come to him. The feeling was something like homesickness. For Rex, for Fernsby.

And maybe most of all for Dane.

## Chapter Five

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

Especially with Cammie gone and Rex pining for her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dane looked at the outraged man and chuckled. "But you're making

beef and Yorkshire pudding. It's driving Rex crazy."

Fernsby eyed him balefully. "Lord Rexford," he intoned, "was s before you disturbed him. He wasn't even aware there was roa nearby."

Susan gave Dane a sympathetic smile.

ok over Fernsby bent to open the oven door, the scent of Yorkshire pudd der thermoast potatoes wafting into the air. "The Yorkshires are done," he d Fernsbytaking them out and setting them on the stovetop. The roast beef restec counter under a foil tent. "They're perfect." Fernsby allowed himself nod of congratulations. He'd made the Yorkshires in a muffin pan, and thethem into popovers, with a hole in the center for his rich, homema awn upgravy.

g a few Dane's mouth was already watering.

"They look absolutely amazing." Susan gave Fernsby the pr: Portolarequired.

you're Then the man looked to Gabby, his mouth stretched into sor ways beresembling an evil grin. "I know you want a Yorkshire. With gravy. ideon'sit. And butter on your roast potatoes."

Gabby screwed up her face, lips pinched, eyes squinty. "That is id Avagross." She turned to Susan. "If you let him in your kitchen, he'll ad iversawto everything, even if it doesn't need it. He's a butter fiend."

joined Face devoid of any expression now, nose imperiously in the air, I ht. said, "Butter and eggs are the staff of life."

eplaced But Dane knew Fernsby had prepared a special meal for Gabby—a tastymeatloaf, a baked potato, vegan sour cream to top. He just liked to rub the wrong way. The feeling was mutual.

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

woman His tone immutable, Fernsby said, "Dear lady, you go be wit g us toguests. Let me handle this. It's what I do." He put a hand to his ches Fernsby!"

ree new Then he handed her a glass of champagne and shooed her away : de." Grinch patting Cindy-Lou Who on the head after she'd just walked in : "Sir," trying to stuff the Christmas tree up the chimney.

y times Susan Spencer hooked her arm through Dane's and led him out living room, where all the Mavericks were gathered. She whispered 1g roastreally amazing."

“And he’s bossy.”

leeping They shared a smile.

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

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

He had to shake himself back to reality.

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

nething Dane had spoken with Harper earlier and learned she was a real pro at Lots of handling placements for high-powered business executives. What interested him most was her love for her brother, Jeremy. The young man had been just a baby when he was a child. Now, at the age of twenty, he still had the softness of the boy he’d been. And he was delightful. Harper had become his go-to when their parents were killed in a plane crash, and he admired how she’d taken responsibility. Much the same as Cammie took responsibility for Lochlan.

Lochlan. He hadn’t missed that Harper had been just about his age when his parents died, and he’d taken on the role of head of the family.

Gabby Troy was engrossed in a conversation with Matt and Ari. Tremor had just stepped away from Rosie to snag an appetizer off Fernsby’s table. Dane took his spot. “I have to congratulate you again on your return to your showing back in January.” All the Harringtons had complimented her work. “It’s a great show after the soccer game, but Gideon had given Dane more than he could hear you sold almost every painting. Your art is truly amazing.”

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

t to the Rosie had been an accountant, and Gideon met her through his sister. “He’s Rosie and Ari had been best friends since they were girls in foster care.”

All the Mavericks had come from troubled backgrounds. Gideon

the Army right out of high school to take care of his mother and little Ari. And yet, for all his loyalty, after their mother's death, Ari had been in foster care, two of them when she disappeared into the foster care system. He'd spent years looking for her. It was an amazing story. Now he'd joined the family, along with Rosie and her son. And Jorge was treated like a treasured grandson, the mother's favorite, as Noah, Matt's boy.

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

Dane moved through the crowd—and it was a crowd. He'd spoken to her earlier, the kindergarten teacher. She'd met Matt when she'd met Noah's nanny. Dane figured it had been love at first sight for both father and son.

He'd also talked with Paige Collins, who was a family therapist. From the family things she'd said, Dane had a feeling she'd helped bring Evan back to her. He did, with his long-lost mother and the twins. Obviously, twins ran in the family. Tasha, Daniel's girlfriend, was a web designer, executing brilliant designs for Daniel's DIY empire, creating an amazing 3D application for Ikea that had been hit customers to design their own kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms, and living spaces, both indoors and out.

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

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

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

Dane managed to sit between Charlie and her mother.

"This all looks so scrumptious," Francine enthused before ducking her head to tuck in.

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

Charlie and Sebastian met when he'd commissioned her to create

e sister.stunning sculpture for his new San Francisco headquarters. Next  
lost to Sebastian beamed with pride, just as Gideon had over Rosie's art.  
s trying Francine Ballard covered his hand with hers, her papery skin  
ng with cold. "You should see her dinosaurs. Charlie makes awesome dinosaur  
ie same even has a T. Rex. And I know your little dog is named after that fe  
beast. Maybe you need a big Tyrannosaurus Rex in your yard."

s more Charlie laughed. "That might be a bit much for a little dog."

Dane shook his head. "But that's why he's named T. Rex. He ne  
en with big-dog name since he's a big dog in his own mind. He'd love a big T.  
became "He'd probably pee on its tail," Charlie said, pretending indignatio  
her and Francine giggled and flapped her hand. "They're all rusty anywa  
won't matter."

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

nily. God, how he wished she were here. The need was a sudden ache  
it ideas chest, a hole she'd left behind. But Lochlan needed her now more than  
Daniel's The meal was delicious, everyone complimenting Fernsby. He l  
l living with pride, though no one else but Dane probably noticed that shine  
silvery gaze. For dessert, he'd made his to-die-for mille-feuille.

gleaned Matt took a bite and moaned. "This is the most incredible dess  
hat was ever tasted."

out only Gabby took her seat after helping to serve dessert. "Maybe we cou  
k much without butter. What do you think, Fernsby?" She held up her vegan,  
free peanut butter brownie.

ion and Fernsby gaped. "No butter? Have you gone mad? One must use a  
butter as possible. How else do you get the pastry in your mille-fe  
ites. He puff?"

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

After Fernsby's luscious dessert—why did that word make Dane t  
Cammie, of her smooth skin and her luscious lips he'd tasted only  
licately night?—they moved once again to the enormous great room to ch  
coffee and after-dinner drinks.

n your Dane joined Susan and Bob Spencer by the grand fireplace. Since  
e of themid-February, Bob had lit the fire.

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

ate the "And it's growing all the time," Bob said with a big belly laugh, h

to her, floating over his daughters-in-law and their baby bumps.

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

“Tasha seems a little too interested.” Daniel eyed her with what he had been longing.

Susan patted his arm. “Don't worry. Your time will come.” A spark could have been a twinkle in Daniel's eye.

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

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

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

Susan and Bob were the glue that held this band of brothers—and sisters—together. They'd married young, had little money, and lived in an apartment in his barely big enough for them and their two children. Bob had been a baggage handler at O'Hare and Susan a waitress. Yet, when Daniel brought home his I've-friends, all of them in bad places in their young lives, Susan and Bob had taken them in. They'd given each Maverick exactly what he'd needed: love, support, discipline, and life lessons. And these Mavericks had even taken on the responsibility for their little sister, Lyssa, who was just a baby at the time, being ten years younger than Daniel.

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

Their answering refrain when he'd begged? *You always want to take it over from people, Dane.*

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

He flicked his gaze to his brothers and sisters as they worked their mouths, talking, laughing. Did they feel what he did—a craving to be part



family? He wondered, too, about Cammie. After losing her parents so regnant after having only her uncle, even as much as she loved Lochlan and w quealed on the verge of losing him, did she crave something bigger?

As if thoughts of Cammie had conjured her up, his phone rang, he t could the screen.

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

Her voice quivered. "It's Uncle Lochlan. His aides are here." She ers and back what could only have been a sob. "He's barely breathing, and hi is almost nonexistent. They told me that if they turn him, he'll probabl of us." "I'm leaving now." He hated that she was so far away, that he coul n ever, there with a snap of his fingers. It would take him over an hour.

brothers Her voice whispered across the airwaves. "Thank you."

growing "You hang in there. Wait for me."

is well. "I will. I better go now."

more— She was near tears, and her pain tore at him like a fist closing aro artment heart. He had to go. Now. He couldn't waste a single minute getting to

raggage Approaching the Spencers again, he said, "It's Cammie. Her unc ome his sorry, I have to leave." On the way out, he squeezed Ava's arm ob had Lochlan. I have to be with her in his final moments."

—love, She pressed her lips together, her face solemn. "You go. Give aken on love. Call me later."

ie time, Dane knew she'd check with her own people and was, in fact, reaching for her phone.

o. Dane In the kitchen, he found Fernsby with his hands in soapy dishwa good in a apron around his waist. "It's Cammie's uncle," Dane said.

parents Fernsby's eyes turned a misty gray. "You must immediately ey'd all Camille. Don't worry about Lord Rexford and me. Gabby can drop u

Pebble Beach on her way home to Carmel. It'll be a perfect opportu o much me to give her a few pointers about the health benefits of butter ar when she's driving and can't hit me," he said with a straight face.

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

be they Then he headed out, thinking only of how quickly he could Cammie.

e room,  
of this

\* \* \*

young, Daniel stood with his parents by the fireplace.

as now “What a caring family you’ve connected with,” his mother said, th  
in her eye when she was wondering exactly how she could help som  
r ID on need.

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

is pulse “You know what I think, honey?” His mother’s gaze roamed o  
y go.” remaining Harringtons in the room.

ldn’t be This time, Daniel chuckled softly. “I already know, Mom. You’re  
wanting to take in strays. Now you want to take in the Harringtons.”

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

Tonight allowed him to see the Harringtons in a new light. They n  
und his leaders in their fields, but they were also orphans, without the l  
her. inspiring parents. While they seemed exceptionally close, they had  
le. I’m Susan and Bob Spencer in their lives. Daniel and his brothers had a  
n. “It’s what they had only because of his parents. They’d taught him how t

He wondered if he’d have recognized his love for Tasha witho  
her our inspiration in his life.

Maybe the Mavericks could bring more to the table than just som  
already business ventures. Maybe they could bring his parents and a share of t  
he’d known all his life. Lord knew his parents had so much of it to giv  
ater, an

\* \* \*

go to  
s off in  
nity for  
rd eggs  
The bed stood in the center of the room, paintings of flowers and lar  
scenes on the blue walls. Comfortable chairs sat on either side, and  
bureau held Lochlan’s things, though he no longer needed them and  
for months. Cammie stood by the quiet form, holding his hand. S  
exactly where she’d always been, at her uncle’s side.

get to That’s who Cammie Chandler was—steadfast, caring, and loyal.  
The pain cracking her features nearly broke Dane.

Though he hadn’t made a sound, she turned, the tracks of dried t  
her cheeks. The moment she saw him, they flowed once more, and in t

moment, she was in his arms.

at look He held her tight as she shook against him.

one in She put on such a strong front. She was strong. That's how the Ma had seen her at the soccer game. But inside there was a fragility she had Danethe world, growing right along with her uncle's disease. Dane knew he barelythis was for her. It was why he'd rushed to her tonight, why he visited ere stillweek, why he video-chatted with her every night, trying to take her n the agony of watching her uncle deteriorate.

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

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

He cupped her face in his palms. "You're never alone. I'm always night be Then together, hand in hand, they turned to her uncle's bed.

love of

n't had

chieved

to love.

at their

ie good

he love

e.

andscape

a longsoon.

hadn't

he waste

belongs

As he

ears onit

he nextas

he needs

As he

"Now

it is to

get them

to see

that

romance

is

inevitable.

\* \* \*

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

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

He shifted Lord Rexford in his arms. Camille would be coming a longsoon. It had been a terrible time for her, and Fernsby would treat her as if she hadn't. Tomorrow, when she was rested, he would call her with his condolences. The words of comfort he could offer. "But it's best she comes back when she belongs very soon," he told the dachshund.

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

Lord Rexford. It's going to take all our skills."

vericks  
id from  
ow hard  
d every  
ind off

are the  
n. And

id gave

here."

house,  
ge, and  
at too,"

ed with  
nt him  
ong she  
a long

g home  
gently.  
ces and  
ere she

nmand.  
ow hard  
is much  
gether,

Lord Rexford. It's going to take all our skills."

## Chapter Six

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was only with Dane's comfort that she'd made it through the months since Uncle Lochlan's passing. And every day since, she'd worked diligently on the estate, wanting the paperwork finished before she returned to the Beach. Her uncle didn't have much, since she'd sold the house

everything in it to pay for his care. But there were still government a to be informed and details to take care of.

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

She had Dane. Needing a break, she typed a quick text: *Dear Lord Barnacle, how do you like the work I had n't seen Charlie Ballard's work?*

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

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

She shrugged, suppressing a smile. "You can't help it." Then she went on to make her point. "I'm just wondering how we can incorporate Charlie's artwork in some way at the resorts." Then she thought of Ari's background, his childhood development. "And what do you think about Ari Tremont checking

the daycare facilities at the resorts and making sure they're up to snuff?"

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

She hoped his words hadn't made her blush. Dane always filled her with ideas. Someday, she hoped to run a project herself. She hadn't been able to

about it while she had her uncle to care for. And she had to be completely honest with herself—being one hundred percent in control of a project was

Oh my little daunting. If anything went wrong, the burden would be on her shoulders. But one of these days, she'd do it. She just needed to get Dane under her after Uncle Lochlan's ordeal.

What she really needed was to get back to Dane.

\* \* \*

Practically the moment Cammie brought up Charlie Ballard's work, Dane called up a meeting with her. And now, only two days later, he sat on a car

in Charlie's studio on Sebastian Montgomery's sprawling estate in Hayward Hills.

Workbenches filled every wall, along with tool chests and stacks of supplies, barrels of nuts and bolts, and great wooden crates holding

ceramic, stone, and piping—anything Charlie could use to create art. Despite the vast quantity of materials, the studio was the picture of order.

gencies orderliness, everything at hand or easily located.

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

Give you She'd removed her goggles and turned off the blowtorch when he spoke, but even as they talked, she assembled bits and pieces of what would be Charlie's art.

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

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

ing out Charlie eyed the metal surrounding her. "Eventually, it'll be a cow sculpture, right?"

Dane snorted. "Of course he's a Texas oilman. And his family probably ranchers way back when."

o think Charlie's eyes twinkled. "How did you know?"

pletely He shrugged. "Only an oilman from a ranching family would want a size sculpture of a cowboy and a steer."

on her With that same twinkle, Charlie changed the subject. "Have you ever seen a Tyrannosaurus Rex for your yard?"

His thinking cap had definitely been on. "Depends on how big."

"I haven't seen your estate, but from the little I know of you, I don't think you want something as large as the dinosaurs at the Flintstone Hillsborough."

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

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



Dane couldn't stifle the half laugh, half snort. "What the hell are th  
i before She held one of the metal sculptures on the palm of her hand. "It's  
e top of Misfit."

of that He eyed her. "What the heck is a Zanti Misfit?"

arrived, Charlie rolled her eyes. "Haven't you ever watched *The Outer Lim*  
become "Can't say I have."

"It was an old episode with Bruce Dern. Zanti Misfits are aliens w  
in the desert with nefarious intentions."

l closer He looked at the creature, shaped like an ant with a huge, garish  
't tell." metal teeth and bulging painted eyes. "That might be a bit too terrify  
ie. He Rex."

But he Charlie snorted. "If Bruce Dern could vanquish the Zanti Misfits, y  
gh, she be darn sure T. Rex will too."

He laughed outright. "Charlie Ballard, you are one very odd woma  
/boy on She smiled, accepting the compliment. "Thank you very much. I've  
wanted to be normal."

y were Then he added, "I need at least five."

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

t a life- They still might terrify Rex, but Cammie would love them. "I  
That's very generous."

u come "I just make them when I need to think," Charlie explained. "I  
something I can practically create in my sleep frees up my n  
brainstorm other ideas."

't think "That's an interesting observation. I feel the same way about golf.  
ouse in my mind to think." Especially when he played with Cammie. Then, h  
could wander back to their first golf game, to that one night, her  
on the sensitive, her touch on him so exquisite, her taste so sweet.

'ound it Damn, he needed to slap himself.

oulating He dragged his thoughts back to why he'd asked for this visit. "C  
ig." He and I are excited to talk to you about a new project we have in mir  
he can opened his computer on Charlie's workbench. "It was her idea, so I'd  
include her, if that's okay with you."

g." She "Of course."

perfect Dane brought up the video app. Cammie answered, her face ligh  
the screen as if she'd been waiting all day for his call. Dane suscep

ey?” was glad to step away from her uncle’s estate management.

a Zanti “Hey, Charlie.” Cammie waved.

Charlie fluttered her fingers. “I’m so sorry about your uncle.”

Cammie blinked, as if she needed to hide the tears that suddenly  
its?” her eyes. “Thanks so much. I miss him, but I’m glad he’s not su  
anymore.”

ho land “I understand completely.” Charlie would understand more than  
since she took care of her mother, Francine. She’d settled her in a Lo  
grin offacility, which happened to be one of Ava’s. The small bedroom com  
ing forsat at the base of the Santa Cruz Mountains, and Dane knew Charlie w  
there regularly. Of course, Francine could have lived with Char  
you canSebastian, but she claimed she wanted her independence.

Dane started the conversation. “Since it’s your idea, Cammie, wh  
n.” you tell Charlie what you had in mind?”

e never Cammie huffed a breath. “It wasn’t really my idea. I just p  
question, and you ran with it.”

They’d brainstormed, tossing ideas back and forth, but using C  
. “Takework at the resorts had come from Cammie. She didn’t even realize t  
truly was his idea genie, no matter how many times he told her. Ca  
Thanks.touch was pure magic.

She jumped into the proposal. “We’d love to have you create a sc  
Makingfor the lobby of each of Dane’s resorts. Some of them have courtyard  
ind toare marble entryways, some are open air. But we thought greeting his  
with an accent signifying the location of each particular resort wo  
It freesamazing. A bald eagle for the Montana resort. A Joshua tree for the  
is mindBut really, it should be whatever you feel is appropriate.”

skin so Charlie’s mouth dropped open.

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

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

“Wow.” Charlie put her hand to her mouth. “That all sounds incredi  
ting up “The other thing we’d like you to consider,” Cammie went on, “is  
ted shetogether some art classes. Since metalwork is your specialty, we’d c

workshop in some of our resorts where you could teach. The building can be whatever size you need, with room for your materials, as well as all types of art like painting, pottery, and so much more.”

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

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

as over Charlie’s face flushed, and with a beaming smile, she jumped on the stool, waving her arms. “I’d love to fly out to your resorts once a month. I can even take people shopping for junk. That’s what I use for raw materials. I don’t love junkyards and flea markets. Then we can bring back the treasures we find and make art.”

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

Charlie’s Dane held out his hands. “Don’t thank me. This was all Cammie.”  
hat she Charlie hugged the computer screen. “Thank you, thank you. Cammie’s absolutely love doing this.”

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

ould be When Cammie was happy, he was happy.  
desert.

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

“As long as it doesn’t interfere with your next show,” Dane assured  
: once a “Would you mind if I used some of those paintings?”

‘ people Dane nodded heartily. “The originals would all be yours. We’ll j  
prints. That’s what will make this thing unique. They’ll be in your show  
off herwe’ll promote them as being an eventual feature in the resorts. Try  
month. I marketing.”

erials. I “Wow,” Rosie exclaimed. “I’m totally in. Thanks so much for  
ires we opportunity.”

When Rosie left the meeting ten minutes later, after talking to  
nazing. Dane smiled at Cammie. “I’d say that went really well.”

The brainstorming had brought back her natural glow. Her smile  
more readily. Her enthusiasm shone in her eyes. “Exceptionally well  
I willsaid, clasping her hands as if she couldn’t contain her excitement. “I’ll  
a meeting with Ari. We can tackle her about reviewing the resorts’ ch  
ths. His facilities.”

ged the Dane loved that Cammie was completely on board with the p  
Cammie doing most of the talking without even realizing how much owners  
was taking.

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

Rosie.

’s had.

as to be  
nals, so

ld be a

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

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

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

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

Dane nodded heartily. “The originals would all be yours. We’ll just use prints. That’s what will make this thing unique. They’ll be in your show, and we’ll promote them as being an eventual feature in the resorts. Two-way marketing.”

“Wow,” Rosie exclaimed. “I’m totally in. Thanks so much for this opportunity.”

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

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

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

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

## Chapter Seven

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

his estate.”

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

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

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

“I'm so sorry.” Dane's voice held so much compassion she wanted to cry. “I know how hard this must be for you. That's why I want you to stay here. I'll make sure you have as much time as you need.”

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

Home. With the suite she'd decorated herself, Pebble Beach feeling like home.

Being with Dane felt like coming home.

Was it really all that bad if sometimes she lay awake in her king-size bed, feeling as if she was just a few steps down the hall and let thoughts of him take her to him? During the day, she was efficient, dedicated, knowing exactly what he needed. But the nights were hers, and sometimes she wanted to close her eyes and remember his hard muscles beneath her fingertips, his silky chest hair against her cheek, his lips on hers, his teasing her. It should have been torture, but she relished those moments, those private memories.

But she couldn't afford them now. “I'm coming home in just a few weeks. The first week of March.” It wouldn't be long. “Right now, I have to think about my time to think.”

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

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

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

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

Keep my

\* \* \*

and ten

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

It's just  
I'd a fee

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

needed to  
to take

If he were a different man, he might have hugged her. But he was not a hugging type.

s work.

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

felt like

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

ize bed

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

e over?

needed

His employer made a move for the bag, but Fernsby got there first. "Escort Camille to her suite of rooms." He grazed a look over Dane's shoulder. "He needs time to adjust." Then he turned to Camille. "Shall I unpack for you?"

simply

ath her

tongue

private

Dog in her arms, Camille laughed that most delightful laugh of triumph. A laugh that should have brought a man to his knees in worship. However, Fernsby wasn't on his knees. When would the man learn?

w days.

o much

"No, Fernsby," she said sweetly, for Camille was always sweet. "I'll unpack for myself. Honestly."

selfish

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

Despite

Only then did he permit himself a smirk. His thoughts pleased him. "Get cracking, you two."

all this

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

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



ter than

\* \* \*

In the late afternoon, when Cammie finished unpacking, she took a r to sit on the bed and drink in the sense of home she'd longed for over t five months. How she'd missed this place. She'd chosen everything en deep room—the flowered border around the ceiling, the seafoam walls, ie entry them a darker teal that complemented the rest. The seafoam bedspre iling at splashes of teal. A lounge chair in the corner where she coul comfortably or use her laptop to do some paperwork. The only thi ed only hadn't chosen was the stuffed teal-colored Tyrannosaurus Rex Da brought her the day they'd decided on the little dachshund's name sn't the puppy, he'd almost fit in her hand.

She treasured that stuffed dinosaur. Sometimes, lying in her bed, k “Thank Dane was just down the hall, yet as unreachable as if he were on th solutely side of the world, she hugged the dinosaur to her as if it were Dane hin : you.” Of all her suites in all of Dane's homes, this was her favorite. Whe s a bit, had it remodeled for her, he'd had the contractors add a kitchenette, small refrigerator, a two-burner stove, and a microwave. He's to tell purchased an electric kettle for her herbal tea. She could make anyth wanted.

. “I will But of course, she'd always gone downstairs for dinner, and nov e. “She her belongings put away, she returned to the house's main level.

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

The estate stood on a bluff overlooking the ocean. The long, v . “Let's drive curled through the golf course belonging to one of Dane's

Although his property was walled off, an errant golf ball occasionally : would the walls. The sprawling house had everything—a master chef's kitc Fernsby, with his suite of rooms next to it. The formal dining room twenty-four, because Fernsby thought it was a good round number threw amazing dinners, though often he held parties in the San Franci

because it was more central to many of his business associates. They used the formal living room except for get-togethers, but they often played chess or gin rummy in his study or lounged in the home theater to watch the past classic movie or something new on a streaming service or to binge watch a show. Dane used the workout room daily. She did, too, but always at different times.

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

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

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

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

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

She suddenly felt nostalgic for all his homes, places she hadn't visited in more than five months. Just as Lyssa Spencer had said, the San Francisco townhouse was exquisite. The English manor house captivated her with its twenty acres of grounds. His Caribbean island was a sanctuary. But Pebble Beach won, hands down. This was where she felt most at home. This was where she could heal after the long months of caring for Lochlan. After the years of watching his decline and being able to do nothing about it. This was her refuge.

Here with Dane.

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

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

"What?" She'd never get tired of the view, and how she'd missed

rarely wanted her to see something special, but she couldn't pick out what it played all this splendor.

Dane pointed among the succulents and rocks. "Do you see them?" Cammie was so very aware of her hand still in Dane's warm, comfortable grip. And finally she saw... something. "What are they?"

"Charlie Ballard's Zanti Misfits."

"They look like weird bugs. With big bug eyes."

Dane laughed. "That's exactly what they are. Bugs. From an old hiking of *The Outer Limits*."

Cammie gasped. "Uncle Lochlan loved that show! We often watch reruns. Now I remember the Zantis." She craned her neck. "Charlie took them down pat."

"I was going to have her make a T. Rex, but she gave me the barkling instead. Rex loves barking at them."

She chuckled. "A big Tyrannosaurus Rex would have terrified him. Squeezing her hand, he said, "That's what I finally decided."

She looked at him, smiling. "I love them."

"Thought you would."

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

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

Dane rolled his eyes. "Fernsby is baking."

That said it all. And now she needed to work. "Let's talk and see what we are."

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

"I was able to finish most of Uncle Lochlan's estate issues. The only couple of minor things left, but it's pretty much done."

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

"Thank you for understanding." He was thinking about his parents and the difficult estate issues he'd had to deal with. Thank goodness

was in Lochlan's estate was so much less encumbered. If they had a different relationship, she'd have walked around the desk to hug Dane, giving him comfort, taking comfort for herself.

But they didn't have a different relationship.

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

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

"But I can't help worrying about you."

She felt almost militant. "I'm perfectly capable of coming back to work as your personal assistant."

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

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

"Cammie, you don't need to worry about paying anything back."

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

His head slightly bent, he waved a hand. "Fine. Good. I understand. There's no time limit. You don't need to make yourself crazy taking care of it."

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

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

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

The debt was another good reason she lived in his house; she rental expenses. And now everything she paid him could go toward t it easy, rather than ongoing care.

r a few With that off her chest, she could get to the good stuff she’ ion too, thinking about. No more dwelling on bad things. “Remember what w discussing about Harper?”

erstood “Sure.” He nodded, his fingers steepled as he leaned back in his ch i her. “I For a moment, she was struck by how terribly handsome he w dark hair, his aristocratic features, his sometimes soulful blue eyes tha read her mind. How she missed this, sitting with him, talking, ev as your looking at him. The sense of finally coming home stole her breath a again.

thing. I She had to force herself back to reality. In the end, they’d postpo me out video meetings with Tasha and Harper. Dane had been right to tell need to slow down with the work stuff. She’d needed to plow through the res estate issues so she could come home. And it had taken her only a fe grip on days.

en been Leaning forward, she crossed her knees and rested her forearms n still at thighs. “Harper’s been dealing with her brother’s special needs for sor ing she like thirteen years. She has great expertise.” Jeremy was a fine kid oing to seen that at the soccer game. But because of his accident, he was d from other boys. That fact provided challenges for Harper.

Dane’s gaze rested on her. “Isn’t that why we discussed ears so specialized activities at some of the resorts?”

ither of “Yes.” Her excitement grew to the point she felt jittery with it. Or that was just being alone with him after so many months. “But ins nd. But adding focused events to existing resorts, what if we created resorts d care of specifically for kids with special needs?”

She’d been thinking about it for days, the idea blossoming in he l to get and now everything burst out.

ist need “We could have classes and sports events and physical thera games. We can ask Harper, ‘If you could have had anything you earlier while you raised Jeremy, what would it be?’ There are things you and never even dream of. We could have activities for the parents too. I

the mightfamily activities, but things they can do on their own, like date  
Therapy for them as well. Because it must be hard. And we could  
had noresources to tap into each child’s unique abilities. Tasha could design  
the debtinteractive games. Charlie and Rosie could give art classes. We could  
shows featuring the kids’ work.”

d been Dane stared at her as if she were a mad scientist. Maybe she’d been  
ve wereso long, he’d forgotten what she looked like. Finally, head still coc  
said, “Have I ever told you how amazing you are?”

air. “I—” She stopped.

as—his “The way your mind works endlessly is fascinating. I mean, you  
it couldbeen through a terrible ordeal. And yet, somehow, you’re still my idea  
ren justcoming up with incredible plans.” When she opened her mouth, he he  
all overhand. “I know work is how you manage your grief. But I still believe  
one but you could conceive an idea like this at a time like this.”

ned the Her heart turned over and tapped out a new rhythm in her chest. “  
l her toreally think it’s a good idea?” Her voice came so softly.

t of the His smile lit her up. “It’s a freaking out-of-this-world idea. I love it  
w morewant to do it.”

This was the kind of project she’d love to sink her teeth into—but  
on herprototype resort from the ground up. It was important work, and she  
nothingto take a big role in it, shoulder more responsibility than she’d ever  
. She’dwith Dane’s oversight, of course.

ifferent She was eager to dive in. “Then, if you have no objection, I  
together an idea document. We’ll have something to brainstorm with a  
addingto Harper about.”

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

maybe “Unless there’s something else that’s more important?”

stead of He huffed out a strange laugh, and she wondered if she was push  
esignedhard. But he said, “There’s nothing more important. Go ahead and get  
feet wet with this.”

r mind, “It’s a dream project. We could expand this all over the world  
whole being felt lighter than it had in months. It was being home.  
py andworking closely with Dane again. It was this new resort that could  
wantedmuch good for so many people. “This is what all your hard work and I  
I couldhave been about. Now you have the experience to build this, to do it t  
Not justway possible.”

nights. “But it was your idea,” he said.

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

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

It hit her that she longed for all those hours together a little too m  
’ve justlittle too desperately.

a genie, Coming off five months of family leave, that might be a very dai  
ld up athing.

that no

Do you

t. And I

ilding a  
wanted  
: had—

I’ll put  
and talk

ing too  
et your

l.” Her  
It was  
l do so  
earning  
he best

“But it was your idea,” he said.

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

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

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

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



## *Chapter Eight*

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

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

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

But she stared at her hands a long moment before looking at him again, as if an errant thought had been running through her mind. "I know it's not even evening back, but it's been a long day. Would you mind if I had dinner in your room?"

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

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

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

Instead, he watched her go.

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

gain, as

ny first

r in my

y.”

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

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

into his Brainstorming ideas had gotten her through those last dark days with her uncle. The video chats had kept her spirits from plummeting after he'd

Now she had work to get her through. She'd already started a document adding to it after every meeting, but tonight she dropped in all the things she'd wanted to floating through her mind. And they just kept coming. God, how badly she wanted to be more than just an assistant on this new resort project. Could she

he sold actually run it? With help, yes. But that was the rub—she still needed help. She

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

. When Which, of course, she couldn't do.

him to It was even harder not to think about that night. After all this time, she should barely be able to recall it. Yet she remembered each detail so clearly

on her.

ack for His taste, his touch. The things he did with his lips, his mouth. The w  
l, she'd stolen her breath with that very first kiss.

salary. "Stop thinking, Cammie," she growled at herself through gritte  
cepting Rex popped his head up, looking around as if a real dinosaur were out  
window.

re rules It was deep into the night, long past midnight, when she finally cl  
t forget document, the page count coming in at twenty. Rex had finally climb  
ir as he the bed and curled into a ball, waiting for her, opening his eyes occas  
to gaze at her, pleading.

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

d leave

\* \* \*

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

of food For just a moment, she felt light and carefree. "I'm sorry. I thoug  
often to was your official title. Am I wrong?"

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

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

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

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

e ideas She didn't want to think about *why* he might have fumbled. "Of c  
dly she knew what you meant. We've been working together for twelve year  
uld she both know the rules."

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

\* \* \*

ne, she  
vividly. While each Maverick had his own center of operations, they occu

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

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

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

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

Matt sat back hard. "That's one hell of an undertaking. How many bedrooms does he have in each of his resorts?"

Eyes wide with surprise, Gideon shook his head. With Gideon's wife a war veteran, Will hadn't thought anything could surprise him. "Not only that, but he wants her to do limited-edition prints. And he wants her to put the originals in her name. Every show."

"Wow," was Evan's only exclamation, but that said it for all of them.

"He wants Ari to check out the childcare accommodations at his resort," Dane said. "He wants her to check out the childcare accommodations at his resort."

"He's talked to Tasha about an interactive website." Daniel drummed his fingers on the table.

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

Cal leaned his elbows on the table. "He was great planning that gala for Lyssa."

"Paige had lunch with Ava Harrington," Evan divulged. "She liked Ava wanted to pick her brain on how to add more mental health services to her care facilities. Even for the families of her residents."

"I had drinks with Troy." Matt steepled his fingers. "He's got some ideas."

group ideas for a new generation of workout machines. I could really get  
by his designing that stuff.”

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

ing their It was exactly what Will hoped to hear. He’d known this was the  
thing to do. Otherwise, he would never have signed the contract. But

Dad’s, good to know the agreement hadn’t been a bunch of worthless papers  
ures for would bring real results. Dane Harrington was a man of his word.

Though Sebastian said what they were all thinking. “This is freaking aw  
meeting But what the heck, man? When are we going to do the great deal

Dane?”

mission “Not just this piecemeal stuff,” Matt added. “But something with  
s if the He curled his hand into a fist.

esses for “Something challenging,” Evan added.

The timing was perfect. The idea had come to him as Harper talked  
were after discussions with Dane and Cammie. He tapped the end of his meca

pencil on his notebook. “I’ve been giving it some thought. And here’s  
7 many think we should propose.”

\* \* \*

being a

iginals.

ext few

Dane didn’t arrive alone. The ideas were mostly Cammie’s, so of course

had to be there. That was never a question in his mind.

As Dane and Cammie prepared to leave for the San Francisco n

resorts,

ned his

You’re staying here to take care of Rex.”

The man had stubbornly gone on. “I can make tea. And I’ve

not sure

baking.”

That got Dane’s attention. “What did you bake?”

Fernsby didn’t smile. He never smiled. But his eyes glinted. “You

out when I bring it into the meeting.”

So Fernsby had come along too.

Over the three weeks since Cammie had returned, they’d

tirelessly on the proposal, refining each of her ideas, researching,

details, taking to Harper and other experts. And today they would

get into their plan to the Mavericks.

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

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

Dane had barely taken a seat facing the Mavericks, with Cammie beside him, when Fernsby rolled in his tea trolley. "Gentlemen and lady." He nodded to Cammie. "I have tea, coffee, and orange juice. What is your pleasure?"

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

Of course he'd made all Dane's favorites, and without even asking, Fernsby served him a Bakewell tart, while Cammie received a butter tart. Sebastian turned to Evan, a frown pulling at his eyebrows. "What do we have someone like him?" They'd all experienced Fernsby at the game, but here, in the office, his service could truly be appreciated.

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

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

Each of the Mavericks could afford him ten times over. But none would come back.

Cal bit into a Bakewell tart and groaned.

Daniel glared at him. "Jesus, you're with my sister. We don't need you. What it's like when you're in bed."

Cal's lips twitched with a smile as he continued making what he considered a rather sexual noise. "I first tasted Fernsby's special present in London," Cal said between lascivious groans. Then he smiled. "Ah, I

the best trip of my life. Changed my entire world.”

ks with Daniel damn near growled. “You’re going to need to eat that c  
lay had then. Or I might have to beat the crap out of you. Again.”

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

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

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

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

, water, Sebastian got in on the fun. “Can we get back to important thin  
how damn good these tarts are?” He turned to Fernsby. “You’re f  
r. Then amazing.”

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

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

y don’t Fernsby inclined his head slightly, as if he were royalty. Then he  
soccer his way out of the room, closing the door behind him.

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

oad. “A “He’s been trying to get on a baking show forever,” Dane explaine  
“He really has a shot this time.” Cammie backed him up. “The t  
amazing. The best I’ve tasted yet.”

e had a All the Mavericks agreed. Then Will rapped the table. “Okay,  
You’re putting in a major effort with all our women, trying to get t  
work with you. But what we want to know—” He waved a hand  
to hear brothers. “—is when we’re going to work a deal with you.”

it Dane  
lties in  
ondon,

the best trip of my life. Changed my entire world.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Chapter Nine

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

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

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

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

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

“Parasailing,” Sebastian supplied for her.

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

host of activities to help them relax as well as their kids.”

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

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

“And you’re all an important part as well.” She indicated them all with asweep of her hand. “We’re going to need all of you to find ways to he create athis and to use your expertise in bringing it to fruition. Everyone h *lifferentsomething* to offer. That’s why we think it’s a perfect project for this h, theymerged group.”

onment Every man in the room glowed with enthusiasm. They were into th as shewhile Cammie gave Dane part claim to the project, it was really all h lines ofturned him speechless with her ability to spark the Mavericks’ inter e fullywas so damn proud of her. She had everything together, even after the . We’llshe’d been through with her uncle.

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

edical. Holding up her hand, Cammie said, “But we wouldn’t want to be r top of the big casinos or ski resorts. Our place needs to be relatively ing theown.”

Daniel tapped the table. “I know the area well. Let me think about on neararound, see what I can find. And in the meantime, we can make our p. el of abuilding.”

r ideas. “I’m sure we’ll find the perfect place.” Color bloomed in Ca in theircheeks. She was loving this—the planning, the suggestions, the buy-in

hildren Gideon jumped in. “This is a good use of the foundation’s ext things,too.”

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

e taken Grinning, Gideon bopped him lightly on the arm. “We’ve got a offer afoster kids needing summer jobs, and even during holiday breaks.” He

at Dane, then Cammie. “They could be like camp counselors. It would be a great experience for them. It might even help some of them find a purpose?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We have you to thank for this,” Will said. “Living with Jeremy, I know I’ve seen the need long ago. But you both asked questions that no one else would.”

It takes a team with fresh blood to look at things from a different perspective.”

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

“It’s synergy,” Dane said. “That’s what we’ve got.”

There were nods of agreement all around.

“We’ll start talking to our contacts about donations,” Evan said.

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

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

As the group enjoyed a celebratory round of Fernsby’s gingerbread, someone’s phone rang with a shrill rotary-phone ringtone from ages ago.

Eyes went to Evan, the only one in the room who hadn’t put his device on silent. As he answered, his face turned pale. “What? But it’s too early!”

A panicked note rose in his voice. “Okay. I’ll meet you there. Have a good night.”

“Everything’ll be okay.” He slammed his phone down on the table with a smack that could have cracked the screen.

“Paige?” Matt asked, worry lines etching his forehead.

ould be For a moment, Evan seemed incapable of speech. Until finally he  
path inthe words. “She’s having contractions. I have to get to the h

Hopefully, my mother will have driven her there by the time I arrive.”

bigger “Maybe you should call for an ambulance,” Sebastian suggested.

it of on Evan shook his head so hard his glasses wobbled. “And have Paig  
me for overreacting? No way. She’ll say, very calmly, ‘It’s just two

teful tosweetheart.” He did a very good imitation of Paige’s gentle, musical t

l. “Andit.”  
e.”

Evan’s voice rose slightly, with either panic or powerlessness  
driver is here with me.”

g about “Guess you need to hire two drivers,” Daniel said unhelpfully.

“Call Susan and Bob,” Cal advised.

ies. It was almost laughable. All these powerful men deliberating abc  
shouldto get Paige Collins to the hospital.

ade us Fernsby tapped his silver spoon against the coffee carafe, the room  
a newas silent as a church when the priest steps up to the pulpit. “If I

interject.” He didn’t pause for objections. “It appears to me, sir—” He

was theslightly to Evan. “—after having met Theresa Collins at the dinner  
od thefew weeks ago, that she’s a very capable woman. I’d even go so far as

she’s unflappable. Experienced in these matters, I’m sure she will  
convey your wife to the hospital in record time.”

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

Will jumped to his feet. “He’s right. Now let’s get the hell out of h  
voicesdown to the hospital ourselves.”

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

r tea.

oodies,

\* \* \*

igo. All  
vice on Dane and Camille remained in the now quiet room. “Maverick ger

ly.” A two-point-oh on the way,” Dane said.

Theresa Camille nudged him. “Noah and Jorge are generation two-point-o  
ie table is generation two-point-one.”

Fernsby recognized the smile lurking on Dane’s lips and s  
opportunity not to be missed. “I suggest you two speed to the hos

got outwell. Your Maverick companions will need calming influences, so it  
hospital.duty to accompany them.” He inclined his head, though he felt like ch

“I will take care of everything on the home front, sir.”

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

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

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

\* \* \*

out how

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

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

Theresa glowed with pride. “I was only glad I could help. Paige  
ked. even tell me at first. She thought it was just a false start.”

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

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

“You must be Cammie Chandler.” Susan took Cammie’s hand in  
saw anhers. “We’re so sorry about your uncle.” Her kind eyes brimmed  
pital assympathy as Bob Spencer echoed her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dane, as if sensing her thoughts, took her hand in his. “You okay?” She didn’t deny her feelings. “It’s nothing like Uncle Lochlan’s last. This is—” She sighed. “It’s just plain beautiful.”

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

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

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

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

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

She laughed at him.

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

oman's "Too bad we don't have Fernsby as well. Or, more specifically, hi  
Cal said.

t Dane. Lyssa, leaning against him, turned dreamy. "Fernsby's tarts. T  
" ever. And they can lead to so many other wonderful things." She tip  
All the face up to kiss him.

Cammie felt a little dreamy just looking at them. She whisper  
n after, Dane's ear, "We'd better not let Gabby hear that."

-brown Dane snickered. "Who will win their competition is one of life's  
ounger mysteries."

o, they It was just after ten in the evening when the doctor came thro  
averick double doors. The whole gang, including Dane and Cammie, had sta  
entire time.

ammie The doctor smiled widely, her dark eyes bright as she announce  
an." have two additions to your family—a boy and a girl. Mom and bab  
wished doing well. We're just cleaning everyone up, then you can see them."

traction "Oh my," Theresa exclaimed, hands flying to her mouth. "That wa  
whole. was in labor with the twins for almost twenty-four hours."

ie room The doctor beamed with pride. "It all went like clockwork."

ys, and Susan hugged her husband, Bob, tears streaming down her face.  
was life and Tony hugged their mom. And the Mavericks clapped one another  
back in congratulations as if they'd all had something to do with the bi

' Leaning into Dane, Cammie murmured, "Now the wait is over, we  
st days take off. We all can't fit in the birthing room."

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

l. It's a

ning in  
ter all."

ood for  
atch her  
, sodas,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Chapter Ten

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

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

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

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

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

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

As if he felt the same thing, Dane curled his fingers around her hand. "Unique and amazing, don't you think?"

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

Dane had never been around babies or children. Neither had she. This was a first. And it was awe-inspiring. But sharing this new experience with him, she relished the warmth of Dane's hand around hers far too much.

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

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

It was so loving, Cammie felt like crying too.

Will took his turn at the bedside, smoothing a finger over the hairless head. Then he turned a stern face on Evan, reminding Cam Farnsby. If one looked up the definition of *stern* in the dictionary, it shows a picture of Farnsby.

“You’re on indefinite parental leave to be with your wife and to watch Will said. “When you’re ready to come back, you let us know. But we’re proud to make it too soon.”

Harper stepped to Will’s side, her words for Paige. “I’m not going to let you come back too fast.”

Ari, now at the bedside, Matt’s arm around her, gave Paige instructions that were obviously for Evan too. “We’re going to hold you to a pinkie swear that you’ll take three months, maybe even six, just to give your parents a breasting time. This bonding time is very important for the babies.” Both Evan and Paige listened earnestly to her, their eyes on the child development.

Evan nodded resolutely. “We will. But it’ll be hard not to be a part of the family.”

Sebastian snorted a laugh. “Just because you’re not working doesn’t mean you’re getting out of coming to the barbecues. And dinners. And weddings. And other events we feel like throwing. You just won’t be working yourself too hard. You’ll be looking out for your family.”

Evan bowed his head in agreement.

Rosie stepped in to kiss each newborn on the forehead, then planted a loving kiss on Paige’s cheek. “Take this time,” she said. “They grow up so fast.” Then she looked at Evan. “The business will be here when you get back.”

Paige wiped away a tear. “You’re right. All of you. Thank you.”

The rest of the women, as if they were of one mind, gathered round. Ari put out her pinkie finger. “Pinkie swear.” All of them hooked pinkie fingers in a circle. “We want you to take care of yourself while you’re caring for the babies. Anything you need, we’re here for you.”

Paige rubbed away another tear. “Thank you. I love you all so much.” Then Susan took over. “We’ll let you get some rest now. It’s been a long day in here.” She glanced across the bed to Evan, and even from the doorway, Cammie recognized her joy and love. “And a long day for you too.” She

Evan a loving smile.

The Mavericks separated into couples then, and Cammie had a feeling of pregnant ladies would receive tender foot rubs tonight. It was so sweet as Gideon kissing the top of Rosie's head, Matt with his hand on her burgeoning belly, Cal with a sweeping gaze of love over Lyssa's face, Noah held his hand out to Ari, looking up at her with the love only a father of a year-old child could feel. Gideon hefted a sleepy Jorge into his arms, gathered Rosie's hand in his. Charlie laid her head on Sebastian's shoulder, Daniel nuzzled Tasha's hair, and Will wrapped an arm around Harper.

Then Jeremy raised his voice above all the others. "Nobody told me a few babies' names."

A chorus of laughter filled the room because none of them had the time to be asked.

Evan kissed the baby wrapped in pink. "This is Savannah."

Paige resettled the baby in her arms. "And this is Keegan."

Cammie whispered into Dane's ear, "Welcome, Maverick generation of this two-point-one."

\* \* \*

It meant

whatever

if to the

laced a

her.

They

ran

smoothly.

Even

more,

her

brilliant

ideas

fueled

his

work.

They

fueled

the

need

for

the

rules.

And

the

reason

that,

even

as

he

lay

only

away

from

her

at

any

of

the

houses

or

flats

or

condos

they

shared,

he

actually

crawled

into

her

bed.

And

he

wouldn't

now.

But

still,

this

five-month

ordeal

had

gotten

under

his

skin.

Just

as

that

tender

scene

in

Paige's

birthing

suite

had

been

a

turn

of

moment.

In

the

past,

he'd

offhandedly

thought

babies

were

children

could

be

adorable.

But

witnessing

the

love

lighting

up

that

room

with

the

joy

of

each

and

every

man,

the

sweetness

of

the

women,

Dane

felt

his

feet

slip-sliding.

Seeing

the

pride

on

Evan's

face

as

he'd

looked

at

his

newborn

son,

and

the

reverence

with

which

he'd

gazed

at

his

wife,

as

if

she

was

the

new

born

son.

woman ever to have given birth, Dane's priorities had turned  
ling themishmash. His heart had flipped over in his chest at the gooey, love  
weet—glances among all of them in that room, knowing in his gut they would  
1 Ari's home tonight to reaffirm their love.

atures. He wanted what these Mavericks had. He'd mused over it at the  
seven-game, and at the signing dinner, he'd gazed at Susan and Bob and t  
ms and they'd brought together. He wanted his family to experience the  
oulder, phenomenon.

Cammie touched his hand. "You're so quiet." Her soft laughter c  
me the him. "Did seeing the new babies scare you to death?"

Dane couldn't laugh. He could only answer truthfully. Even if I  
ught to back the genuine depth of his feeling. "I have to admit I was a little jea

Her touch vanished like a phantom into the night. "Jealous? E  
haven't had a serious relationship since I've known you."

He shrugged. "Maybe I've just never found the right woman."

eration He'd dated, but they'd been more like flings than relationshi  
woman had erased the memory of that one night with Cammie. W  
what he was searching for? A woman who could make him forg  
amazing that night had been? A woman who could surpass it?

"I like them as a family," he tried to explain. "They're a powerfu  
mmie's because they've created such a cohesive unit."

ye the "But so have you. With Ava and Troy and Clay and Gabby."

missed He shook his head slowly, barreling down the highway toward  
Beach, toward the home he shared with her. He had only one answer t  
his life "We don't have anyone like Susan and Bob Spencer. We never  
ed him. example of how it should be between a couple who totally love each  
ly steps Who want to raise a family together." Parents who didn't leave a  
e never didn't feel their children's love was a burden.

She sat silently for a long moment, as if she had to recall the scen  
n under hospital room—Susan, Bob, the love, the tears, the joy. "I get it. It's  
t topsy- and Uncle Lochlan. We were so close, and I loved him so much. Bu  
ute and miss my parents. I miss my mom even more now that I'm grown up."

om, the Dane no longer missed his parents. But he missed what he'd neve  
innards parents like Susan and Bob.

wborns Then she added breathlessly, "That's why you wanted this merg  
he first more than just the business ventures. Even more than the respect you h

into them. It's Susan and Bob and the family they've created."  
He couldn't quite admit that to her. Not now. He was still too raw  
to return the emotions that swamped him as he'd watched that special family  
joyous room with those beautiful and much-wanted new babies.  
He told Cammie the first lie he ever had. "I'm really not sure. I  
think about it more."  
That part, at least, was true. He had to sit with these feelings.  
And with the new feelings Cammie's return had brought up in him  
addressed

\* \* \*

he held  
alous." The weekly family barbecue was held at Sebastian Montgomery's Hill  
but you Hills estate. Charlie Ballard's fabulous metalwork was all over the place—  
—bubbling fountains, wind spinners, a magnificent blue crane standing  
pond, sculptures of woodland animals, mythical creatures, and ancient  
ps. No some large and in-your-face, some small and barely visible unless you  
was that carefully.  
et how The family gathered around the terraced pool deck out back.  
amazing that these rich, powerful men still held weekly barbecues with  
il force family. They were like normal people rather than billionaires who could  
rented an entire country club and catered the whole affair. It was this  
the Mavericks that drew Dane, Cammie knew, even if he hadn't  
admitted it.  
Pebble  
o offer. Since the babies were only two weeks old, Paige and Evan had  
had an everyone to wash their hands. Once that was done, the bundles of joy  
n other, passed around like they were the most miraculous babies anyone had  
nd who known.  
e in the This family barbecue was different, since all the Harringtons had  
like me invited—*family* being the operative word. Sadly, only Ava and Gabb  
it I still make it this time, while Troy and Clay had jetted off to events they could  
miss.  
r had— Cammie smiled to herself, because they weren't exactly jet-setters  
two were always working on new deals. Troy was giving the keynote  
conference for young athletes. As an influencer, he was often a guest speaker.  
ger. It's not just because of the company he'd started, but for the Olympic  
ave for medals he'd won diving. He never missed an opportunity to encourage

fledgling athletes. Clay, of course, was off looking for new talent to introduce to his exclusive video platform and for sponsors and patrons in that arts.

Flagstone terraces led down to a sparkling infinity pool, and the smell of barbecuing meat wafted in the air. Will and Sebastian manned the grill while the other Mavericks watching the proceedings and making snide comments about the quality of the cooks.

Dressed in shorts and deck shoes, Dane stood with them, drinking and laughing, and getting in a few good-natured digs too.

His tanned, muscular legs drew Cammie's glance despite herself.

Noah, Jeremy, and Jorge raced back and forth on the grass, playing with the dogs. Tasha and Daniel had rescued shepherd-mix puppies abandoned in the woods near Tahoe's Fallen Leaf Lake. Tasha had kept one, a female, whom she'd named Darla, while the two males, Flash and Duke, gone to live with Noah and Jeremy, respectively. Though the dogs looked about a year old now, they still hadn't grown into their gangly paws, and rolled around on the grass, play-fighting like three-month-old puppies. Rex, of course, had to be right in there, rolling with the big dogs. Since his course, he believed he was a big dog.

Fernsby hadn't joined the festivities today. He was supposedly working on another masterpiece for when he secured a spot on *Britain's Celebrity Bakers*, something that would wow the judges. Something that would surpass anything Clyde's butler, Digbert, could make. The baking competition between the two butlers was legendary, almost as legendary as the rivalry between Fernsby and Gabby.

Sitting on a lounge chair, Cammie sipped a margarita and listened to the ladies' conversations around her. Gabby, wearing a flowered swimsuit, stretched out in the sun, her eyes closed, drinking in the spring sunshine. She'd positioned herself so that only her legs below her one-piece swimsuit were in the sun, kept up with the women's running commentary, nursing her margarita.

Mid-April could be rainy in the Bay Area, but today, nature provided a lovely sunny day. Half the women wore swimsuits, the other half shorts and tank tops. Cammie, having dressed at Pebble Beach where it was cooler, had opted for light leggings. Though it wasn't hot, merely warm, she sat in the shade watching as Savannah, Paige's little pink bundle, was passed from

she could arm, receiving kisses and hugs while she slept peacefully.

Under a big umbrella on the opposite side of the pool, the grandmothers, Susan and Theresa, cooed over a burrito-style blue-scented sweet little Keegan. With arthritically gnarled fingers, Francine rilled, then chucked the baby under the chin. She sat on her walker, decorated with about a foot of blue crêpe paper wrapped around its handles and down the bars to its wheels. The sight sent a pang through Cammie. She wished for a beer, Lochlan could have known Francine. She was a beautiful soul, smiling despite her infirmities.

She tuned in to the conversation around her as Paige said, “Being with Susan are so involved. It’s been a blessing.” She patted Lyssa’s head and said, “They’ve practically moved in with us.”

“But didn’t you hire a nanny?” Ari asked, her head tipped to the side, had probably wondering how she would manage when her new baby arrives. “We did.” Paige shrugged. “But Susan just seems to know everything and they—” Lyssa added, “She truly does.”

Gazing across the flagstones at the men crowded around the baby, of Bob Spencer included, Paige smiled. “Bob is adorable with the babies. He seems to find them endlessly fascinating, like they’re some mystical working he’s never seen before.” She shared a meaningful look with Lyssa. “I’ve never seen him think he’d never had children of his own.”

The ladies laughed together, obviously knowing Bob much better than Cammie did.

Even as they all talked, Dane separated himself from the men and went to the table where Susan, Theresa, and Francine fussed over the baby. He smiled, then chuckled as he caressed a soft baby cheek. The women, in their tankinis, as spellbound by him as they were by the sleeping child. He made them laugh, he made them blush, and he charmed them. But that was Dane. He could charm anyone.

Then, in the most amazing gesture, he held out his hands to Susan. She lifted the baby into his waiting arms.

Cammie marveled at the tenderness softening all the aristocratic pleats of his shirt, but Dane’s face. Just as on that day at the hospital, his curiosity and attentiveness surprised her. As he held Keegan in his arms, rocking slightly side to side now, she swore he was a natural. As if he could be a father. It was usually the men who got the urge to have a child, but looking at Dane now, it seemed

might actually be thinking about fatherhood himself.

In that moment, the adorable baby in his arms, Dane looked up at the two bundles and smiled.

Cammie's heart kicked over in her chest. What had he said in that pink leading ready to find that woman now. It seemed impossible, yet the evidence was right before her eyes. How good he looked cuddling the baby so tenderly always. How manly. How utterly endearing. She couldn't help smiling back at

Though she would have gone on watching forever, Gideon joined Dane, holding out his arms, and Dane handed over the child. Was that reluctance in his face? The way he looked at the baby boy almost with longing?

Or maybe she was imagining it, and Dane was just being polite. Yet she couldn't forget that image of tiny Keegan in Dane's protective arms. "ing."

rebekah,  
ies. He  
miracle  
"You'd

er than

headed  
baby. He  
seemed  
e them  
me. He

an, and

lanes of  
iveness  
to side,  
women  
as if he



might actually be thinking about fatherhood himself.

In that moment, the adorable baby in his arms, Dane looked up at her. And smiled.

Cammie's heart kicked over in her chest. What had he said in the car? That with all his dating, he hadn't found the right woman? Maybe he was ready to find that woman now. It seemed impossible, yet the evidence was right before her eyes. How good he looked cuddling the baby so tenderly. How manly. How utterly endearing. She couldn't help smiling back at him.

Though she would have gone on watching forever, Gideon joined them, holding out his arms, and Dane handed over the child. Was that reluctance on his face? The way he looked at the baby boy almost with longing?

Or maybe she was imagining it, and Dane was just being polite.

Yet she couldn't forget that image of tiny Keegan in Dane's powerful arms.

## Chapter Eleven

“What’ll you ladies have? We’ve got hamburgers, hot dogs, and Sebastian called, filling a platter with meat. “And for you, Gabby, the vegan patty, along with a gluten-free bun.”

Gabby sat up, sliding her legs off the lounge, and raised her hands. “The veggie guys are fantastic. Thank you. But can I have one rib too?”

Utter silence fell over the pool deck. The only sounds were the c and dogs playing on the lawn.

“But—” Ari sputtered. Then she dropped her voice to a whisper. “The ribs aren’t vegan. They’re meat.” She almost bared her teeth as she said the word.

Gabby smiled, answering her in the same whisper, loud enough for the women nearby to hear. “I know.” Then she grinned. “I’m vegan most of the time. But once in a while, I can’t resist a barbecued rib. Even if I get a stomachache the next day.”

Ava laughed. “You’re only doing it because Fernsby’s not here with you.”

Gabby shook her finger at Ava. “Don’t you tell him. He’ll think he’s starting the war.” She raised her voice. “And don’t you tell Fernsby either, Dana.”

Dane put an offended hand to his gorgeous chest and mouthed, *What?* Cammie had very occasionally seen Gabby indulge. And only when Fernsby wasn’t nearby.

A few minutes were spent by everyone picking and pouring condiments, adding potato salad and green salad, then taking their seats again to eat the barbecue. Cammie couldn’t resist a rib either, and it was definitely yur

She licked her fingers clean one by one—because, really, a napkin didn’t work—and looked up to find Dane’s eyes on her from his perch on the edge of the picnic table by the grill. He raised an eyebrow. She raised her hand back at him. Then he held up a margarita glass, tipping it side to side, as if she wanted another. She shook her head. When he held up a plate with a hot dog, she shook her head again. He shrugged and took a big bite, looking at his eyes and making faces as if it were the absolute best thing ever.

laughed.

They could say so much without a single word.

Ava's voice tore her away from Dane's antics. "I'm so happy for you," Ava gushed, her hands outstretched, her empty plate now on the table beside her.

"I ribs," She was always enthusiastic, her gestures expansive. Cammie could never's after confidently taking charge of a boardroom full of men just as easily wore the eye-catching royal blue one-piece that wowed unattached. "YouToday, she'd pulled the waves of her thick hair, the color of dark chocolate high on her head in case she decided to swim.

children "But I'm not jealous," Ava said airily, a glitter in her amber eyes. "I wrote off relationships a long time ago."

r. "The Engrossed in watching Dane, Cammie must have missed a major part of the conversation, because she had no idea how it had reached this point.

Harper, leaning forward with curiosity, asked Ava, "So you're not all the looking for love?"

t of the As she shook her head, Ava's hair glinted in the sun. "It's worked out well for you all. I mean, look at your guys." She waved a hand at the tableau zealously manning the barbecue as more meat sputtered around. "to see" "They're a dazzling bunch." Then she smiled gently with either sadness or relief. "But love has never worked out for me. I didn't make good choices with men's women." She shuddered dramatically. "So I'm done. And I'm totally okay with that."

o, me? Though Cammie had known Ava Harrington for twelve years, she'd never whenever shared confidences about relationships. And Cammie had only a few memories of past relationships that were serious enough to even talk about. She had no clue about Ava's bad choices. But she did wonder if Ava was projecting joy the little too much, as though she wasn't as okay with it as she said.

nmy. But the ladies really got into the discussion. "Yeah," Charlie said. "Men never" "Men can totally suck." She looked at Sebastian, though he obviously didn't suck at all.

sed one Ari laughed. "And we certainly don't want you to think that even I was asking was a bed of roses with this lot." She hooked a thumb over her shoulder and gestured with a barbecue crowd.

closing Cammie longed to hear their stories. She wanted so much to know more. She better.

“I mean it,” Ari insisted. “Matt was so overprotective of Noah watched me like a hawk in case I did anything wrong.”

r all of Tasha rolled her eyes. “And they’re all so bossy.”

ie table “You should have been there when Daniel tried to knock Cal’s bl after he found out we were dating.” Lyssa heaved a huge sigh in I uld seedirection.

7 as she Rosie added dryly, “I believe there was something about Dani d men.finding out you were going to have Cal’s baby...?”

herries, Lyssa flapped her hand casually in the air. “Okay, there was that.”

yes. “Iwith a disgusted shake of her head. “He couldn’t accept you were a woman and not just his little sister anymore.”

part of “I’ve got you all beat,” Paige said, her smile almost smug. “Beaus t. was married to my sister. I think you’ll all agree it was a total disa ’re notboth of them.”

“I hate to speak ill of anyone,” Harper said, spreading her finger l out soyour sister...” She left it hanging, and all the women seemed to know ie malewhat she hadn’t said.

id spat. There must be a heck of a story there, but Cammie wasn’t comi ness orenough to ask.

oices in “But look at you two now.” Rosie’s dark eyes twinkled. “Two a ay withbabies. And everything worked out beautifully.”

Paige looked at her husband with the other Mavericks. “Yeah,” s they’dwith a tender smile. “It’s all worked out so perfectly.”

. couple Even after hearing their stories, Ava crossed her legs on the loung had noher arms folded over her chest, a smile that could have been a grimace esting aface. “But you all picked men with potential. While my decision-mak been extraordinarily bad.”

agreed. Cammie hoped she’d go on. Ava had been so good to her. 7 didn’tCammie could help her by being a good listener. Except that she m required to reveal her own secrets... and *her* mistakes took the cal ryrthingcould only imagine the look on Ava’s face—on all the women’s faces- er at thewere to say, *My biggest mistake was a one-night stand with your right before my job interview with him.* It wouldn’t matter to them t w themhadn’t known who he was when she’d slept with him. In fact, that m worse.

that he Closing her eyes for the briefest moment, she could almost feel his hands on her skin, the softness of his hair beneath her fingers, the caress of his hands on her throat, her breasts, her belly. Everywhere.

ock off Lord, that night had been the absolute best. Even if it was a total screwup. Daniel's But Dane wasn't her only screwup. She'd made two other extremely bad choices, far worse than what she'd done with Dane, and like Ava, she'd never let that happen again. Though Dane was the only worthwhile guy in the bunch, she'd had to let him go for Uncle Lochlan's sake. The job Dane was her and Uncle Lochlan's lifeline. As glorious as that night had been, as incredible as the memories still were, she would have sacrificed Uncle Lochlan's well-being.

Besides, both she and Dane had dated other people. Clearly, if they were meant to be, they'd never have dated anyone at all. And since she'd fantasized for another guy as hard as she had, even after Dane, he couldn't be the one. She simply sucked at picking men, as badly as Ava claimed she did. "But sometimes you just aren't enough for the man you yearn for, and it exactly turns out the way you hope it will."

Ava kicked Gabby's foot where she lay on her lounge. "What about you, darling sister? You're awfully quiet there." Ava gave her a dastardly look. "Let's hear all your secrets."

dorable Gabby smiled and drew her thumb and forefinger across her lips, making them shut.

he said Which made all the ladies laugh.

Kelsey swayed back and forth, Savannah sighing sweetly in her chair, "Oh my gosh, I think she's smiling."

on her "I'm pretty sure that's just gas," Paige said dryly.

ing has "Then I guess that means I need another margarita," Kelsey said with a laugh, handing Savannah to Cammie.

Maybe For a moment, she felt paralyzed. Gideon wandered over, Keegan and Matt came with him, and brushed a kiss against Rosie's ear. Matt came with him, she was behind Ari's chair, his hand on her shoulder, her hair, her arm.

—if she Evan arrived right behind them. "Like, would it be possible to hold the kids for a minute?"

hat she Kelsey, who hadn't yet left for her margarita refresh, said, "No, you should stop asking and go away." With so many Mavericks around, the job that Paige and Evan never got to hold their own children.

s touch Chucking Savannah under the chin, Kelsey grinned up at her brother. “Don’t you think they look just like Tony and me?”

Holding Savannah, Cammie couldn’t see any resemblance at a rewup. then, she couldn’t see Evan or Paige in the babies either.

ely bad Kelsey threw an arm around Evan’s shoulders. “Come on, big l she wasyou can get me a margarita.”

e one in With Savannah in her arms, Cammie couldn’t seem to let go, c job withpass the baby on to Tasha beside her. She’d never thought about l ht withmother. Her whole life had been consumed by Uncle Lochlan and l d neverAnd Dane.

He’d joined the kids on the grass, where Rex was getting bossy v ey werebig dogs. Picking up a soccer ball, Dane spun it on his finger, enticin llen forand Noah into learning how to play soccer.

ne. No, Gideon handed Keegan off to Rosie. “I’d better get over there an he did.Jorge how to play the game. Or he’ll just learn the Harrington way.”

t never Ava shot him with a finger gun. “You wish.”

Gabby laughed. “Maybe Ava and I need to show them how to do out you,the right way.”

r smile. Matt held up his fingers in the sign of the cross. “Hell, no. We letting you two near them.”

zipping With a snort, Ava said, “You’re just afraid they’ll learn so ma moves they’ll start beating you.”

Matt grabbed Evan’s arm. “We need to take charge.”

r arms. And the whole troop of Mavericks descended upon the field.

“They’ll never get over it.” Charlie laughed. “Almost getting bea by two women.”

with a All the ladies laughed knowingly.

Bob headed out to the grass, too, and Susan called, “Just be ca n in hisyour back, Bob. And wear your sunscreen.”

tanding Holding the sweet-smelling Savannah in her arms, Cammie wat the men played with the boys.

l one of Dane hunkered down to their level, explaining something about th the two boys listening avidly. Then he stood, dribbled the ball betw u can’t.feet. Even from her lounge by the pool, Cammie heard Jorge say, “ ke wastry,” closely followed by Noah’s, “Me too. I want to pass the ball to Jo

“They’re both so lovable.” Gabby pulled her silky blond hair on

her older head, holding it there for a moment to cool off her neck.

Both Rosie and Ari smiled.

But Cammie thought the truly lovable one was Dane.

He played with the boys, the Mavericks joining in, all of them another bunch of big kids. Sometimes he stood on the sidelines, gabbing with two of the guys. He was so natural with everyone. Then they'd all run into the fray.

Savannah made a sound, and as Cammie looked down, she was surprised to see a smile, not just gas. The baby was so tiny and so beautiful. She smelled like sweet milk and baby wash. Something clenched deep inside her with the barely discernible need began to grow. It wasn't just about the baby. It was this life she saw before her, a life that all these Mavericks had: Love, camaraderie, the ability to share all this love with one another.

Without thinking, she raised her gaze to Dane. All the guys were in their two cents, teaching Jorge and Noah this move and that play. Dane was the two boys looked to, Dane they listened to, perhaps because he was the new man in their sphere. He taught them with patience, gave his undivided attention. As though he were a father.

He was so good with animals, babies, and small children.

And she wanted that. Maybe because she was alone now, because she'd lost Uncle Lochlan, because he no longer needed her, she had a sudden vision of a future she'd never before imagined. The truth was, she wanted a Maverick life. She wanted marriage and love and babies.

God help her, she wanted that life with Dane.

Breathing in the sweet baby scent, she wondered if she'd been lying to herself. She'd tried to be with other men. She'd even found a special one. She'd told herself he was the one. But maybe that was just another lie she'd told herself. Maybe it was the only way she could keep her hands off Dane. At least her heart safe.

Dane raced down the field with the boys, shouting encouragement, clapping his hands, urging them on.

The Mavericks were out there, but all she saw was Dane. It didn't matter that she could never have him. It didn't matter that she sustained herself on memories of their one night, of his kiss, his taste, his touch. It didn't matter that she sucked at choosing men, same as Ava. She knew all the reasons why Dane couldn't be together.

And it was twelve years too late anyway. Whatever happened that was so far in the past that, in Dane's mind, it could be only a distant memory. She couldn't risk losing the life she'd made for herself. She couldn't risk just another change after losing Uncle Lochlan. She couldn't risk the possibility of losing Dane as her best friend. That's what he was—her very best friend back all the world now that her uncle was gone. Even as she craved the company of these wonderful Maverick ladies, she couldn't risk losing what she had.

It was safer to stay where she was, with the perfect working relationship; and with the perfect friendship.

All she could do was watch Dane on the grass with the boys. She could let herself have memories of his kiss, of his hands trailing down her skin, of his male scent filling her head, and his body filling her up. She would have to sustain her.

But as she held the darling baby in her arms, as she bent to kiss his sweetly scented skin, she simply could not stop her gaze from drifting to Dane once more. He seemed to be having the time of his life with the boys, and fear curled in her belly. Fear of the day when he realized how he wanted to be a father. Fear of the day he'd go in search of the woman to be the mother of his children. Fear that woman could never be her. It all hit her in a single sucker punch—the baby in her arms, Dane's fatherly things with two little boys, the memories of their one night, and of what might have been. If she'd been alone, she'd have curled into a ball, terrified of her future.

Instead, she stood too fast, feeling a wave of dizziness, suddenly dizzy for the child she held. Pasting a ridiculously cheerful smile on her face, she thrust the child at Paige. "You'd better get to hold your baby too. We've been monopolizing the twins."

Paige took Savannah happily as all the women gathered round, and clueless as to why Cammie had to surrender the tiny pink bundle. Cammie kissed her child's smooth cheek, closed her eyes, and breathed in deeply that sweet baby scent.

It was almost Cammie's undoing. She didn't dare cast another glance in Dane's direction. All she could do was run for the house, where she could hide inside, take deep breaths—or scream and cry—until she found her bearings again.



at night  
memory.  
n't risk  
possibility  
friend in  
lives of  
already

onship,

All she  
ing her  
p. That

kiss the  
fting to  
the two  
v much  
perfect  
be her.  
e doing  
the loss  
a tight

7 afraid  
ace that  
should

smiling  
e. Paige  
reply of

ance in  
e could  
herself

## Chapter Twelve

Dane was aware of Cammie every moment, even as he showed the boys how to dribble the ball, as he ran with them, encouraged them, even as he sat on the sidelines watching them scramble for the ball. Maverick generation point-oh.

Still keeping her in his sights, he said to Matt and Gideon, “You’ve got a couple of future powerhouse players there.”

Matt laughed. “We have to bring out the younger generation to have a chance of beating your sisters.”

Gideon folded his arms, gazing at the boys. “Yeah, your sisters are unbelievable.”

“A more ruthless couple of players I’ve never known,” Matt agreed, grinning.

“They started really young. Gabby played in middle school. I helped her train.” He breathed in deeply, his eye on Cammie holding the babies. The pink swaddle must be Savannah. And Cammie looked damn good.

He wondered if her job had been holding her back from her true calling of being a mother. Or maybe it was all the years of caring for Lochlan, which he couldn’t dream of anything else.

With Sebastian close behind him, Will joined them just in time. “That was after your parents died, right?”

Dane nodded, turning once more to watch Jorge and Noah, with Daniel calling instructions and Bob imparting words of wisdom. “It was more than just training for Gabby. I guess you could say that’s how we all processed our feelings. And there was a helluva lot to vent after our parents died.

“We all grieve in different ways,” Will said. “Whatever works.”

Dane couldn’t say why, but something broke loose then, a tiny pang in his chest. Maybe it was watching the boys. Maybe it had been feeling the delicate weight of a child in his arms. Or maybe, most likely, it was thinking of Cammie holding a baby as if motherhood was the only thing she wanted. And never had.

“Ava and I were still in college when the avalanche killed our parents. It had been an avalanche in so many ways. “She was a freshman, and I was a junior. I wanted to be a veterinarian,” he said with a wry smile. “But I had to drop out.” He hardly remembered those days, except for his memories of the animals. As a teen, he’d volunteered at an animal rescue, fostering cats, dogs, birds, squirrels, a skunk, and once even a rattlesnake who’d lost its rattles. “Man, that’s really tough, losing your parents as well as having to give up your dream,” Gideon said. The man was probably remembering all his memories before he’d finally found his sister, Ari, again. And then Rosie.

Will slapped Dane on the back. “So you actually raised your family as well.”

Dane shook his head, glancing at the group of women by the pool. One was talking animatedly, her hands sweeping through the air as if she was giving a proclamation, Gabby tranquilly basking in the sun, eyes closed but taking it all in. And Cammie, who listened. She always listened, gathering information, a quiet voice and a thrilling mind.

He told the guys the truth. “Ava did far more than me. She’s really smart. She got her healthcare management degree in night school while she was working full time at a nursing home. We made it through, and yeah, we did it together, but I never would’ve held up without Ava.”

And he would never have found his focus if it hadn’t been for Cammie. “It’s the women in our lives who keep us sane.” Sebastian threw a punch at Charlie, then jutted his chin toward Susan. “Without them, we’d be nothing.”

The herd of Mavericks surrounding Dane erupted in a loud hum of agreement.

Dane had to add, “Your mom is awesome.”

Then he ran back in to help the boys, feeling almost as if he were watching the revealing moment on the sidelines. He’d never divulged so much to anyone in his life. Except Cammie and his own family.

But that’s what Mavericks did. They talked. They shared. They confided. What if he confided how badly he wanted his assistant back in his life? How he dreamed of her at night? How he closed his eyes, and her scent filled his mind? How he still felt the softness of her hair against his fingers, the way she’d ever of her on his tongue, the silken tightness of her body around him?

Somehow his need had amplified with Lochlan’s passing. As if no

ents.” It was nothing truly holding them back. Even the rules seemed super  
I was aThey’d been there to protect her job, mostly for Lochlan’s sake.

ve both Or, hell, maybe it was just the fact that she’d been gone for five  
love ofand he’d missed her.

injured Cammie had never given him a single signal that she wanted n  
le. they got too close, if there was a moment when sexual tension see  
give upvibrate in the air around them, if he looked at her mouth and thought  
s lossesleaning close enough to kiss her, there were the rules. And he would n

one damn thing to ruin the relationship they had or make her run  
wholeHaving her in his life was more important than a single night in her bed.

But now, the beautiful sight of her with a baby in her arms terrified  
ol, Ava She’d had a couple of close calls with men—at least one he knew  
makingsure. Or maybe it was more accurate to say it had been a close call for  
aking itthe end, though, none of her relationships had lasted. And as badly  
itheringwanted her to have the life she deserved, he’d never been so damned  
anything in his life.

7 smart. But how could he compete with a woman’s desire to have a child?  
worked “Da-ane,” Noah cried, turning his name into two syllables. “You  
together, the ball.”

Sure enough, Dane had let the ball roll right on by.

mie. “Sorry, guys, let me get it.” He ran for the ball, kicking it back to  
glanceboys. Then, inevitably, inexorably, Cammie drew his gaze once more.

7e’d be She stood, handing the baby to Paige. Even as she smiled, Cammie  
and walked up to the house. Maybe he was the only one who saw that  
zzah oftime she reached the three top steps, she was running.

How thoughtless he’d been. He hadn’t even considered how hard it  
be for her to see this big, beautiful family and not think of how she’d j  
fleeingher uncle. Damn, he was an insensitive idiot.

much to He called to the boys, “Okay, you two keep practicing with that ball  
be back in just a sec.”

afided. He tried not to run off the field, but as he closed in on Matt,  
is bed?softly, “I just saw Cammie go inside. I think she might be feeling bad  
it filledher uncle. I’ll just check it out.”

he taste Matt rested a hand on his shoulder. “You’re the best damn boss I’ve  
known.” Then he looked at his wife, her hand on her pregnant belly,  
w theresmiled softly. “Except maybe for me when it comes to Noah’s nanny.”

rfluous. All Dane could think about was getting to Cammie.

nonths,

\* \* \*

nore. If Cammie stood for a long moment in the hallway powder room. She  
med to her cheeks, checking the mirror to make sure there was no sign of tear  
it about She hadn't exactly cried. Her eyes were just a little misty and her nose  
ever do runny. But she was fine now. In control of herself again.

t away. An outside door slammed, and self-consciousness flushed her  
d. How long had she been gone?

l him. She opened the bathroom door.

v of for Dane was in the hall. "You okay?" His voice was raspy with sor  
him. In she couldn't define.

y as he Before she could open her mouth to say she was fine—even if she  
glad of—he enveloped her in his powerful arms.

Lord help her, he felt so good she wanted to weep.

missed "I saw you rush inside." His breath against her ear sent a delicious  
traveling down her spine. "Maybe bringing you here was too so  
murmured against her hair. "You're still mourning your uncle. I'm so  
didn't even think of that. I just thought it would be good for you to  
and have a fun afternoon by the pool."

the two She couldn't tell him this had nothing to do with Uncle Lochlan. S  
e turned missed him. She always would. But she couldn't tell Dane that her er  
t by the had been all about imagining the child she held in her arms was his,  
they'd made together. As she'd stood in the bathroom, mist in her eye:  
t would envisioned walking down the aisle and taking his hand.

ust lost She could never tell him that. She couldn't tell him she wanted s  
more than just being his PA. She had no idea how she could ever get  
all. I'll yet, she didn't know how to go on without it.

he said The thought just made her hug him even tighter. Until she could  
d about beat of his heart as if it were her own.

ve ever He rubbed her back, whispered soothing words in her ear. She  
and he barely hear them as hopelessness washed over her. He was holding h  
because he was a compassionate man providing comfort to an en  
who'd recently lost her uncle. Literally, he hadn't made a move in  
years. Maybe he didn't think that night had been as good as she reme

it.

A terrible thought struck her.

*If he was as into me as I am now willing to admit I'm into him, he  
have made a move long ago.*

She'd been overwhelmed with concern for her uncle, taking care  
making sure the last years of his life were as good as she could mak  
But Dane had no such compunction. If he'd wanted her at all, woul  
have shown her in some way? There'd been moments when she'd  
tension, the need, the desire. When everything in the room had still  
they'd leaned a little too close, and she'd thought maybe... But i  
happened. And then she'd remember the rules. He'd never even tried t  
them.

It could mean only one thing. That Dane *wasn't* into her.

She hadn't made a move either, true, but she had big reasons. Oth  
keeping his work life on track, what reason did Dane have? Just the  
he liked to date.

At that thought, she wanted to slip out of his arms, but Dane h  
tight.

It had been so long since she'd been held like this—his arms env  
her, his back strong against her fingers, his heart beating against her  
deliciously musky male scent making her dizzy. She couldn't bear to  
Couldn't bear to push him away.

Yet her mind drifted back to all his women over the years. She'd  
little inside every time. She'd waited, even prayed, for each relation  
end, as awful as that was. She truly wanted him to be happy. She'd co  
herself with the thought that he hadn't seemed overjoyed to be with  
them. And she'd dated, too, had even had two serious relationships  
before Dane, one after. But now she knew deep in her heart, deep in h  
that neither had been the one. When Arlo Doyle had cheated on her  
long ago had it been? Seven years. It said a lot that she had to thin  
how long. She could see now that her despair had been all about the f  
Arlo had lied, not that he might have been the man she would spend  
of her life with.

Because there had never been anyone for her but Dane.

That made her want to cry again, real tears this time, not just misty  
One tiny sob, little more than a hiccup, escaped her.

Dane's hold on her grew only tighter, overwhelming, tempting. She wanted it to end.

2 would

\* \* \*

of him,  
e them.  
dn't he  
felt the  
led and  
t never  
o break

Every part of Dane's body lit up with the feel of her in his arms. Mc his next breath, more than his next heartbeat, more than the rush o through his veins, he wanted to kiss her.

And that made him the world's biggest ass. He was supposed to be consoling her, not relishing the feel of her body against his, her scent s around his head, her breasts against his chest.

For God's sake, she'd just lost her uncle. Yet here he was getting all over her when she was still grieving.

ier than  
women  
held her

Somehow it was like the day he'd gone ballistic on Troy for ask out. He'd actually wanted to pound his fist into his own brother's face. how crazy he'd been. How totally inappropriate. Just like now.

Luckily, no one had ever mentioned the Troy incident again, though he was aware it had become family legend, the one and only time th brother had lost it. The problem was, Dane did things without thinking ear, his  
) move.

Cammie was concerned. Thank God his family hadn't understood t reason.

But if he thought of her in another man's arms the way he was l her now, he'd go crazy. He admitted to having one or two daydre l died a  
iship to  
onsoled  
any of

pounding on a few of the jerks she'd dated. Especially the last one years ago. He'd wanted to wipe the floor with that ass and throw h with the trash. How dare the man hurt Cammie?

ps, one  
er soul,  
r—how

But he hadn't beaten up anyone. He'd pretended he didn't know extent of her heartbreak. Because he knew the rules. And if he broke th could lose her.

But holding her like this, feeling every inch of her against him, h k about  
'act that  
the rest

without a doubt that this was where his mind and his body wanted to l like that night twelve years ago...

*She lay beneath him as he tasted her like she was the sweetest an  
She was more beautiful than any woman he'd ever seen. Her hair w  
eyes. silk, her skin like satin, and her taste like fire. She moaned as he pusi*

*He never to the peak. He wanted her right there, right on the edge, trembling, letting her fill him with her sighs and her moans and her cries. And only then would he bury himself fully, burying himself inside her, staying there endlessly...*

Before he could kiss her in the here and now, before he could taste more than way he craved—so badly his guts ached with the need—Cammie had blown it off bloodaway, blowing the daydream to bits.

l to be  
wirling

g horny

ing her  
. That's

ugh he  
eir big  
g where  
he real

holding  
ams of  
, seven  
im out

the full  
em, he

e knew  
be. Just

*ibrosia.  
vas like  
hed her*



*to the peak. He wanted her right there, right on the edge, trembling, begging him with her sighs and her moans and her cries. And only then would he take her fully, burying himself inside her, staying there endlessly...*

Before he could kiss her in the here and now, before he could taste her the way he craved—so badly his guts ached with the need—Cammie stepped away, blowing the daydream to bits.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

During the days after the barbecue, Cammie did her best to shake thoughts and feelings. To ignore how badly she'd wanted Dane to be right in the middle of that beautiful hug. Otherwise, wanting something she could never have would make her crazy. Her desire would drive her to despair. And she absolutely would not be that kind of person. She would not spend her life mooning over something out of her reach.

She'd learned that lesson when her parents died. No matter how much she hoped and prayed, they never came back.

The new resort project provided the perfect panacea. Especially a week later, she and Dane were seated side by side at the conference in the Pebble Beach office, going over her endless lists.

He sat back abruptly, folding his arms over his broad chest—an action tempting she had to look away. “You’ve got fabulous ideas. But we need to figure out how to get from idea stage to completed project. Let’s fly to a tropical island, where there won’t be any distractions. We’ll spend a couple of weeks there, throwing out ideas and brainstorming the whole thing.”

Outside the office’s floor-to-ceiling windows, the ocean lay before her. The morning fog finally burning off and the sun sparkling on the water. Though spring had rolled in, it was still cool, and a dip in the ocean would require putting on a wetsuit. Dane’s Caribbean island was exactly what she needed—warm waters and hot sand, where she could lounge around in a sundress all day. They could even lie on the beach while they brainstormed, recording their discussions on her phone for later transcription.

“Brilliant,” she said.

It would be the first time the two of them had been alone in a very long time. Then she had to laugh at herself. They wouldn’t be alone. Ferns and flowers were everywhere with them. And she wouldn’t think about Dane sleeping on the other side of the lanai. Just like she didn’t think about him sleeping in the dining hall right now in the big house. She hadn’t allowed herself those thoughts since the barbecue. That way lay heartache.

Instead, she thought almost constantly about the resort. She

everything they'd come up with. Could she handle managing the p  
Yes, maybe she could, even if she had to ask for Dane's help, since he  
this so many times. She'd even relish the chance, though she wasn  
ready to jump in without backup.

But there was plenty of time to think about that. They were stil  
off her planning stage. She picked up her phone and scrolled through her con  
kiss hershe spoke. "I'll make arrangements with your pilot. When do you  
ing sheleave?"

her to Dane grinned as if they were going on a romantic holiday for two.  
ouldn'tof course, they weren't. "ASAP."

After informing Dane's pilot, she called Fernsby about food prepar  
uch she Dane's island was one of the many specks of land dotting the Car

Too small for a resort, its amenities consisted of two huts on opposite  
when, at the island. One served as the living quarters, with three bedrooms  
table in common area, including the gorgeous lanai overlooking the beach  
ocean, with a marvelous view of the sunset. The second hut contain  
tion so kitchen and a living area where Fernsby stayed, doing all the cooki  
need to bringing food over in a golf cart.

7 to the He could have stayed in the main house, but the first time Dane  
of days that, Fernsby had looked down his nose and drawled, "I prefer my p  
sir."

e them, Cammie had never actually seen his room in the cookhouse, p  
waves called it, but knowing Fernsby, it would be laid out with precision.

it would The island wasn't large enough for a runway, so a helicopter flew  
hat she over from Martinique, where the plane had landed.

it only a As always, Fernsby efficiently handled the distribution of goo  
formed, suitcases to the two huts, then doled out instructions. "I will prepare f  
you for the week, sir, and bring it over later today." He set T. Rex's ca  
the golf cart.

ry long Cammie held out a hand. "You can leave him here."

oy went Her words were met with a frosty admonition. "Camille, you two a  
, on the to work. I'll take the little tyke with me since he can be such a nuisance  
own the Rex wasn't a nuisance at all. But with the quarter mile between  
oughtshuts, Fernsby would miss the dog. Even if he would never say so.

The weather was glorious, the sun warm but not too hot. The oc  
e loved wafted through her room as she unpacked, the constant rhythm of the v

project?balm to her soul.

'd done Before leaving home, she'd arranged for a cleaning service to open  
't quiteisland house, put fresh linens on the beds, and dust. No one had been  
all the months of her family leave.

l in the Outside her room, the screened-in porch wrapped around the hou  
tacts ascould leave the two sets of French doors open all night long if she cho  
want tolaid her teal T. Rex against the pillows. As odd as it might be, she  
packed the dinosaur. Because its teal color made her happy. Bec  
Which,reminded her of Dane.

His room was far closer here than in the big house in Pebble B  
ations. would be easy to step outside her French doors and walk the length  
ibbean.veranda to where his doors, too, would be open to the night air.

sides of And Fernsby was on the other side of the island.

s and a Of course she wouldn't do it. She never had. She never would.

and the God, how she dreamed of it, though. She wanted it more than ever.

ned the But knowing now how badly she wanted love and a life toge  
ing andblossom between them, a rejection if she made a move would make t  
only more poignant.

offered Unbearable.

privacy,

\* \* \*

as they

Half an hour later, Cammie pulled a sundress over her head, the s  
w them smocked bodice fitting tightly over her chest. Sundresses and bathin  
were all she wore on the island. Dane liked his board shorts, his lo  
ids and tanned and muscled. And when he threw his shirt off for a swim? She  
ood for count her breaths so she wouldn't hyperventilate.

rrier in Dane was already pouring champagne when she stepped out of he  
straight into the living room.

"I don't think I can work if you give me champagne," she said  
re here handed her a glass.

e." "We worked the entire flight. Now we need a break. We can star  
the two tomorrow." He tapped his glass to hers with the tinkle of crystal.

Fernsby arrived only minutes later, his golf cart laden with f  
ean air unloaded into the small kitchen's refrigerator.

waves a Dane stared in wonder. "Did you make all that this afternoon?"

With a hint of disdain, Fernsby said, "I am always prepared, so I've got the pointed to the fridge. "You'll have cold salmon on a bed of asparagus here in salads, fruit salads. You'll also find a fish pie with instructions on how to reheat it."

She saw Cammie's mouth watered. She loved Fernsby's fish pie.

"There's also shepherd's pie, cold cuts for lunches, and a selection of fruit for breakfast." He clapped his hands. "If you need anything, please let me know. Otherwise, just work away to your hearts' desire," he said with a grin. "Then he stretched his lips in what could pass for a smile, at least for Fernsby, who never smiled."

"Fernsby, you are brilliant," Dane said.

"Of course I am, sir."

"There's enough food here to feed an army, let alone two people. I'll put a hand to his chest. "So why don't you just take some time, however long we're here. You can come up with more recipes for the next competition that will pound Digbert into the sand."

Fernsby drawled, "You're so kind, sir. But that man doesn't give me a single worry. He uses *frozen pastry*, for God's sake." Then he trundled off in his golf cart.

"How does he do that?" Cammie asked with wonder. "Taking everything with barely a moment's notice?" She smiled, then huffed a laugh. "He really needs to write a book. *How Life Should Be Lived According to Fernsby*."

Dane added dryly, "Don't mention it, or he'll start writing it while you're on the island."

She put a hand on her waist and cocked her hip. "Tell me, do you know anything about his life before he came to work for you?"

They both looked at the dust settling in Fernsby's wake. "I thought about putting a private investigator on him. But then I tossed the idea. It's just that Fernsby remains a mystery."

She had to agree.

\* \* \*

Good he

They'd worked straight through for two days, to their hearts' desire. Fernsby put it, and they'd accomplished so much. Today, the n

ir.” He dawned bright and beautiful. Dane had a need for something di  
s, green perhaps a round of golf on the nine-hole course he’d had built on the is  
how to So far, spring had been rather cool in the Bay Area, and Dane relis  
heat of the Caribbean. He hadn’t come here while Cammie was on  
leave. Somehow the sea and the sun were so much more relaxing w  
tion of was with him.

ease do He’d lain awake last night with more of his crazy thoughts, like p  
iphysis, along the lanai to her French doors. They’d be standing open. Cammi  
east for the scent of the ocean and the breeze that blew through during the ni  
thought incessantly of blowing through the doors himself, just like the  
The thought had been so inviting that his body clenched tight. She  
close. And yet, so far away, as the saying went.

” Dane His fantasies seemed so much more potent after that hug in Se  
off, for Montgomery’s hallway, after the crazy need to kiss her almost got the  
baking of him.

With thoughts like that running rampant through his nights,  
re me a coming to the island hadn’t been the best idea. Especially with Fe  
d off in quarter mile away. Because now nothing stood between them.

Nothing except the rules.

care of For two days, he’d repeated that to himself. *Remember the rules.*  
d out a he’d started to hate them.

ording But as much as they kept her safe, they kept him safe too. Kept hi  
making a mistake, kept him from pushing her away by asking for mc  
e we’re she could give.

Over a breakfast of toast and fruit, he suggested, “Let’s play a ro  
u know golf.” It had nothing to do with how much he liked watching her swin  
club in those sexy little sundresses of hers. Or they could go down  
it about beach, where he liked watching her in those sexy swimsuits just as mu  
s better But then he’d have to slap himself for his thoughts.

Those errant thoughts were also why he used the Pebble Beach  
gym at a different time than she did. Watching her in her tight leggin  
skimpy workout tops drove him just a little bit mad.

“Great idea.” Cammie gave a little fist pump. “I haven’t go  
months.” Then she added with a smile, “We always do ou  
sire, as brainstorming while I’m beating you.”

morning “Beating me?” he scoffed. “We’ll see about that.”

fferent, Even as *he* was beating *her*, she'd have her recorder going, a  
sland. brainstorming transcript would magically appear a few hours later.

hed the A most irreverent thought occurred to him. What if he touched her  
family if he kissed her? What if it was all on that recording?

hen she The idea made him smile. Even as it heated him up.

Of course it was just another of his many daydreams.

adding The island wasn't big enough for eighteen holes, but Dane had e  
e loved enough land for nine. Right after breakfast, they hit the course and  
ght. Hearound ideas.

breeze. "I like Daniel's idea of finding something in Tahoe," she said behi  
was soas he lined up his ball. "We'll have the sand for volleyball games and t  
right there for swimming. And what do you think about putting in a ni  
bastiangolf course as well?"

e better "I love the way you think," Dane agreed as he whacked his b  
overshot the hole by a wide margin. His mind wasn't on this game,  
maybethat long-ago golf game. Twelve years ago, to be exact.

rnsby a He'd gone out that day to hit a few balls and ease the tension ou  
muscles. He'd needed to get away from his office mess. Where bette  
than the golf course he owned, especially since he had a condo there  
Even ifhe could shower after the game? He hadn't known who she was wh  
spotted her. He'd been playing alone. She'd played alone too. Then  
m frombeen playing together. He'd been about to introduce himself when she  
re thanup her hand. "No names," she'd said in the sexiest damn voice that see  
curl around his insides. "That way, I'll feel more comfortable  
ound ofcutthroat."

g a golf No names. A mystery woman.

to the And cutthroat she'd been. So had he, even as he drove himsel  
ch. every time he got near her. He remembered the way she smelled  
citrusy scent that mesmerized him. Just the way her fruity scent mesr  
1 homehim now, like the fresh mangoes they'd had for breakfast.

igs and With his very first sight of her, his heart had tried to beat itself ri  
of his chest.

lled in "And we'll offer all the necessary facilities, a physical therapy roc  
ir bestall the equipment, as well as providing therapists," she was saying.

But he was thinking how physical that game had become. He c  
tear his eyes away from the way her body moved. He'd damn near sa

and the graceful movements of every muscle as she swung. How badly he wanted to put his hands on her and feel her body's moves with each swing.

"Do you think we should have a big hall with family-style dining tables where everyone sits together?" She stopped for a moment to look at him, flushing as if his thoughts were written all over his face. Just like it had been that day. She rushed on, "Or maybe we should have more intimate dining. Tables for two and four or six, where people can talk more easily in a big group."

That word. *Intimate*. He thought of how intimate they'd gotten at the lake golf game. Even as he knew he shouldn't think about it at all. Even as he tried to shove things to his body in this moment.

"We should have both," he said. He wanted both, business and pleasure, all of it.

"Yeah." She nodded, turning back to the ball. "We need both."

He never should have hugged her at Sebastian's house. Now he remembered the feel of her against him. While she was grieving for her father, he'd been having lustful thoughts, making him a complete ass. In the bedroom where he admitted that, he couldn't stop looking at her in that too sexy, sultry way. Even as he'd been thinking about touching her, kissing her.

Just the way he'd been thinking that day during their first sexy, intimate golf game.

He wanted to play

\* \* \*

She couldn't concentrate. Her thoughts were scattered all over the place. She was throwing out ideas that were already on their list, for Pete's sake. Some of them were supposed to be talking logistics—geology reports, engineering drawings, how to start building. But her mind wouldn't work properly. She thought of how close he stood, how good he smelled, how hard his muscles were when he swung.

Just like that other golf game.

She tried to sound coherent. "We need a full gym and workout area and a massage therapy room." Her nerves were jumping. Every time she played golf since that day, her body had tingled with the memory of his touch. Her body tingled now with the memory of his touch, his kiss, his



ot. The “We need a pickleball court too,” he said.

nted to She laughed, the sound a little strangled. “Of course we need a pickleball court.”

;—long She remembered how he’d stood there that day, setting up for a shot, his hair glistening in the sun making his hair gleam blue-black, his body so tempting she’d wanted to lick him like an ice cream cone. She’d been at the golf course only to get a job. Clyde had said her jitters were making him edgy. He’d told her to get out and exercise to burn off all that nervous energy. She’d had that interview that day with one of Clyde’s associates, whom she’d never met. And Clyde had said that made her swear she wouldn’t research the man beforehand. That had been a big mistake.

But Clyde had insisted, “I don’t want you to have any preconceptions. Despite Clyde having told her the job was in the bag—he’d obviously been singing her praises—she couldn’t count on anything. And she’d gone to the golf course to play and relax.

is body Then *he* had come along, a man so handsome, so sexy that she’d forgotten all her nerves about the job interview. In fact, she’d forgotten the interview completely. There’d only been him.

ndress, She’d challenged him with that no-names thing and playing cutthroat. She just hadn’t imagined exactly what *cutthroat* meant. He’d made wise choices, mind-sidling close to her, saying things like, “Do you really want to take your job that way? Maybe you should try it this way.” Then he’d stand right next to her, less than a breath of air between them, and guide her hands on the club. His sexy, slightly sweaty male scent had made her dizzy. It had been a mistake not to let him throw her off her game. Hot and cold shivers had run down her spine. At some point, she’d leaned back, felt him against her back. They were together.

neering The game—and the games—continued, touches that weren’t necessary. It was his breath against her hair as he whispered how good her stroke was, how good a grip she had on the shaft of her club, all those innuendoes making her crazy as much as they made her laugh. Everything was so much better without names. He was a seductive stranger she’d never have to see again.

ea. And “We should have single rooms as well as family cottages,” she said. They’d had a voice too sexy, too husky as her memories made her hot and bothered. And she’d wanted to turn around and jump him. Just the way she’d wanted to that day. “We should also have dorm rooms the kids can share, as if they’re at school.”

Did she even make sense anymore?

Yet everything had seemed to make so much sense that day. He had enchanted her with his touches, his whispers, his hard body, his hot, the innuendos. And when she'd won the game—had he let her win? She'd wanted to ask—he'd said, "This calls for champagne." He'd had a condo right because of the golf course and *not* taking up his offer had never been an option. She'd almost have followed him anywhere.

His taste had been exquisite, his lovemaking so beautiful it still made her get a headache late at night. He'd made her forget the lover who'd broken her heart because the man had never existed.

"We need to have the best chef," he said.

She laughed. "You're always thinking about food." The champagne had been appetizers had been exquisite that night. And he'd been exquisite, knowing exactly how to touch her.

"I'm always thinking about life's pleasures." His smile reached down inside her to all those memories, to all that pleasure he'd given her. It was the taste of him on her tongue, the feel of him inside her.

She'd never known such dazzling sensations as those he'd given her that night.

What would have happened if she hadn't walked into the interview the next morning and discovered that Dane Harrington, her potential employer, was the very man who'd made such beautiful love to her there before?

so hard  
up and  
r, all of

necessary,  
what a  
ing her  
sexier  
gain.  
aid, her  
l, ready  
And we  
."

Did she even make sense anymore?

Yet everything had seemed to make so much sense that day. He'd enchanted her with his touches, his whispers, his hard body, his sexual innuendos. And when she'd won the game—had he let her win? She'd never asked—he'd said, "This calls for champagne." He'd had a condo right on the golf course and *not* taking up his offer had never been an option. She would have followed him anywhere.

His taste had been exquisite, his lovemaking so beautiful it still made her ache late at night. He'd made her forget the lover who'd broken her heart as if the man had never existed.

"We need to have the best chef," he said.

She laughed. "You're always thinking about food." The champagne and appetizers had been exquisite that night. And he'd been exquisite, knowing exactly how to touch her.

"I'm always thinking about life's pleasures." His smile reached deep down inside her to all those memories, to all that pleasure he'd given her, to the taste of him on her tongue, the feel of him inside her.

She'd never known such dazzling sensations as those he'd given her that night.

What would have happened if she hadn't walked into the interview the next morning and discovered that Dane Harrington, her potential new employer, was the very man who'd made such beautiful love to her the night before?

## Chapter Fourteen

*Pleasure.* “We want our guests to have the best of everything,” Dane in

He realized now that she was the best he’d ever had. Her taste had his mind reel, her skin had been as soft as rose petals, and the lyrical of her ecstasy still played in his mind every night.

He found himself close to her now—close enough to sense the heat of her body, the sweetness of her shampoo, the citrus of the lotion she always used. “We need to offer leisure time for the parents, like a couple’s night followed by a romantic candlelit dinner in their suite. So they can learn to be lovers again.” He painted the romantic picture he dreamed of with her.

She smelled so damn good. He shouldn’t want this. He shouldn’t have her. This could be so bad for them.

But it could be so damned good.

He put his finger beneath her chin and tipped it up, forcing her to look at him. “What do you think?” His voice was so low it couldn’t even be called a whisper.

Her eyes were wide, her breath coming fast, and her scent carried the sexual musk of that night. Even as his mind shouted a warning—*be alert!*—his body and his heart didn’t care.

She was so close. Her lips were so pretty and plump, begging for his touch.

With just the tip of his finger beneath her chin, he touched his lips to hers. The sweetest, lightest touch.

She made a sound, almost a moan.

He trailed the tip of his tongue along the seam of her lips. Taste her. Tempted her. Just the way he had that night. With the tiniest gasp of surprise, her lips parted for him.

Nothing had ever been so good as when his mouth closed over hers. When her tongue touched his, and the kiss became a slow, sweet devouring of each other. Delicious little moans rose up her throat, sounds of pleasure that were as sweet as her taste. He wanted to haul her against him, his body plastered to his. And yet, he wanted this, just her lips, her moist tongue, her taste still filled with the luscious fruit they’d eaten that morning.

\* \* \*

She wanted to curl her arms around his neck and climb his body until she could wrap her legs around his hips, to hold him there, tight against her, to feel of him hard against her core. He tasted like heaven. He tasted like the sweetest treat she'd ever known. He tasted of desire and sexy, steamy passion. He tasted of twelve years of craving. And he tasted of rules that shouldn't be broken, of everything she wanted and everything she couldn't have. As if he'd stolen every last breath from her, she had to step back and drag in a lungful of air before she drowned in him. They were both breathing hard. She'd been so deep in those memories of that day. When there'd been no need to resist. When there'd been no need for rules. When there'd been nothing but the feel of him, the taste of him, the scent of him. But that day had been left behind long ago.

\* \* \*

He wanted her. He also knew how easily he could push her away if he needed something or someone this much always brought disappointment. But he had to fix it. Right now. Before she left him because he'd overstepped. "I'm so sorry. That was totally inappropriate." She rolled her lips together, swallowed, her eyes too wide, too open. Finally, she said, "I'm sorry too. It breaks all the rules." Who had thought up their idiotic rules? Was it him? Was it her? The rules were the reason the two of them had been able to work together so long in the most symbiotic relationship he'd ever known. She spoke again, saying things he didn't want to hear but needed anyway. "Our rules matter. We can't change them now, especially now because we're in the midst of the most important project of our careers." He wanted to argue. Something in him said the rules just didn't ring anymore. She'd needed the job to give her the wherewithal to care for Lochlan. But Lochlan was no longer here. Didn't that mean the reason for the rules no longer existed?

“I mean, we can’t throw it all out now.” Was that desperation voice? “I mean, it would be throwing away everything we’ve worked until she for.”

her, the Would it be so bad to let themselves go?

like the “I mean, the rules enabled me to help my uncle. And they nights. everything about our relationship work. I mean...” She finally stopped

*I mean.* She kept saying that, as if she was trying to convince he wanted much as him. And he saw then, without a doubt, that if he push absolutely would run. She needed her rules. As sweet as that kiss ha : just to the rules were truly what kept them together. And if he blew them might blow up his life and this crucial relationship.

*You always want too much from people, Dane.*

been no Even as his throat wanted to close around the words, he had to forc d been out. “You’re right. You’re right about everything.”

In a voice that threatened to tear them apart, she said, “We’ve be for three days, and we’ve got a ton of material. Why don’t we head where I can collate all of it and put together our presentation Mavericks?”

forever. Metaphorically, she was running, even if he hadn’t destroyed the ru

ient.

\* \* \*

se he’d

How many times did she need to go over all the reasons why an affa o stark. Dane was a really bad idea? Over and over, obviously.

Even that didn’t work when she thought about his lips on hers, h But the filling her mouth, filling her entire being. His scent was like a drug r for so senses. No man had ever been as potent for her. Even as she packed h alone in her room, the scent of him still mesmerized her, and his k eded to steamed her up.

ot when So she *had* to go through all her reasons. Again.

It would end badly.

ing true They would lose their friendship.

are for She would lose her job.

Nothing would ever be the same between them once it was over.

Her life would change irrevocably, and she couldn’t stand change. Not now. Not right after losing Uncle Lochlan.

in her But still, she couldn't help craving one more kiss, one more night so hardmore moment of pleasure.

A pair of silk panties in her hands, she had the most awful thought hadn't even fought her when she'd said they shouldn't forget the rule madehe'd been the first to apologize. *So why did he kiss me in the first place*

On the heels of that, another horrible thought rammed its way in. *What if I was the one who'd kissed him first? Was that why he'd immediately apologized, she* Oh God, she couldn't remember how it happened.

She could only remember wanting him, being in his arms, kissing him up, he It was only a kiss, yet it tore her apart. Without Dane, without the life she had nothing. She didn't even have her uncle anymore.

No, the best thing for her was to forget about that kiss, forget about the long-ago night, forget about him with the kids at the barbecue, with a life in his arms. She might want all that, and she might want it with Dane, but it would never go on here never going to happen. At least it wouldn't happen the way she wanted it to happen. And her beautiful, comfortable, secure life could turn into a hot mess for the

\* \* \*

minutes.

While they waited in Martinique for his pilot to ready the jet, Dane saw Maverick meeting in San Francisco for the next morning. "Are you guys ready?" he'd asked Cammie as she busied herself on her laptop.

"I'm sure we will be," she'd said without looking up.

He had nothing else to do. Because Cammie wasn't speaking to him in his taste in an angry, *I never want to speak to you again* way. Cammie was going to her that. This was more of an *I can't believe I kissed you and I don't know what to do about it* way.

He was just as shell-shocked.

That kiss reminded him of every single moment they'd spent in his arms on the golf course that night. Not that he'd ever forgotten a single moment. But now the memories were fresh with the taste of her, the scent of her hair, the need for her.

He just wasn't sure what to do that wouldn't ruin the good things he already had.

But he had the hours of the flight to think about it.

And to think about her.

ght, one

\* \* \*

t. Dane They flew home overnight, working some of the time, sleeping some  
es. And time. After preparing a special treat for the morning's Maverick me  
? the plane had a sufficient galley kitchen—Fernsby watched Dane  
Was she Camille's every waking moment with a hawk's eyes.

ogized? Of course they didn't notice his scrutiny; they were too busy i  
each other. *What's up with that?* he thought, just like an American.

rim. But he wasn't American. He was British. The British were alway  
his job, reserved, especially when they were being devious. And he was  
(another Americanism) devious.

out that *Something* had happened on that island. SOMETHING BIG. He  
baby in the words in huge capital letters.

t it was He could have clapped with glee, but of course he didn't. Thing  
l it. finally moving in the right direction. FINALLY. Again in huge capital

ss. He'd brought food to the island, much of it already prepared, so  
have all the meals they needed and could just forget he was there.

But something hadn't worked the way he'd planned.

“Just get on with it, you two,” he muttered under his breath. He wa  
t up the rail at them. But he'd just have to work harder. A good butler's wo  
ou sure never done.

Then a brilliant plan came to him, which was not unusual. Quite o  
was filled with brilliant plans. He was a mastermind, if he did say so h

im. Not He almost wanted to buff his fingernails on his lapel. Because t  
n't like one of his most brilliant ideas yet. And it would work.

w what

\* \* \*

s condo It was almost the end of April, and the Mavericks were eager to hea  
oment. and Cammie's plans for the resort. They all wanted to get a move on.

her, his following morning, Will and his best friends and brothers sat around  
conference table for the meeting. All of them except Evan. Will kne

ng they would never last three months, never mind six, but at least he was tak  
time now to bond with his children.

Matt was telling the story, with wide gestures and a resounding v  
how he'd taken Ari and Noah to see the babies. “I swear, Mom a



made an edict that Evan and Paige needed a date night.” He dropped his voice as if they were in a conspiracy. “Secretly, I think Paige was horrified by leaving the babies alone for one evening. After all, they’re only a month old—He laughed. “But you know Mom. She told them they needed to reach a certain age over more than being peed on and changing dirty diapers.”

Of course that’s how Mom and Dad would be, the ultimate grandpa. They were in seventh heaven over the twins, as well as the new babies on the way.

Will had a sudden vision of Harper, hands on her belly that was his child. He wanted it. Badly. He just wasn’t sure the time was right. But when it was, he’d be overjoyed.

“And I swear,” Matt went on, unusually long-winded, “Paige v— ‘But-but-but...’” He smiled. “And Mom simply held up her hands, ‘It’s nonnegotiable, and I don’t want to hear any excuses.’ You should have seen Mom. And you can’t argue with her, because she’s always right!” Maverick at the table chuckled. They knew their mother well.

So true. Mom had known Harper was right for him, and she allowed him to make a mistake that would scare away the love of his life. Will would be forever grateful for that.

The conference room door burst open. Dane should have been there instead, Will—and all his brothers—were delightfully surprised to see Fernsby rolling in his tea trolley with another mind-boggling delicacy for himself. A man must spend every waking moment in the kitchen.

Cammie Chandler and Dane followed, but not a single Maverick brother was about them.

“Do you travel with that trolley, Fernsby?” Will asked.

The man looked down his nose. “Of course, sir. A butler is prepared. I keep it in the trunk of the car, which we left at the airport.”

Then he began pouring coffee and dishing out another of his creations. So the big, the big, the big, around a mouthful of delicious cake covered in warm custard and jam roly-poly, Sebastian said, “Okay, so is there a butler registry, like a dot-com or something, where we can find someone just like you?”

Dane laughed. “There’s no one like Fernsby.”

Fernsby, with as straight a face as ever could be, said, “There’s no one on this planet who can handle bosses who are too big for their britches than I can.”

ped his Each and every Maverick laughed himself sick. Fernsby was so  
ified atthey were all too big for their britches, as their mom often told them.  
th old.” Mom and Fernsby would get along great.  
connect

\* \* \*

ma and  
ie three Cammie ran through the slide deck demonstrating their ideas,  
ge with pickleball court to basketball hoops to activity rooms, along with art  
for her. for painting to metalwork, and even a dance studio. Her tummy ha  
flipflops on the drive from the airport when Dane had said he wanted  
take the lead, claiming most of the ideas were hers.

vas all, And now she found she couldn't look at him. As if one look woul  
saying, her stumble.  
ould've Or remind her of that island kiss, and then she'd become con  
” Every flustered.

She concentrated on the conference room full of Mavericks, all se  
hadn't the big table, their arms folded. The blinds behind them were pulled to  
his life. glare on the large display screen from the sun shining through the w  
overlooking San Francisco Bay. She was glad they'd dressed info  
ere, but making her feel better about the fact that she and Dane still wore  
to see clothes. When they'd been heading to the Caribbean, she hadn't tho  
cy. The take business attire to change into.

As she clicked through the last slide, Sebastian breathed in deeply,  
k cared it out in a long sigh. “Don't you think we're asking a lot of these  
dancing, painting, metalworking?” He might have been wondering how  
time Charlie would have to devote to teaching special kids how to cr  
always out of scrap.

But Cammie had an answer. “Our guests will rise to the level  
ons. capabilities. We talked to Harper.” She glanced at Will. “She feels th  
alled a kids need to be given all the opportunities their contemporarie  
Butler- available to them.”

Daniel looked at the practical side. “So how much land do yo  
you'll need for this, if we're building from the ground up?”

Cammie nodded, grateful for the question. She wanted these men t  
one on she'd thought of everything. “We don't necessarily need to build fr  
e way I ground up. We want to be in Tahoe—that was a great suggestion, than

right—She tipped her head to Daniel, giving credit where credit was due. “But the Maverick Group is committed to its environmental policies, there are no long-vacant old resorts or casinos with lakefront property that might be repurposed with existing roads, power, and water.” She clicked to a slide with a picture showing square footage for every activity area they’d talked about at the resort. “If we can do it all on the same level, the footprint could be kept from a large area. But there’s no reason we can’t have a multilevel facility and still have classes for outdoor activities. Our main objective is to be on the waterfront and have a forest at the back, making hiking trails available to our guests.”

“What about skiing in the winter?” Matt wanted to know.

“Rather than having our own slopes, we could work out deals with existing resorts for day trips.”

Matt nodded his approval.

“So how much money do we need to start?” Gideon asked.

Cammie didn’t hesitate. She felt good about the material, confident in her presentation. “The lowball figure would be two hundred million to start, but we can do this in stages. But to do it right, we need at least five hundred million.”

Not a single Maverick choked or guffawed or batted an eyelash, normally. Cal, who was the Mavericks’ business manager. With the billions of dollars at stake, it could be all pie-in-the-sky, but Cal was down to earth. “We’ll surely have our work cut out for us.” He paused, looking at the square footage on the screen for a long moment. “But it’s doable.”

Cammie smiled and finally looked at Dane. She saw pride gleaming in his eyes. Little did he know it had taken every ounce of confidence she possessed to run the meeting. But she’d really done it.

“We’ve already started opening doors,” she told them. “We’ll send a message with Clyde Westerbourne to see how he can help.”

Cal whistled. “Westerbourne. Great man. He helped us with Gideon’s foundation.”

“And I’m sure he’ll want to help with this too.” Then she smiled smoothly, “We’d welcome any additional ideas or comments you have. This is a group project. We need your input.”

Will sat back in his chair, holding a pen between his fingertips. “I’ll speak for all of us. You’ve done the work.” He flashed his gaze around the room, and the Mavericks let him be their mouthpiece. “And we like to thank you.” “If we have something to add, we’ll let you know, but you’ve got an a

it as the start here. Obviously, there'll be massive fundraising for this. But y  
e a few have such a mind meld, we don't want to get in your way."  
t work, "Cal and I will look at how the foundation can help," Gideon sai  
a chart you know you can call on us if you need anything."  
lding to She wanted to clap. She wanted to cry. They'd done it. The Ma  
e a lot were in. And finally, she could look at Dane again.  
re room She felt that mind meld, as if they didn't need words.  
vith the And it told her he was extremely proud of her.

vith ski

t in her  
rt, if we  
n."  
ot even  
aires, it  
as hell  
ge slide

g in his  
ssessed

left a

ideon's

added  
re. This

believe  
und the  
ill of it.  
mazing

start here. Obviously, there'll be massive fundraising for this. But you two have such a mind meld, we don't want to get in your way."

"Cal and I will look at how the foundation can help," Gideon said. "But you know you can call on us if you need anything."

She wanted to clap. She wanted to cry. They'd done it. The Mavericks were in. And finally, she could look at Dane again.

She felt that mind meld, as if they didn't need words.

And it told her he was extremely proud of her.

## Chapter Fifteen

Dane had planned on three days to go through the entire project with the Mavericks, to discuss it, take suggestions, make changes, think it over. But the group had decided in less than two hours. It wasn't even much past eight a.m. The whole thing was kind of crazy.

But then, it wasn't crazy at all. Cammie had done an exceptional job of polishing their presentation on the overnight flight from the Caribbean. She'd gotten some good shut-eye, but he wasn't sure how long she'd slept, though it had certainly been long enough for her to be sharp and ready for whatever the Mavericks threw at her.

That was why she hadn't spoken to him much on the flight—because she'd been working, perfecting.

It couldn't have had anything to do with that kiss.

"Great presentation," Will said, rising to shake Cammie's hand and Dane's.

Fernsby's trolley was empty. Ah yes, that was probably why the Mavericks were letting them go: The cake was gone.

Back at the car in the parking garage, Dane had left the air on—he had a special climate control—since Rex was sleeping inside.

Fernsby stored his foldable tea trolley in the trunk and turned, ready to greet them with his staid British façade. "I've flown halfway around the globe for you today, sir." Did he even recognize what a huge exaggeration that was? But Dane didn't stop him. "So please don't ask me to drive another two hours down to Pebble Beach. I need my rest." He sniffed loudly as if he should have known this. "I'll take the dog to the flat with me while you play tourist for the rest of the day."

Fernsby didn't fool him. He adored the dog, and taking Rex to the flat was a hardship. Both he and Cammie had seen Fernsby sneaking dog treats out of the kitchen though the butler claimed it was Dane who gave out way too many.

Cammie jumped in. "We can't play tourist. We've got a lot of work to do."

Fernsby eyed her with a look that could have flayed the flesh.

lesser human's bones. His voice when he answered held its usual steel though slightly more tender, perhaps because of Cammie's loss. "My dear Camille," he said softly. "You two have worked like dogs," he said with an exaggerated drawl, "for the past three days. You must take some recuperation time."

When Cammie opened her mouth, he wagged a finger. "You are never, but grieving, my dear." Was that compassion in Fernsby's eyes? "My dear, eleven mistake about that. And now I am ordering you to go out and enjoy this beautiful city on earth."

"I thought London was the most beautiful city on earth," Cammie said. He'd not exactly arguing with him.

Fernsby looked at her as if she were incredibly misguided. "However the heart is," he said simply. With that, he crammed his tall frame into the car, slammed the door, turned on the engine, and expertly backed out because the parking spot at high speed.

Thank God the two of them weren't still standing by the trunk. In Fernsby and the car were a distant memory.

"He's so bossy," she said, hands on her hips.

Dane merely smiled. By some miracle, he had exactly what he wanted: the free time with Cammie. Taking her elbow, he guided her to the car park.

"Let's get a coffee and talk about what we'd like to do today. At the car park Fernsby gave us an order."

She harrumphed like an old lady. And Dane smiled deep down inside, guarding

\* \* \*

be with

at was?

er three

if Dane

ou two

was no

to Rex,

work to

from a

They found a little café just outside the garage entrance, and the smell of freshly ground coffee almost made her swoon.

She staked out a table while Dane ordered espresso for himself and for her. He always knew exactly what she wanted. She watched him as the barista, laugh with the other customers, and make the young woman behind him look to see if he wore a wedding ring.

He was just so... likable. Sexy. Drool-worthy. And the perfect boss.

But right now, she wanted to squeal her delight like a child who had won a stuffed animal at a carnival. She couldn't have been happier with

well the meeting had gone. She'd answered every question as if she

rn tone, what she was talking about. Which she did. She'd put together the  
ly dearfound example photos, worked out square footage, looked at cost est  
with anThe Mavericks hadn't looked to Dane for answers. They'd listened  
erationAnd now she overflowed with triumph.

The feeling was momentous. As she'd talked, she'd realized she  
are stillthis project with every fiber of her being. It was the project of a lifetim  
ake no She could do it. Sure, her nerves could get the better of her every  
ie mosta while. But she'd worked with Dane on so many projects. She had  
contacts they needed. He came to her often enough, asking who they  
ie said, call about this and who they needed for that. If she let this proje  
through her fingers because of a few nerves, she'd regret it forever.

ome is She wouldn't let fear get the better of her.

me into When he finally returned to their table, setting the perfect latte in  
l out offer and pulling his seat close to hers, she managed to say the wo  
absolutely had to.

a flash, "You know I love working with you, Dane. It's been totally great."

Something like panic flared in his eyes, and he pressed her hand

For a man who always knew the right words, Dane actually stammere  
anted—wait—please, let me—"

k stairs. She cut him off. "Just hear me out, okay?" She pushed throu  
fter all, nerves, pushed through her memories of all the bad days with her  
pushed through the grief and the moments where she'd felt powerless  
ide. him. "I've been your assistant for twelve years." She pressed her lips t  
when unbidden tears wanted to rush to her eyes. Maybe it was her  
Maybe it was all those good years with Dane. Or maybe it was the ni  
started it all.

cent of Dane grabbed her hand, held on a little too tightly. "Cammie, pleas

l a latte She reclaimed her hand to say what she had to. "I'm ready  
i charm promotion. I don't want to be just an assistant on this project. I v  
man in manage it."

He sat back, hand dropping to his lap, staring at her as if she'd  
shown him this side of herself before.

s. Maybe she hadn't.

o'd just Then he puffed out a snort. "Now why the hell didn't I think of th  
ith how shook his head, something like wonder widening his eyes. "Of course  
e knew do the best job. Everything we talked about in that meeting was you



slides, He tapped his temple. "In fact, I think the original idea was yours."  
imates. She couldn't remember anymore. It didn't matter. Because, mirac-  
to her. miracles, he'd agreed. "I might need some help." She was stepping out  
comfort zone, but she needed to do this. "But I'm ready to try it."  
wanted He pointed his finger at her nose. "You're my idea genius."  
e. Before she'd always been his idea *genie*, as if what they did together  
once in magic. But now she was already promoted. To *genius*.  
all the "You can bounce things off me," he said. "Just the way I bounce  
should off you. But you can do this."  
ect slip She might never be one hundred percent in control of her nerves  
But was anyone—except Dane? She'd settle for ninety-nine. "That's  
We'll absolutely do our normal idea exchange."  
front of They always would, because she would never let anything get in the  
rds she of what they had together.

\* \* \*

tightly.  
d. "No, Cammie left to use the powder room.  
That moment had stretched on endlessly, when he'd believed she  
going to quit. Her beloved uncle was no longer her responsibility.  
igh her meant she didn't need this job, because she could now work any-  
uncle, where the rules he'd always thought protected her had protected him from losing  
to help And now, she didn't need either anymore—not the job, not the rules. /  
together him.  
uncle. But his heart rate was under control once more. He could breathe  
ght that Cammie wasn't leaving.  
e." Dane wished he could be his own punching bag. How stupid could  
for a be?  
want to Cammie had worked for him for twelve years without a single problem.  
And because he was thoughtless and selfish, he'd been holding her back  
d never along. He'd kept her in the place he wanted her to be instead of helping  
get to the place she needed to be. She was his idea *genius*, not his *genie*.  
she conjured things out of smoke. She was so intelligent, so competent  
at?" He even told him when he was going in the wrong direction, sometimes kicking  
e you'll it before he did. She was his right-hand woman, not just his girl Frida  
r idea." wasn't a *girl* at all, but a resourceful, thoughtful, caring, loyal woman.

And he was an ass for not giving her this chance before.

The moment she returned to the table, he took her hand. “I apologize for what?” she asked, as if she couldn’t see how he’d held her back.

“I’ve given you raises, but I should’ve realized that wasn’t enough. You’ve always taken on more responsibility, doing whatever new projects were asked of you. We just never acknowledged it. You’ve always directed projects. And I’ve always listened to you.”

She shook her head, staring him down. “Don’t rewrite history, Rex. This is different. I’ve never asked to do that before. But I want it now. Please don’t apologize. You had no idea it was important to me, because I didn’t even know I wanted it. Maybe I had to get through the order the way Uncle Lochlan.” She shrugged. “But now I know what I want. And thank you for the promotion.” She put her hand to her heart. “Thank you so much.”

“Of course you’ll get a raise commensurate with your new title of manager.”

“Thank you.” She didn’t turn him down. He wouldn’t have let her.

He still could have smacked himself. Why hadn’t Fernsby forced him to open his eyes? “You need to know I’m in awe of you. And I can’t wait for everything you come up with along the way. Because it will be astounding.”

Her smile turned him inside out. He should have done this years ago. And not so she’d smile at him exactly that way.

again.

\* \* \*

Cammie’s cheeks flushed at his praise. Something wanted to bubble up in her. Excitement. Maybe even joy. Certainly pride. Because Dane hadn’t asked for the promotion. She’d asked for it. She’d taken her own personal back all the horns and wrestled it to the ground, telling Dane what she should do years ago. She wanted a project, and what better project than for special needs kids? It was almost like a calling. And she was going to do the absolute best job ever.

But she smiled so Dane wouldn’t know the overwhelming effort she’d put into it. “Now that’s out of the way, let’s talk about our plans for the future.”

We’ve always done our best brainstorming while we’re outdoors—

hiking in Pebble Beach, or wherever.”

ze.” Just as she had on the island, she remembered that fateful golf game. their golf games. But she also remembered the long hikes when she’d been enough. in tune with Dane. A walk around San Francisco would be the next task. I thing.

ted my “Why don’t we go to the windmills in Golden Gate Park?” she suggested. “It’s the perfect time of year for the tulips.” She chuckled at her Dane.” always seem to think about visiting the windmills when the tulips are in bloom. This is season.”

low. So “Deal.” Their coffees finished, they headed out, and Dane pulled her around his crooked elbow. “I’m glad we both wore our walking shoes. I’ll be in good luck with you.” Since Fernsby had taken the car back to the flat, Cammie booked an Uber.

1.” They were picked up by a massive SUV. Once they were ensconced in the back seat, she enjoyed the drive across San Francisco, with a brief detour around Alamo Square and the Painted Ladies, those gorgeous Victorian houses, then through Golden Gate Park past the Botanical Gardens.

him to They climbed out of the car to find the tulips still blooming in the park. To see Wilhelmina Garden at the Dutch Windmill. Hand over her mouth to conceal her excitement, she clutched Dane’s arm. “Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?”

go. Just Looking at her, he said softly, “Yes, I have.”

For a moment, she was struck speechless. But of course he wasn’t looking at her. He might not even have meant a woman. He was probably thinking of Kew Gardens in London or the Tuileries in Paris or a sunset on Pebble Beach.

inside The tulips flowered in a burst of color—red, yellow, white, pink—against the backdrop of the Dutch Windmill.

bull by “Let’s sit,” she said. She would beg if she had to. “And just content yourself with this.” They found a bench amid the flowers, the perfume of sweet, garden things filling the air. “Doesn’t it make you feel serene?”

g to do In the oddest gesture, Dane laced his fingers through hers and held her hand. Usually, it was a squeeze or a touch, but he didn’t let go. “This is the perfect place for reflection.”

he day. Cammie dropped her voice to a low note. “Thank you for coming with me.”

She'd been pushy about the promotion, but he'd acquiesced with me. All chivalry, taking blame for never before giving her a project to manage. I felt so how could he have known when she'd never said what she wanted?

Next best He smiled down at her. "Fernsby damn near ordered us to go and enjoy the day. So I say no work, no brainstorming, just enjoying. What suggested can we do when Fernsby lays down the law?"

herself. "I Her heart fluttered at his touch, his smile, and the thought of a chance out of being with him. But she giggled. "He just wanted to practice baking a show without us hanging around."

her hand Dane laughed with her. "So true."

" Once they had their fill of the sweet air, Dane stood, pulling her with a wink and a nod. "There's a place I'd like to go. It's maybe a mile and a half walk away. It haven't been there in years, and I'd like to see it again."

needed in She tipped her head, having no idea what he could be talking about. "It's called Portals of the Past. I'll tell you about it when we get to the detour. You game?"

Victorian You game?"  
Lord, to be with him, she was game for anything. Thank goodness Queen wasn't wearing heels.

over her They strolled the sidewalk, few cars passing them. The more popular part of Golden Gate Park was on the other side of Nineteenth Avenue with the Japanese Tea Garden, the Academy of Sciences, and the de Young Museum.

They didn't talk about the job or the resort, or even her uncle's passing. Instead, falling into the smile on his beautiful lips, she waited for probably something... momentous.

Pebble Dane asked, "When you were a little girl, did you wear your hair in pigtailed or braids?"

nk—all

plate."

growing

held her

It's the

ng here

She'd been pushy about the promotion, but he'd acquiesced with such chivalry, taking blame for never before giving her a project to manage. But how could he have known when she'd never said what she wanted?

He smiled down at her. "Fernsby damn near ordered us to go out and enjoy the day. So I say no work, no brainstorming, just enjoying. What else can we do when Fernsby lays down the law?"

Her heart fluttered at his touch, his smile, and the thought of a day just being with him. But she giggled. "He just wanted to practice baking for the show without us hanging around."

Dane laughed with her. "So true."

Once they had their fill of the sweet air, Dane stood, pulling her with him. "There's a place I'd like to go. It's maybe a mile and a half walk. But I haven't been there in years, and I'd like to see it again."

She tipped her head, having no idea what he could be talking about.

"It's called Portals of the Past. I'll tell you about it when we get there. You game?"

Lord, to be with him, she was game for anything. Thank goodness she wasn't wearing heels.

They strolled the sidewalk, few cars passing them. The more popular part of Golden Gate Park was on the other side of Nineteenth Avenue with the Japanese Tea Garden, the Academy of Sciences, and the de Young Museum. They didn't talk about the job or the resort, or even her uncle's passing.

Instead, falling into the smile on his beautiful lips, she waited for something... momentous.

Dane asked, "When you were a little girl, did you wear your hair in pigtails or braids?"

## Chapter Sixteen

Cammie laughed so hard she had to put her hand over her mouth. “T With my red hair...” She flicked her curls. “I would have looked like Longstocking.”

He blinked. “Who’s Pippi Longstocking?”

The inane conversation was delightful, even making her heart “She was the nine-year-old heroine in a series of children’s books I read when I was a kid.” Then she turned the questioning back on him. “about you when you were a little boy?”

With a straight face, he said, “My hair wasn’t long enough for pig braids.”

She slapped at him playfully. “I didn’t mean your hair. What did you to do?”

He held her hand as they walked, nonchalantly, almost as if he didn’t notice what he was doing. But she felt the warmth of his palm and the strength in his grip. “I was all about animals. I had a pony. Later on, a dog. And if there was ever an injured animal out there, I found it.” He tapped his chest as if he was proud. “And made sure I healed it. Then I released it into the wild,” he added with a flourish.

She knew he’d wanted to be a vet, that he’d been in his third year of college, with veterinary school in mind. He’d never made it.

“What was your favorite pet?”

He tipped his face skyward. “There are so many to choose from. I found a wild turkey with an injured leg. I found her when I was hiking and stumbled right into a flock of wild turkeys with all these chicks. Turkey chicks called poults—and they were so damned cute.” His eyes shone when he looked at her. “She was their heroine, hobbling off in the opposite direction, squawking and shrieking, trying to draw me away from the poults while the other female led them to safety. She thought I was some sort of predator. I admired her heroism.”

When he looked down at her, she could almost see the little boy’s face, the young child chasing after a turkey so he could heal her leg.

“I caught her, took her home. I thought I could fix her.” His voice if he still remembered his hopefulness. “But she’d been born with a de leg. She liked to wander around the yard, even though my complained—at least when they were home—about the poop on the gr

“Did you at least clean up the poop?”

Neither. His eyes still glittering, he shook his head. “You can’t just cl e Pippiturkey poop, let me tell you, especially when the whole flock joined he that really drove everyone crazy. But she was great, even ate out hand.”

flutter. “What did you name her?”

used to “Stumpy.”

“What She stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. “Stumpy? That’s ju mean.”

tails or Dane’s smile shone down on her, as warm as the sun on the top head. “She always came when I called, so she must have liked it.”

ou like “You’re terrible,” she complained, walking again. “What happ her?”

e didn’t He shrugged. “One day, the whole flock just moved on. I’m not su and theCould have been a predator that drove them away.”

a horse. “Did you miss her?”

ped his “For a while.” He sighed. “I hoped she’d come back. But she nev it backSometimes you just have to accept that the things you love don’t come back to you.”

year of She thought how incredibly sad that was.

But then Dane smiled. “I figured she’d gone on to enjoy life els That’s what I hoped for all the animals and birds I rescued. That they I had aon to a better life. If I didn’t do that, it would have been too depressing

walked She suddenly wanted to hug him. Because, really, how many me cks arethere be who just wanted their protégés to move on to a better life?

hen he Just like her, with the way he’d so readily agreed to give her the rection, and a promotion. But that was Dane.

hile the They reached Lloyd Lake, where Dane stopped at a spot with a cle tor, andline across the water. With him standing behind her, his body close for her to feel his heat against her back, his whisper sent a sweet little 7 in hisdown her spine.

“Over there.” He pointed. “See it?”

rose as The structure reminded her of a columned doorway from Roman  
formed standing by itself on the other side of the lake as if it might lead to  
parentsworld.

ass.” Dane murmured, “It was the front entry to railroad tycoon Alban T  
Nob Hill mansion. It’s all that was left after the 1906 earthquake. I  
lean up entryway. It was moved here as a reminder of all that was lost that fate  
er. Now in San Francisco, when our fair city burned to the ground after the  
of my earthquake.”

She felt his heat everywhere along her skin, the timbre of his  
resonating deep inside her. She wanted to lean back, to lay her head  
shoulder and look at him. But all she could do was whisper, “It’s beaut  
st plain “You’ve never seen it before?”

She shook her head, her hair brushing his cheek. “Never heard o  
of her wasn’t far from the soccer field where they’d played the game that Su  
January.

ened to “You said the tulip garden was serene. I feel that here, like it’s a p  
place.” His breath washed over her ear as he chuckled. “Except  
re why. Beach, of course, when we’re hiking in the woods.”

On a spring weekday, just the two of them were at the lake, a  
beauty and harmony enveloped them. The intimacy of his body so clo  
ver did. his breath in her hair shot tingles to all her erogenous zones.

always “Thank you for showing me this.”

“Thank you for showing me the tulips. Sometimes we forget to s  
smell the flowers.”

ewhere. She couldn’t even laugh at the cliché. The moment was too perfe  
moved she nodded against him, reluctant to step away. If only they could s  
;.” way forever.

n could How long they gazed at the portal she couldn’t say. A path led aro  
lake, and they could have walked through the columns, but someh  
project memorial was best seen from afar, as if you could step through into  
Francisco of the early 1900s. Getting too close would ruin the effect.

ar sight “Where to now?” he finally asked, even as she remained mesmer  
enough his nearness.

e quiver To his bed, she thought. It was the only place she really wanted to  
But it was the only place she could never be. Not ever again.

“We should ride a cable car.” The words almost burst from her, a



times, needed the clickety-clack of a cable car and the laughter of other people. Another burst the bubble in which they stood.

She called another Uber. It dropped them off a couple of blocks from the cable car turnaround near Union Square so they didn't have to wait in the long line with the other tourists. And soon they swung up onto the colorful dashboard of an overpacked car, Cammie's heart in her throat when she felt the greater foot might slip. Dane was right there, helping her grab a pole and paying the fare in exact change when the conductor came by. They went up, across the monumental hills of San Francisco, turned left on California and then right on Hyde, the car swaying as she held on tight. At the top of Lombard Street, the crookedest street in the world, the crush of bodies eased a bit as the passengers jumped off for their turn to walk down among the buildings.

Dane pulled her inside, where it was still standing room only. "Do you want to get off here and walk down Lombard?"

She shook her head. He was so close behind her she didn't want to move not even an inch. "I've done that. Let's ride all the way to Ghia Square."

"Sounds good to me." His breath whispered across her hair. The car's jolt as it took off again pressed her against him. And somehow she stayed there.

Even above the clank and clang of the car, she was sure she heard him breathe deeply, as though he was sniffing her hair. His heat caressed her spine, sending more tingles through her, all the way to her fingers and other parts.

It was crazy. It was unprofessional. And it was exhilarating.

\* \* \*

Dane breathed her in as if she were a life-giving elixir. Allowing the car's gripman behind him plenty of room to work the manual brakes, he used it as an excuse to hold her close. And he felt her everywhere.

It was enough to make a man want unthinkable things.

With her body flush against him, he could let his imagination run wild. He could imagine hauling her high against his body until she wrapped her legs around him. Until he pressed her against the office wall. Or laid her down on the floor.

people took his desk.

Dane knew he'd truly gone crazy when he imagined kissing her right from the cable car. Imagined undoing her blouse and tasting her. In taking a seat and pulling her down to straddle him.

Hell if he wasn't fully, temptingly aroused when they stepped onto the cable car near Ghirardelli Square. How many blocks had that been paying Lombard? Five, maybe. He wished the ride had been longer.

"Where to now?" His voice almost cracked.

She looked at him, her gaze dreamy. If he didn't know better, he'd thought she felt the same agonizing need that he did. But of course she was always in control.

Except for that one night twelve years ago.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him, walking backward. "I want an ice cream sundae at Ghirardelli Square."

He would have given her anything she asked for.

They shared a banana split with butter pecan, cookie dough, and Ghirardelli road ice cream, lots of chocolate sauce, whipped cream, nuts, and sprinkles on top.

Who could have known that sharing a sundae would be so sexy. The cramped table forced them to sit close, the sundae between them, with only one spoon. Had he failed to ask for two spoons on purpose? He could have offered her one, but they worked their way through the ice cream with him feeding her spoonful, then taking one of his own. He was so pathetic he actually licked the lingering taste of her on the spoon.

"Good?" he asked. Hell, it was better than good. It was fantastic.

Her pupils were wide, as if he'd stolen her breath, as if he'd stolen her heart.

"It's so good."

He felt her breathlessness deep inside.

Giving her the last bite, he watched her lick the spoon clean. He wanted to lick her just that way, wanted to feel her tremble with desire.

The way he trembled with desire at this very moment.

When they were done, he grabbed her hand. "That was dessert, definitely need a starter." They dodged tourists on the sidewalk down to Fisherman's Wharf, where he bought her clam chowder in a bread bowl.

"One spoon again?" she asked.

He couldn't let her know how badly he had designs on her. This ought herefor fun and games, but if she thought any of it was real, she might balk imagined "They only gave me one. Here, take a bite." He fed her again, and groaned at the clam chowder's creaminess. He opened the bag of off the crackers and held it out. "You need a chaser." After pouring a few in from hand, he watched her suck them down.

His insides tensed.

He kept on feeding her, wanting her, kept on remembering that'd think the island, remembering the golf game and that night in his condo. He didn't close to losing his mind. If he went on tempting himself this way, he'd completely.

And he could very well lose her.

With the chowder bowl empty, they were heading to Pier 39 with an ice suddenly dug in her heels and pointed. "We need a balloon animal."

Her hand in his, the two of them watched as a clown sitting on a rock stool blew up balloons, twisted them into shapes, and handed them to wrinkles kids walking by.

Chuckling, Dane murmured into her sweetly fragrant hair, "You want any? The of those?"

When she nodded, Dane stepped up to the man. "Can you make one that only n't say dachshund?"

The man rolled his eyes beneath his white face paint and oversized relished lips. Then he blew hard on the balloon, twisting, shaping, laughing, and

And finally, he held out a dachshund balloon on his palm.

"For a very pretty lady." He handed it to Cammie.

Her smile grew like a flower opening. "Thank you. I love it."

Without a thought, Dane tipped the man a fifty. If he'd had a hand a kiss, he'd have given him that, too, just for the smile the clown had put on his face.

He held her hand as they wandered Pier 39, shared a shrimp cocktail, and stopped to watch the seals.

Then Cammie found it. Though it wasn't a pet shop, it sold dog toys but we eyes shone so brightly, he could have kissed her right then.

She held out a... thing.

He looked at it for a long moment. "What is it?"

She laughed. He loved it when she laughed at him. "It's a log," she

lay was with exaggerated slowness. “With chipmunks inside.”

Her words didn’t make sense. Until she shook the thing and she chipmunks fell out all over the floor.

Dane couldn’t help laughing as she gathered up the little creatures and stuffed them back inside.

“Rex will go wild, shaking out all the chipmunks and chasing them,” she said, demonstrating, hands on both ends so nothing fell out.

He could see her playing with the dog. How she loved that dachshund. He was doing too. And he loved that Rex was theirs together.

She looked at him pointedly, her face tipped up. “Rex absolutely has to have this.”

Dane reached for it. “I’ll get it.”

She hugged the chipmunk log to her chest. “No. I’ll get it.”

“But this is my trip. I’ll buy it.”

She glowered at him. “But if you do, it’s not my gift to Rex.”

“It doesn’t really matter who pays for it—it’s from both of us.”

“You don’t get it.”

He opened his mouth, ready to argue with her, but before he could say another word, she slapped her hand over his lips, shutting him up.

An electric shock zipped through him. He wanted to lick her. He wanted to grab her and lick way more than that.

But Cammie yanked back before he could get his tongue between her lips.

Her eyes were wide, her face a grimace, as if she’d been scalded by boiling water.

And maybe she had.

Certainly, he’d been scorched.

hundred,  
on her

ail, and

ys. Her

he said

with exaggerated slowness. “With chipmunks inside.”

Her words didn’t make sense. Until she shook the thing and stuffed chipmunks fell out all over the floor.

Dane couldn’t help laughing as she gathered up the little creatures, stuffing them back inside.

“Rex will go wild, shaking out all the chipmunks and chasing them,” she said, demonstrating, hands on both ends so nothing fell out.

He could see her playing with the dog. How she loved that dachshund. He did too. And he loved that T. Rex was theirs together.

She looked at him pointedly, her face tipped up. “Rex absolutely must have this.”

Dane reached for it. “I’ll get it.”

She hugged the chipmunk log to her chest. “No. I’ll get it.”

“But this is my trip. I’ll buy it.”

She glowered at him. “But if you do, it’s not my gift to Rex.”

“It doesn’t really matter who pays for it—it’s from both of us.”

“You don’t get it.”

He opened his mouth, ready to argue with her, but before he could utter another word, she slapped her hand over his lips, shutting him up.

An electric shock zipped through him. He wanted to lick her palm, wanted to grab her and lick way more than that.

But Cammie yanked back before he could get his tongue between his lips.

Her eyes were wide, her face a grimace, as if she’d been scorched by boiling water.

And maybe she had.

Certainly, he’d been scorched.

## Chapter Seventeen

Cammie could barely speak. She could barely even think. She still had her fingers pressed against her lips on her palm. Had he licked her?

No, that was just her imagination.

Yet an electric current had rushed through her, so powerful that even if she hadn't been stunned, she might have thrown herself into his arms and kissed him.

It was the only thing on earth she wanted to do.

Even twenty minutes later, when they'd made it back to the car turnaround near Ghirardelli Square, Cammie was still reeling from the experience almost... She didn't know what to call it. Not a kiss; it was just his hand under her hand. But it was *something*. Something delicious and sexy.

Something she needed to forget.

It had been such a fabulous day. First, the meeting with the Mayor where she had then mustering the courage to ask to be project manager. Then she had been swept away by the beauty of the gardens and the park, mesmerized by the cable car ride and Dane feeding her the banana split and clam chowder and seals, the view of the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz on a sunny day.

Being with him made it sublime.

He stopped before entering the line waiting for the next cable car. "Let's do something to celebrate everything we've accomplished."

"That's what we've been doing all day."

He shook his head, looking at her as if she had no imagination. "We're not just playing tourist. Now we need something truly special."

"Like what?" Her heart beat faster, as if it expected something amazing.

Dane took out his phone, checking the time. Then he smiled. "It's almost dinnertime. Let's go back to the flat and ask Fernsby to make us that delectable meal. We'll let him choose. In fact, I'll call him right now so he can start preparing. What do you think?"

It was the crowning touch to a flawless day. "That's brilliant. No other restaurant chef can make anything better than Fernsby can."

Dane raised an eyebrow and made a mock choking sound in his

“Now that will go to his head.”

Laughing, Cammie said, “He’s the one who told me that.” They looked at the cable car line. It wasn’t as long as the one at Pow Market, but they still might not make it onto the next car. “Let’s wait only a mile or so, right?”

Dane looked up, and up and up. Somewhere up there was Nob Hill. “We’ll certainly work up an appetite. Let’s do it.” Then he grinned. “You are crazy.”

Cammie wanted to be crazy. With him. They were both in good luck. While she’d been caring for her uncle, taking a break for a walk had kept her sanity intact. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a few hills,” she scoffed.

Dane could never turn down a challenge. “You’re on.”

They climbed at a measured pace, never rushing, not trying to outpace the other, just taking the hills one step at a time. Just before Lombard Street, a cable car clanked down the hill, its bell ringing. Another came up full of passengers from the turnaround. Cammie waved, and the gripman rang the bell.

The route wasn’t all straight up. Sometimes they had a respite, but they’d been on all their long hikes, neither she nor Dane was breathing terribly hard. They finally reached his flat on Nob Hill. It comprised the entire top floor of one of San Francisco’s beautiful old buildings that had been rebuilt right after the 1906 earthquake.

Though not the biggest in San Francisco, what the flat lacked in size was made up for in sheer beauty, everything constructed with precision. It didn’t mean it was minuscule. Dane had remodeled after purchasing the flat, creating three suites, one for each of them—Dane, Cammie, and, of course, Fernsby, whose rooms were next to the chef’s kitchen he’d had a big part in designing. In addition, there was a great room, dining room, guest bathroom, and an office large enough for their two desks.

Cammie had discovered the flat and supervised the remodeling and decorating. With the world’s biggest Rolodex—no longer the old-fashioned mechanical kind, but an app—she’d tapped into some great resources and brilliant artisans. Since Dane always paid well, many of the workers willingly slipped their project in between others. Decorating appealed to her, and she’d made several suggestions for his resorts, as well as decorated his other houses. The London townhouse and the countryside

however, had been perfect just the way they were, with the exception of the kitchens, which they'd modernized for Fernsby.

Beyond the massive great-room windows lay Alcatraz and the Golden Gate, Sausalito and Tiburon, the sun sparkling on the bay. Each of the homes had its own unique beauty that called to her. But for a city on a hill, nothing surpassed that of the San Francisco flat.

The patter of doggy nails on the hardwood floor signaled Rex's imminent arrival. He dashed into the room, followed by Fernsby.

"Here, you give it to Rex." Dane handed her the bag with her ball, and she accepted her the chipmunks, which he'd carried all the way up the hill.

When she threw the log for the dog, she smiled at Dane. "I told you I love it."

Rex pounced, shook the toy viciously, and the chipmunks flew in every direction, which way.

"Good Lord," Fernsby drawled. "What on earth is that?"

"Rex's new toy," Dane supplied.

"And just who is going to clean up the mess, sir?" Fernsby asked. He stepped out after to enter into a chipmunk and sent its stuffing flying.

"Well, that didn't last long," Dane noted.

Cammie huffed at them both. "He's got nine more chipmunks."

Fernsby merely blinked, slowly, with great meaning, which could have been either, *That's nine more chipmunk innards I'll have to clean up your mess, you clean it up.* Then he said in the driest of voices, "But that instructed, I've prepared a celebratory feast for you. You'll find it up on the terrace, where you can enjoy the sunset."

She couldn't wait to see what he'd come up with.

hand in  
room,

\* \* \*

Cammie gasped as she stepped out on the rooftop terrace.

The sound hit Dane like her hand over his mouth had in the store. He wanted to lick her.

He had no choice, of course, but to maintain control.

She laughed, a beautiful musical sound that wrapped around him.

Yeah, he really should have licked her.

He thought the gorgeous sunset through the glass had grabbed



of the attention. Then Dane saw it—a hot tub where no tub had been before. Soaker tub in his suite, he'd never felt the need for a hot tub.

Golden But suddenly, Fernsby had created a need. Dane wanted nothing more than to lounge in that tub with Cammie.

My view, Two tables sat on either side, each filled with goodies, from bruschetta to shrimp rolls, seafood mushroom caps to pâté-stuffed phyllo kisses, and appetizers to skewers to crab cakes with mango relish. Fairy lights strung around the terrace winked on, illuminating the sparkling bottle already chilling in an ice bucket and champagne bucket, two glasses beside it.

Fernsby stood impassively by the terrace door as if he didn't care. He'd recognized the impressiveness of what he'd done.

Dane gestured at the hot tub. "Did you forklift this thing up here?"  
In a voice as cool as his features, Fernsby said, "You needn't worry yourself about how I did it, sir. Just enjoy the fact that I was able to."

He'd even laid out their swimsuits on a lounge chair, two rolled up beside them.

As Rex Cammie put her hands on her hips. "That's why you didn't want to come back to Pebble Beach. And why you wanted us out of the way today."

Was that a flicker of humor in Fernsby's eyes? Of course not. It was the antonym of humor.

"Let me just say, sir," Fernsby intoned like the talking head on *60 Minutes* or *It's a Wonderful Life*, "I've watched you two work yourselves silly, and I've come up with some special treats for you." Fernsby had obviously been working on this for a long time before Dane called him. "Now enjoy the sunset, sir, drink champagne, eat those scrumptious hors d'oeuvres over which I slaved all afternoon, and enjoy that hot tub. I'll take care of the dog." He gathered the dog under his arm, the little dog covered in chipmunk fluff, and marched to the terrace door, closing it behind him and leaving Dane alone on the terrace with Cammie.

And he "Only Fernsby could get a hot tub up here." Cammie inhaled and exhaled with wonder.

Dane was still shaking his head. "I could drag him back here to show you how he did it."

Cammie pressed her lips together. "He'll never tell." Then she said, "And it's more fun if we don't know."

Then she grabbed her suit off the lounge chair. "I'll just put this on."

With a you pop the cork.” She gave him a cheeky grin. “I want to sit in that watch the sunset with champagne in my hand and one of Fernsby’s tongue more my mouth.”

Of course that made him look at her mouth. And one glance made her think of all the things he’d like to do with that beautiful mouth.

But she was already out of reach.

Dane stripped down right there on the deck. Unless a plane flew in the overhead, no one would see him. He pulled his trunks on, then pushed

the button to retract the glass roof, opening the hot tub to the sky and then waited for the event that would soon pop out. Then he did exactly as she’d told him, pouring champagne, adding three raspberries to each flute from the small ones Fernsby had left.

She stole his breath when she returned in a slim black one-piece that hugged her stunning curves, a keyhole gold buckle between her breasts. Her towels plunged back that revealed every beautiful inch of skin right down to the base of her spine.

He drooled, wanting to kiss her right there in that keyhole.

Instead, he handed her a glass of champagne. After thanking him, Fernsby climbed into the two-person tub. Priceless. They’d have to sit facing each other, their bodies almost touching. Leaning over the side, she grabbed a news Fernsby’s shrimp puffs and popped it in her mouth, closed her eyes and savored the delicacy, damn near moaning over it.

The sounds she made could drive a man crazy.

Opening her eyes, she looked at him without a single clue as to what she’d just done to him.

He had to sink beneath the water before she noticed.

“That sunset is amazing.” With the hot tub positioned so they could see the view over the bay—Fernsby thought of everything—Cammie held her glass out the terrace windows, where the sun streaked so deeply, colors across the sky.

“Gorgeous.” But he was looking at her.

With a satisfied sigh, she smiled. “I’m addicted to Fernsby’s treatment.” She patted her stomach. “At some point, I’m going to have to back off, but my figure will soon be dealing with the consequences.”

What the hell was she talking about? Without thinking, he blurted out, “You’re kidding? You have the most perfect body I’ve ever seen.”

tub and Her beautiful jade eyes went wide. “Really?” Then she blushed. reats inyou. That’s really nice of you to say.” She paused two seconds, as actually had to think about what she was saying, and whispered, “Rig ide himat ya.” Then she sank into the water up to her chin as if afraid of h words.

He hadn’t meant to say it. It was one thing to compliment a wom e flewnew dress or a different hairstyle, but you simply couldn’t talk abo hed theemployee’s body. Not ever. You weren’t even supposed to *look*. Of re starshe’d been looking for years; he couldn’t help himself. But he’d never pouringcatch him at it.

ll bowl And what he’d really wanted to say was that she had the hotte: ever. Twelve years ago, she’d made him breathless, made him droo: ce thathim hard. He’d delighted in every facet of this beautiful woman. But ts and athirty-four, she was even more striking than the day he’d met her. E 1 to thenow he *knew* her—the sharpness of her mind, the sweetness of her ch the beauty of her soul.

Holding her glass above the bubbling water, she said, “You know im, sheis when you’re over thirty and everything starts to sag, and you go, wo ig eachgetting older?”

l one of “Are you crazy? You’re even more perfect than the day I met you.’ es, and Suddenly, as though she couldn’t take another compliment shrieking and jumping out of the tub, she changed the conversation e “I can’t believe Fernsby actually found a two-seater tub.”

o what The tub was exactly right, but he said, “It had to be a two-seate else could he have hoisted it up here?”

Their body heat ratcheted up the water temperature. Their legs t lld bothbriefly, his thigh to her calf. He wanted to run his hand all the way pointedshe jerked away as though he’d burned her. Maybe he had. He was c tunningon fire.

Instead of sipping her champagne, she gulped it. Then she leaned c a phyllo kiss, giving him a view of her swimsuit’s plunging back.

s.” She Matching her move for move, he stretched for a mushroom cap. A , or mybrought him in contact with her leg again, her warm, fragrant skin ski his.

d, “Are He could have laughed at himself, getting intensely worked up o leg. But she had beautiful legs, her calves toned from all the hiki

“Thank muscles lean. His lusty thoughts almost made him choke on Fe  
s if shescrumptious mushroom.

ht back He was glad for the jets stirring the water so she couldn't see him l  
er ownthe surface. She'd probably jump out in shock.

As if she needed to keep things on an even keel—and they mig  
an on abeen getting out of hand—she said, “I've always appreciated the work  
ut yourdone. But this resort we're putting together, it will help so many in the  
course, Special children who are really in need, as well as their paren  
· let hercaregivers. I've never been more proud of you than I am right now.”

He gazed at her steadily, letting his eyes roam her striking featu  
st bodylush lips, her silky red-gold hair pulled into a knot on top of her head  
l, madetook the words right out of my mouth. Only you could put all your he  
now, atsoul into managing this project.”

Because Cammie put her heart and soul into everything she did, from dec  
aracter, his homes, to running his life, to caring for her uncle. He'd already pro  
was a mess without her.

r how it She was everything, and he was pretty damn sure she didn't even k  
ow, I'm Before he could think how ill-advised it might be, he leaned for  
wrap his hand around her nape. Then slowly, giving her every chance

” him, he pulled her close. The island kiss had been spectacular but bri  
withoutkiss was openmouthed, sweet with champagne and raspberries and he  
ntirely. tongues played hide-and-seek, and their bodies drifted together. He kis  
until their breaths became one, until their heartbeats raced at the same

r. How She put her hands on his shoulders and floated over him as he  
back against the tub, their bodies caressing, their skin hot. He took her  
ouchedas if he'd been starved for her. With a teasing bite on her lip, he drew  
up. But delving deep, his tongue sliding along hers. She came down on him,  
ertainlyher legs, straddling him until he felt her everywhere. If he'd thoug  
known heaven before, he'd been wrong. Because *this* was heaven.

over for This was what he'd dreamed of night after night, knowing she v  
down the hall. Knowing she was off-limits. Until this moment. When s  
and thateverything he could ever want in his arms.

imming Her skin was like satin, her taste like the finest champagne, her thi  
and inviting. Sliding his hands down her sides, he wanted nothing mo  
ver herto tear off the sexy swimsuit. Tracing his fingers across her back, he h  
ng, her closer, closer as he slipped his fingers down to the base of her spine, to

ransby'sher there, feeling her quiver against him, her legs tightening around him

She pulled away to whisper against his lips, "Rules."

beneath Putting a hand to the back of her head, he murmured, "What rules?"

ht haveher breasts, every part of her.

you've Her voice tantalized him. "We're being so naughty."

future. The word made him crazy. "Say that again. It's so damned sexy and

its and She whispered, "Naughty."

He might have exploded right then. He might have pushed her up  
res, her side of the tub and tasted her. He might have done every single naughty  
l. "You breaking thing he'd thought of for so long. Everything he'd denied him

part and But her phone rang.

At first, he thought it had to be a dream. No, a nightmare.

porating But the phone kept ringing.

oven he Then she pushed away from him, her eyes wide, perhaps even frigid  
"It's Clyde."

now it. "We've been waiting over a week to hear from him." They'd called  
ward to first, even before presenting to the Mavericks.

to stop Her voice grew tremulous. "What if he needs help?"

ef. This Dane's worry ratcheted up, just as Cammie's did. He truly liked  
r. Their man. "You'd better get it."

used her Yet he mourned the loss of this moment between them. There  
pace. never be another.

leaned

mouth

her in,

parting

ht he'd

was just

she was

ghs taut

ore than

ield her

ouching

her there, feeling her quiver against him, her legs tightening around him.

She pulled away to whisper against his lips, "Rules."

Putting a hand to the back of her head, he murmured, "What rules?"

He wanted to break every single one. Now. Wanted to feast on her skin, her breasts, every part of her.

Her voice tantalized him. "We're being so naughty."

The word made him crazy. "Say that again. It's so damned sexy and hot."

She whispered, "Naughty."

He might have exploded right then. He might have pushed her up on the side of the tub and tasted her. He might have done every single naughty, rule-breaking thing he'd thought of for so long. Everything he'd denied himself.

But her phone rang.

At first, he thought it had to be a dream. No, a nightmare.

But the phone kept ringing.

Then she pushed away from him, her eyes wide, perhaps even frightened. "It's Clyde."

"We've been waiting over a week to hear from him." They'd called Clyde first, even before presenting to the Mavericks.

Her voice grew tremulous. "What if he needs help?"

Dane's worry ratcheted up, just as Cammie's did. He truly liked the old man. "You'd better get it."

Yet he mourned the loss of this moment between them. There might never be another.

## Chapter Eighteen

What was going on with Clyde?

Cammie didn't have time to think about what she and Dane had been doing in the hot tub. Not now. Because that was Clyde's special ringtone. The butler, Digbert, usually made any calls, then transferred after she answered. But Clyde himself was calling. Something had to be wrong.

After climbing out of the tub, she dripped water across the deck as she went to pick up her phone on the lounge chair. Even after twelve years, she was still attracted to the old man. She flew out to see him every six months or so. He was like another uncle. And she was a surrogate daughter, since he'd never had one. They often talked on the phone, but never this late, considering the three-hour time difference. He should have been in bed by now. Worry churned in her stomach.

"Clyde?" She heard the anxiety in her own voice. "How are you doing? Is everything okay?"

"Of course it is, dear." He harrumphed with irritation. "Everything is fine. I'm going to live forever. Do you think I'm an old man?" His British accent hadn't faded, though he'd left the UK years ago.

"No, no, no. I never think of you that way."

Dane climbed out of the water, sleek and beautiful, grabbing two towels and wrapping one around his waist, hiding every inch of bare skin.

She sagged onto the lounge chair, still dizzy with worry even as it faded. She mouthed to Dane, *He's okay*.

Dane draped the towel over her shoulders. She'd grown cold in just a minute or two.

Only now could she think about what almost happened in that tub. How amazing his taste was after all these years, the feel of his skin against hers, his hands on her, his lips taking hers. It was as if they'd time-traveled back to that night in his condo on the golf course.

She would have done anything with him in that hot tub. She had done everything with him all those years ago.

But Clyde was talking. She had to pretend that everything was normal, and she hadn't been sitting on Dane's lap only moments before she had the hard feel of him between her legs.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get back to you about your new project," Clyde said.

She and Dane had briefed him, letting him know they were looking for ad sponsors as well as donations.

"It's only been a week. We didn't expect you to have an immediate answer." She looked at Dane as he sat down next to her on the lounge.

"Dane's right here. Let me put you on speaker."

"I told you I'd get back to you after I'd thought it over. And I've concluded it's a brilliant project, and I absolutely need to be a part of it. Relief flooded her. Clyde was in. That was a huge boon, since he had kids' enormous pool of contacts.

"Thank you, Clyde. We're so glad."

"I've been making calls," he went on. "And I haven't heard a single thing yet."

"That's amazing news."

She glanced at Dane, whose smile beamed across his entire face. "Always, Clyde, you're a powerhouse. Thank you."

"I take it you're close to breaking ground for the resort?"

Dane jutted his chin at her, indicating that it was her project she had to answer to give.

"We're looking for just the right property." Or she would be, as they got back to Pebble Beach.

"Brilliant. I have yeses to the tune of two hundred million already." Cammie gasped. That was her lowball figure just to start. "Clyde, that's the absolute best."

"I know," he said without an inflection of either humor or humility. "I do miss seeing you. I hope you can come out soon."

Guilt hit her that she and Dane had just been in the Caribbean, and she hadn't even flown over to see Clyde. She hadn't seen him since she'd taken the leave of absence. Of course, Clyde had understood since they'd talked extensively about her uncle's condition. But she hadn't arranged to see him.

The worst was that she didn't know when she could get out there



perfectly now that she was running the new project.

ore, the Dane came to her rescue. “We’re going to come see you, Clyde. Don’t you worry. If you can let us nail down the property and get things sorted out for the project,” we’ll be out for a visit.”

Clyde gave a guttural laugh. “Good. I see I’m guilting you into coming for me. Then he added more seriously, “I know you’re both busy. Just know we have a standing invitation.”

mediate “Thanks for understanding, Clyde. We appreciate it,” Dane told him from the chair. Cammie’s guilt eased slightly. Clyde claimed he would live forever, but she knew time would catch up to him. She vowed to make it out to see Dane as soon as they had a property secured.

of it.” After they’d said their goodbyes and she’d pushed the End button, she had antouched her arm. “You don’t need to feel guilty.”

“We were just in the Caribbean, and I didn’t even think,” she said to herself.

ngle no “Neither did I. But we had other things on our minds.”

Oh yes, she had. That kiss.

“We’ll see him in a very short while, like I said. Let’s just get a scene. “Asgoing.” He squeezed her hand, his touch reminding her of everything she’d done in the hot tub.

And she couldn’t help an irreverent thought. Clyde really was the one she’d called, and she was so happy he’d called, but did he have to call *right* at that moment? Couldn’t he have called two hours earlier? Yes, there were rules they shouldn’t break, rules that kept them safe for twelve years, just as she’d told Dane on the island.

” But oh, how badly she’d wanted to get naughty with him. In those sexy, amazing moments in the hot tub, she hadn’t cared about the consequences. It was obvious Dane wanted the same thing.

y. “But Just as she’d felt when she watched him at the barbecue, with the children and the babies, she wanted *everything*.

and she Even if she knew how terribly wrong it could all go.

ummer, Maybe the person she really had to fight wasn’t Dane, but herself.

erstood, Of course she didn’t want her heart broken. She couldn’t let the relationship change when it wouldn’t be for the better. As much as she wanted that dream of love and family, she couldn’t trust that she’d get it again, couldn’t ruin everything they already had.

Even as badly as she wanted him.

... don't  
... rolling,

\* \* \*

... a trip." Clyde was bringing them two hundred million for the resort. Dane c  
... ow you shake that off. But couldn't the news have waited until tomorrow? C  
... the Fates let them have tonight?

... n. They would have broken all the rules. And he would have convin  
... ver, but there was no reason to leave him because of it.

... him as Cammie stuffed her arms into the robe, courtesy of Fernsby, tha  
... held out for her and belted it tightly, letting the towel fall to the deckin

... , Dane He pulled on his own robe. The champagne sat forgotten by the l  
... the bubbles gone flat. Just the way he felt.

... berated But he couldn't let what happened in the hot tub pass. Everyth  
... wanted had bubbled over. He'd let loose. He couldn't rein any of it in :

... "We need to talk," he said with an authority he hoped she'd listen t

... She forestalled anything else he might have said, rushing her

... ite deal "What just happened in the hot tub shouldn't have happened. We bot  
... ; they'd it would have been a mistake."

... "It's not a mistake," he insisted, even if he feared it was. With  
... re best, rules, and despite the new project, she still might decide it was time to  
... at that road. Especially now that Lochlan was no longer holding her here.

... all the She shook her head, wet tendrils of hair escaping her topknot and s  
... ust like to her cheeks. "Twelve years ago, we were right to make rules. We  
... going to have to get a handle on this. No more hot tubs."

... ose few "What about golf games? I seem to remember a kiss during a gol  
... out the too."

... children He was baiting her, he admitted it. But he wanted something mor  
... her than a flat no.

... Her nostrils flared and her lips thinned, as if there were so many th  
... whizzing around in her head that she didn't know what to do with

... "Maybe we shouldn't play golf either."

... et their Now, that was going too far.

... as she "No," he said, his voice emphatic. "I remember how good it was t  
... it. She time. And I still want you now." He didn't talk about feelings. Feeling  
... scare her off. But the chemistry between them was undeniable.

She stepped back, putting physical distance between them as emotional. “We’ve always agreed that was a mistake. And we’re not going to make another.”

He wanted to grab her shoulders, get right down in her face and screw *that*. After that kiss on the island, that sweet, sexy kiss that couldn’t become so much more, even then he’d agreed about the rules. But not after he’d felt how much she wanted him in that hot tub. Not after he’d realized how badly he wanted her. Had always wanted her.

And now he was torn between losing her and wanting her.

His desire for her won.

“No,” he said, claiming the step she’d put between them, he ratcheting up his emotions, his need. “I won’t pretend it didn’t happen. I won’t say it was a mistake. On the contrary, that night was the best thing I’ve ever known. And I don’t know why the hell we’ve had to wait twelve long years to do it again.”

She stared at him for a long, agonizing moment while his guts twisted into a tight coil. That day at the barbecue, when he’d held her in his arms, he’d known then how much he wanted her, yet he’d still been pretending all he could do was offer her comfort.

But he had so much more to give her. So he whispered, “I can make you feel so good.”

That’s when she ran.

\* \* \*

Turning so fast on the deck she almost slipped, she felt him reaching for her. When he touched her, she was a goner.

That day at Sebastian’s, when Dane had wrapped his arms around her and held her close to his heart, she’d wanted to kiss him. But her desire hadn’t been a force inside her for so much longer than that. She’d dreamed about another night like the first. Dreamed about it.

But that was just fantasy.

And suddenly, because he didn’t care about the ramifications of changing their status quo. *I know how this will go down. You can’t have it both ways. You can’t want something so badly you ache with need, but when you finally get it, it never works out the way you want.*

well as He wanted to give her pleasure, to have sex with her, and yes, it was going to be out of this world. But then what would happen when she wanted more pleasure?

And she tried so hard not to slam the door of her bedroom, but once she had she couldn't help herself. She locked it. Because Dane wanted to talk longer, talking would lead to so much more. Because she simply didn't have the willpower to resist him—and, worse, to resist herself.

She slid down the locked door until her butt hit the floor.

He wanted her. He couldn't know what those words did to her, how she wanted to throw herself at him and say, *Yes, yes, yes, I want it all.* But he hadn't said he loved her. He hadn't even said he wanted a relationship. He'd said nothing of marriage, home, babies—all the things she'd realized she wanted desperately that day as she'd watched him wait Savannah and Keegan, with Jorge and Noah.

It was so easy for a man to want a woman, but wanting didn't mean twisted relationship and love. How many women had Dane drifted through? His arms, for a few weeks, sometimes even a couple of months, then moving on. That wasn't callous; he didn't *want* to hurt anyone. She was sure he was sure that he didn't want a serious relationship. She was pretty sure he'd never been in love, not even before she'd met him.

She'd thought she was in love twice, yet in the end, both men had turned out the same. She couldn't make another bad decision, especially not with Dane. He was her livelihood. Even more, he was her best friend. Now that he was gone, he was the closest person in the world to her.

; out. If Climbing into his bed would ruin everything because she wouldn't want anything less than love the next time around. And if she put her heart on the line, he could crush her with only a few agonizing words.

her and She could never tell him how she felt. She could never ask for what she wanted. She couldn't even ask him what he was offering. Because she wanted asked for specifics, he would tell her he wanted a hot and heavy relationship.

And that would absolutely kill her.

, Dane  
You can  
get it, it

\* \* \*

Dane followed her to her room, only to hear the lock click on her bedroom door.

ould bedoor. As if she were afraid of him.

ore than All he wanted to do was make her feel good. He wanted to hold her arms, wake up beside her in the morning, open his eyes and see her face inside, to his.

lk. And But she'd run from him. Just the way he'd feared.

ave the Maybe he'd jumped into the conversation too quickly. Tomorrow have made more sense, when they'd both calmed down, and she'd have a chance to think about what she really wanted.

n much He could only hope it was him.

He dumped the robe in his room and pulled on sweats, then wandered along to the kitchen. He should tell Fernsby they hadn't eaten all the things Fernsby could pack it up. Or eat it himself.

m with He stared at the door to Fernsby's suite just off the kitchen, exactly the man had designated it should be. With a sitting room, bedroom, bathroom, the suite also acted as an office, where Fernsby could sit at the desk to take care of the household accounts. Dane trusted him implicitly. He Fernsby had been with him for close to fifteen years, since the first day they knew each other's character, each other's foibles. But they never talked on a personal level. He knew little about the man's past. And he never ask Fernsby for details. A man had to *offer* his past, and once given it couldn't be taken for granted.

1 Dane. If Dane had ever gone to Fernsby about any of the women he'd ever had, Fernsby would have looked down his nose and sternly said, *I'm your sir, not your therapist.*

t accept But these were desperate times. As much as his brothers and sisters were his best friends, as much as they were a team—not just in soccer but in life—he couldn't talk to any of them about this. If he'd been at a Monday night barbecue, he might have turned to Susan Spencer, but he couldn't wait until the next week for the next one.

sexual Before he could talk himself out of it, he knocked on Fernsby's door.

The man opened it still wearing his bespoke suit, even at this late hour. His face remained expressionless, though the number of times Dane had knocked on his door could be counted on one hand.

Dane finally spoke. "I need help."

Fernsby stepped back and waved his hand expansively, entreating Dane to enter. "Tell me what I can do, sir. And I will do it."

Yet Dane could almost feel Fernsby rolling his eyes. Except that there was a glint in his eyes that was beneath him.

So he said it. Because Fernsby was the only one who knew Cammie almost as well as Dane did. “I need advice.” He breathed in. Then he spat out the words as he exhaled. “Cammie and I shared a kiss on the night of the party. Was that a twinkle in Fernsby’s eyes? He had to be mistaken. I absolutely did not twinkle.”

Dane admitted the whole truth. “Then we kissed in the hot tub.” This was humiliating. But Cammie was worth any humiliation. “Acting as a butler was far more than a kiss. It was romantic—the stars overhead, the beautiful food, the champagne, the feast you prepared.”

Shockingly, he swore that Fernsby’s eyes *did* twinkle. Suddenly, he got it. “Damn it, you were setting us up.” He pointed at Fernsby. “In fact, you’ve been trying to set us up for twelve years, haven’t you?” He threw his hands in the air, circled the room, and came back to Fernsby once more. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it.”

If ever there was a poker face, Fernsby wore it now. “I can’t really confirm nor deny, sir.”

He didn’t need to admit it. That twinkle Dane had never seen before, it confirmed it all.

But now Dane had Fernsby right where he wanted him. “You’ve helped me date, help me. Because I’m afraid I’m going to screw up the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” He added, more emphatically, “I absolutely can’t screw up.”

Fernsby, never one to swear, muttered, “Crikey,” in an East End accent—Dane had never heard before. “I’m afraid you’re already screwing up, sir,” he added with a completely straight face, as if he hadn’t just insulted Dane.

Although Dane sometimes wondered who was the boss and who was the employee, since Fernsby usually did whatever he wanted.

“Thank you very much, Fernsby,” he said dryly, almost as if he didn’t care. “I’m well aware that my romantic skills are rather lacking.”

“Lacking?” Fernsby croaked, one eyebrow raised. “Shall I suggest you date a nonexistent woman, sir?”

Dane harrumphed like Fernsby often did himself. “I’ll admit I’m

rolling had many examples.” His parents certainly hadn’t taught him anything  
love, except to make him realize he wasn’t going to get it and  
Cammie certainly stop expecting it.

“Shall we say no *good* examples?” Fernsby belatedly added, “Sir.”  
“True,” Dane had to concede. “I’m not sure I know how to romance  
a woman. Especially not Cammie.” The women he’d dated hadn’t r  
romance. And he wasn’t sure he could give Cammie the romance  
she deserved. “There’re her emotions to worry about.” He absolutely didn  
want to hurt her. “I’m not equipped with the proper skills.” And he did not  
blush sexually.

Fernsby, once again the staunch and proper butler, said in his  
cultured British voice, “I’m very glad you came to me, sir. I will help  
you. That stretching of his lips couldn’t possibly be a smile. “This is the task  
I haven’t waited years to perform.” He held up a hand. “Leave it to me, sir.  
I’ll do exactly what to do.” He narrowed his eyes. “You just need to say  
anything I propose.”

Fernsby might do anything he wanted to do, but he’d never  
ordered Dane to do his bidding. This, however, was a special case.

Dane said, “On any other subject, I’d tell you to go pound sand. I  
care about Cammie. If you think you can find a way to make her mine,  
I’ll do whatever you suggest.”

It’s ever

to know this

\* \* \*

Fernsby closed the door. Then he did a little jig. He never jiggled in front  
of anyone. But this deserved two jigs.

He was quite aware that Dane hadn’t said he was in love with Cammie.  
But Fernsby had known the man’s feelings for years. How those two  
figured it out themselves was beyond him.

Yet Fernsby well knew that Dane hadn’t mentioned *love*, using  
the euphemism of *romance* instead, because he was afraid of it. Because  
he didn’t believe he possessed the skills to love Camille the way she de  
served. After learning how his parents had abandoned their children to a sea  
of nannies and flown off to God only knew where, Fernsby had realized  
ago that *none* of the Harringtons had a clue about love or how to be  
examples of it.

g about Thus, Dane had always held himself aloof from love. After fifteen  
should Fernsby knew it all. There wasn't a single time Dane had left for an e  
out with a female companion that he hadn't claimed the date was no b  
It wasn't only because of Camille either. Dane Harrington was afraid  
ance ahimself up to love. Afraid it wouldn't be reciprocated.

quired It was Fernsby's job to show his employer that he needn't be frig  
ice sheof love, especially when it came to Camille.

it want He rubbed his hands together with glee. Because what he'd told Da  
ot meanthe absolute truth. This was the job he'd been waiting for all his life.

And he never failed.

highly Well, perhaps once.  
p you." But he certainly wouldn't this time.

ask I've  
I know  
yes to

before

But this  
, I'll do

front of

ammie.  
, hadn't

ing the  
ause he  
served.  
eries of  
ed long  
e good



Thus, Dane had always held himself aloof from love. After fifteen years, Fernsby knew it all. There wasn't a single time Dane had left for an evening out with a female companion that he hadn't claimed the date was no big deal. It wasn't only because of Camille either. Dane Harrington was afraid to open himself up to love. Afraid it wouldn't be reciprocated.

It was Fernsby's job to show his employer that he needn't be frightened of love, especially when it came to Camille.

He rubbed his hands together with glee. Because what he'd told Dane was the absolute truth. This was the job he'd been waiting for all his life.

And he never failed.

Well, perhaps once.

But he certainly wouldn't this time.

## Chapter Nineteen

Seated at his desk in Pebble Beach only two days later while Cammie was out for a walk with Rex, Dane beckoned Fernsby in when he knocked on the doorjamb. “What can I do for you, Fernsby?”

Impassive as always, Fernsby said, “It’s not what you can do for me but what I can do for you.”

He paused for effect, forcing Dane to ask, “And what is that?”

“I’ve heard back from *Britain’s Greatest Bakers*, and I’ve moved on through the first round.” Fernsby seemed neither elated nor downcast. Always, he showed no emotion at all.

Dane wanted to clap, but instead he merely said, “Congratulations, Fernsby.”

“Thank you, sir.” His butler went on, “They need to see how I appear on camera, so they’ve asked to interview me.”

Dane wasn’t sure how this was something Fernsby could do for him. Rather, it was the other way around. “So you need a couple of days off work?”

Fernsby stared him down for a very long moment, then drawled, “I want to see me in England, sir. And Bradford Park is only a ten-mile drive from the site of this season’s competition. Therefore, I respectfully request that we spend a few days there for my interviews and screen tests.”

“Of course.” Dane waved his hand, giving imperious permission. “I’ll be at the manor house. Take whatever time you need. I know how important this is to you. But I’m not sure why I need to go along.” He tipped his head back in question.

Fernsby let out a long-suffering sigh. “Sir, I require that you and Cammie travel with me. I’m going to be doing interviews, a lot of them. I’ll be working with producers.” He widened his eyes fractionally. “In fact, I’ll rarely leave the house.” He allowed a very pregnant pause.

Until Dane saw the light and lowered his voice, even though Cammie wasn’t home. “This is part of the plan to help me with Cammie, isn’t it? I’m still not getting how the manor house will help.”

Fernsby squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose.

not say, sir, that I will rarely be at Bradford Park?” He waited for the lightbulb to actually turn on.

Dane should have gotten it the moment Fernsby had said he wanted Dane and Cammie to fly to England. It was just that this was so uncharacteristic of the staid butler. But he’d asked for help, and Fernsby was throwing him the lifeline he needed. Plus, Cammie loved the manor, loved the long walks, loved to tease him about his title, Lord Fuzzybottom or Lord Bumstead, or any of the silly names she made up.

“Fernsby, you’re a genius. A few days at the manor will be perfect for me, sir,” Dane said, winking. Fernsby winked, startling Dane still further. “I’m leaving it up to you to do the rest. I know you can. Because when you set your mind to make something, especially if it’s your heart’s desire, you always make it last. As I do believe Camille is your heart’s desire.”

Dane couldn’t say why the words shocked him more than Fernsby’s wink. Heart’s desire? It was such a powerful image. He desired Cammie since the day he’d first seen her on the golf course.

Cammie was always the one to make sure he added heart to his plans. As though he had no heart at all. Yet his heart always beat faster whenever she was around. His mind and body craved more. And yes, his heart did desire her. So much more.

“They’re all yours,” she said, which was actually quite terrifying.

“What if he laid everything before her—and it scared her off?”

“And yet... he couldn’t go on with her only as his assistant. Or his manager. Not even as his best friend. He wanted her. His heart wanted her.”

“Stay at the manor,” Dane said. Even as Dane reeled inside, Fernsby said, “Have no fear, sir. Everything you need will be at your fingertips. Because I’ve been planning this for slightly over twelve very long years.” He stared down his long nose at Dane. “Trust me when I say, I’ve already prepared for the things you don’t even know you’re going to want or need.”

“But had he prepared Dane for his heart’s desire?”

Dane could only hope he had and that he showed not an ounce of trepidation. “Why do you think I’ve kept you around for so long? You know what I need before I know I need it.”

Fernsby’s expression was suddenly as satisfied as a cat who had wheedled a handful of treats when it wasn’t even dinnertime. “I have no doubt, sir.” As the man disappeared around the doorjamb, his voice

Dane's back to Dane. "Get 'er done, sir," he added like a rodeo star.

Dane wondered if a paranormal entity had taken over Fernsby's body both. When Cammie bounded into the room only a short time later like his wearing her hiking clothes, she flashed him a grin. "What's up, Fernsby?"

oved to He told her the partial truth. "He's made it past the baking show of the round. Now they want to do interviews and screen tests. I'm afraid you have to go to Bradford Park. The show will be filming only a few miles away. He needs our moral support."

you, sir, Cammie clapped her hands. "This is so exciting." Her eyes were bright as she bounced on the balls of her feet. "I *knew* they'd pick him. He'll happen. Ace any interviews and screen tests. And then he's going to win."

"Since he is the quintessential British butler, they'll love him." Fernsby's But he couldn't forget everything else Fernsby had said. *His wife, had desire.*

She was beautiful and smart. She was dedicated and kindhearted. She was loyal. She was his best friend. He'd never known a more caring woman as his wife.

He felt the phantom touch of her fingers on his cheek, the intensity of her kiss on his lips. Now that he'd tasted her again and the thrum of her body against his, there was no way he could go back.

He had to have her as more than his project manager, more even than his project best friend. But how to tell her? He couldn't ask Fernsby for the right words. That was too much. He'd just have to tell her the unvarnished truth, that he cared about her, that they'd be good together, that the moment could make a relationship work. No over-the-top declarations like he'd made. "And he didn't make her his. Nothing that would send her running straight to the airport."

He'd tone everything down, tread lightly. Be calm, cool, and collected. Yeah.

Even if he felt like he'd go stark raving mad if he didn't make the most of his always right this moment.

\* \* \*

He'd just  
faith in  
floated

He'd gotten them to Bradford Park. Fernsby felt like doing another

course he wouldn't, not with his patron and the lovely Camille standing before him.

er, still "I will leave you both now," he said formally. "I must go forth and fight with the top dog over that person who shall remain unnamed." Digbert must be the butler for the inestimable Mr. Westerbourne, but Fernsby would still win the first kitchen floor with him.

ve need She knew exactly of whom he spoke as a battle light glowed in Camille's eyes. "I can't believe *he* made it into this round too. You're going to win against him."

right as She was a feisty one, always ready to go to war for the ones she loved. totally Fernsby drawled in his most unaffected voice, "Rest assured, Camille, I've got him. You can count on that." He stretched his lips as if they wanted to smile.

heart's "Digbert is going down," she said, pounding her fist into her palm. her eyes widened, and she put a hand over her mouth. "Oops. I should have mentioned the name."

n in his Fernsby nodded his forgiveness. He was sure the only reason his name was mentioned was because Clyde Westerbourne's ignominious butler, had entered the contest because he knew how badly Fernsby wanted to win. Digbert was that dastardly villain.

Dane appeared to stifle a laugh. "He certainly doesn't bake as well as his do."

words. Fernsby almost snorted, refraining only at the last moment. "That's not been a question."

at they "And you're much more congenial than he is," Camille added.

d die if Fernsby was well aware he didn't have a congenial bone in his body. back to was part of his charm. "Have no fear, dear lady, I will win." He would use his dying breath to make sure Digbert didn't best him.

lected. But there was so much more on the line than Digbert, more even than winning a baking contest. There was Camille and Dane's happiness. her his it all set up—the best champagne, the most delicious food, all Dan's favorites, and beautiful flowers gracing the table. He'd turned the house into a romantic getaway for two.

Dane wanted this despite any fears he might have. Sadly, they were people who couldn't see what was right in front of their faces, like a jig. Of course, it was written in the stars. So this was up to Fernsby. And with the romanti

tanding he'd set, they would have to succumb.

He knew it in his gut just as strongly as he knew Digbert hadn't a  
d battle of beating him.

ight be Getting these two together was truly his life's work.

ripened the Suitcase in hand, he stood in the flagstone entrance hall and said se

"Please don't forget to feed the dog while I'm gone." Then he left then

Camille's He was right that Dane and Camille were meant to be. Because  
trounce Fernsby. And he was right about everything.

ved.

\* \* \*

Camille,

y might Cammie wasn't tired, since she'd slept well during the flight. But s

starving after the drive to the manor. "Fernsby said he left food. What

n. Then think it is?"

aid the "Let's check out the dining room." Dane held out his hand. "Shall

you, my dear?" he asked in a fair imitation of Fernsby.

emesis, As her stomach rumbled, she couldn't resist. Especially when

st was laughed. His laughter was like sweet wine in her blood.

kind of Champagne chilled in a silver bucket, and flowers bloomed

magnificent centerpiece. The sideboard was laid with an array of delic

l as you tender slices of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding with gravy,

vegetables and perfectly crisped potatoes. And, of course, there

s never English trifle for dessert, topped with a mountain of whipped cream.

"Oh my God, my favorite," she gasped. "I missed the roast be

Yorkshire pudding at the signing party, and I haven't had it since la

ly. That How did he do all this?" Awe dripped from her voice. "He was on th

ld fight with us the whole time."

Dane was already popping the champagne cork and expertly pouri

en than flutes. "He must have made calls with very explicit instructions on

He had what he wanted and how it was to be prepared."

e's and Handing her a glass, he raised his own in a toast. "To us."

ned the It hit her then. "This smacks of romance." She put a hand on h

"Did you put Fernsby up to this, Lord Badboy?"

ere two He smiled. "I may resemble that."

t alone She spoke in her sternest voice, though she would never be

ic stage emulate Fernsby properly. "We talked about this in San Francisco. W

our rules.”

prayer “I heard all your reasons why we still need the rules.” Dane raised an eyebrow. “But I’ve changed my mind.”

This was bad, really bad. He could make her lower all her defenses severely, then her heart could very well be crushed. “But you can’t change your mind to it. All my reasons are still valid.”

he was He pulled out her chair, then snugged her closer to the table when she sat. If her stomach hadn’t rumbled again, she might have jumped right up and run out of the room.

“Are they?” he asked softly. Then he took her plate and began to clear the sideboard. “Let’s put that to the test.”

he was She was terrified to ask how.

do you He gave her a bit of everything she most desired—slices of roast beef, a gravy-laden Yorkshire, vegetables, and mouthwatering roast potatoes. As he set the plate in front of her, she couldn’t help breathing in the heady aromas, somehow breathing in his scent as well.

1 Dane He plated roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for himself, and then when he sat, she dove into hers, because, honestly, she couldn’t wait.

d in a “You’re totally right. This is a very romantic setting.” He waved his hand over the table. “Delectable food, good champagne, beautiful flowers, all roasted all alone.” He smiled roguishly. “I just made my move. But I’m not going to haul you close and kiss you again.”

She couldn’t help but wish he would.

beef and He held her gaze like a hypnotist, stealing her ability to look away for the first year. “since I already know we’re meant to be together...” He raised his glass. “My next move is yours.”

ing two “My move isn’t coming. I won’t give up the perfect relationship we’ve had exactly all this time for a romance that will potentially fail and ruin everything.”

There. She’d said it. Even as her heart cried out with how badly she wanted what he offered, she couldn’t go through another heartbreak. Especially not a heartache over Dane.

He calmly cut into his tender beef, chewed, swallowed, his eyes fixed on her the entire time. Until finally, he said, “I’m not willing to risk failure again. But since I know we won’t fail, I also know there’s no risk.” He speared a forkful of Yorkshire pudding dripping with gravy. “I have feelings for you.”

feelings that haven't gone away for twelve years. I know we need to be together. And I know we can make a relationship work."

He wasn't talking about *just* sex. They knew each other too well for that. And he wasn't only talking about sex. Of course he had feelings. But he hadn't said *love*. In his mind, he'd used the word *relationship*. But a relationship could mean so many things. *Feelings* and *relationship* didn't necessarily add up to love, she sat. It certainly didn't mean marriage. It couldn't even be called permanent. Not yet. Besides, they already had a relationship that worked.

She could sleep with the billionaire. She could revel in his attention. But she knew it would all come tumbling down eventually. It was the age-old story of a secretary having a fling with her boss. And who ended up out in the cold? Always the secretary.

Dane had made this switch so fast, after only a couple of sexy, steamy kisses in a hot tub. He wasn't a bad man; he was full of integrity. But if Dane Harrington wanted something, he went for it. And when the initial project was satisfied, he moved on to the next project. She didn't want to be the one left behind.

She didn't want a broken heart.

She didn't want to lose the only thing that had any meaning in her life. Her relationship with Dane, just the way it was. No changes, no deviations. It was better to keep the beautiful thing she knew rather than risk everything on a fleeting affair, no matter how dazzling, that couldn't last.

7. "And

s. "The

t stake.

've had

."

dly she

artache.

on her

: either.

eared a

or you,



feelings that haven't gone away for twelve years. I know we need to be together. And I know we can make a relationship work.”

He wasn't talking about *just* sex. They knew each other too well for it to be only about sex. Of course he had feelings. But he hadn't said *love*. Instead, he'd used the word *relationship*. But a relationship could mean so many things. *Feelings* and *relationship* didn't necessarily add up to love. It certainly didn't mean marriage. It couldn't even be called permanent.

Besides, they already had a relationship that worked.

She could sleep with the billionaire. She could revel in his attention. But it would all come tumbling down eventually. It was the age-old story of the secretary having a fling with her boss. And who ended up out in the cold? Always the secretary.

Dane had made this switch so fast, after only a couple of sexy, heated kisses in a hot tub. He wasn't a bad man; he was full of integrity. But when Dane Harrington wanted something, he went for it. And when the initial drive was satisfied, he moved on to the next project. She didn't want to be the next project he left behind.

She didn't want a broken heart.

She didn't want to lose the only thing that had any meaning in her life—her relationship with Dane, just the way it was. No changes, no deviations. It was better to keep the beautiful thing she knew rather than risk everything on a fleeting affair, no matter how dazzling, that couldn't last.

## Chapter Twenty

*Since I already know we're meant to be together, the next move is yours.*

Dane waited for her to say yes. But everything she felt was written in the strained lines of her lovely face. She didn't believe a relationship with him could work.

He wasn't even sure himself. Could anyone be sure? Until he'd seen Susan and Bob Spencer, he hadn't believed it was a possibility.

The only thing he knew for certain was that he couldn't go on loving Cammie the same way he had for twelve years. But what if he pushed too hard and ended up pushing her away? If he confessed all his feelings, it meant he was asking her to declare herself too. Then the pressure would be on her. Essentially, he'd be putting his heart in her hands, and she'd be expected to do something with it.

That very expectation could make her run.

He'd thought about this all the way to England, picked apart his feelings, his thoughts, his heart. It wasn't that he feared for his own heart. He was afraid of what she would do. He was all about putting pressure and expectations on her.

After the hot tub, he'd admitted that first time with her had been the best damned night ever. And he'd just admitted his feelings had never gone away. He'd even admitted Fernsby was right, that she was his heart's desire.

He couldn't say *nothing*.

Finally, he whispered, over tender roast beef, over mouthwatering Yorkshire pudding, over trifle and flowers and champagne, "Tell me what you think it won't work."

\* \* \*

The compassion in his voice brought her close to tears.

Cammie had never talked with him about her love life, but even if they hadn't discussed it, he knew of one bad relationship she'd had that he couldn't know, however, what had happened when she'd been his assistant.

There were men who lied to women to get what they wanted. Dane, of course, had never been that type. He'd always built her up, telling her what a great job she did, how she organized his life, how he'd be nothing without her. She was his idea genius.

And he was as honest as they came.

But she knew men who thought nothing of spinning a web of lies in the devastation they left behind. Maybe in telling Dane her story, he'd help him understand why she couldn't go through it all again with him.

"I made two big mistakes." The trifle sat untouched in her bowl. Her first time was when I'd worked with Clyde for about three years. I sighed, looking up at the ceiling a moment. "And Rufus Mayhew came on without our lives. I was twenty-one, still living at home and looking after my mother since he was in the early stages then. Between work and Uncle Logan, that hadn't dated much." Actually, she hadn't dated at all.

She was on. Toying with her cloth napkin, she wished it were paper. Then she reacted to the satisfaction of tearing it to shreds. But even if she couldn't look at it, she owed Dane her story. "He was beautiful. I was innocent. I had no idea what men were like. He took me to the best restaurants, bought me wonderful things, gifts. He was older, and he was magnetic." She'd cared so much, and she was so afraid to think about how naïve she'd been.

Dane's eyes were flinty in the candlelight. If Rufus had been sitting there, he'd have punched him in the nose, she was sure. Yet something else lurked in his gaze—perhaps an ache, though for what exactly, she couldn't tell.

She had to clear her throat. "I fell for him completely. If he'd asked me to marry him right then, I would have handed in my notice to Clyde and said yes." She closed her eyes, put her hands to her flaming cheeks, her fingers against her fingers. "He didn't start pumping me for information until two months into our relationship. I had no idea what he was doing. He just wanted to know about everything I did during the day so he could be like he was with me when I was working. And he helped me with Lochlan, coming to the house, playing card games with us. He seemed so kind, so caring. I had no idea that all he wanted was information about me. Things he could use to make money off of." Clyde's

She was so ashamed, she wanted to cry.

Dane laid his hand over hers on the table. "It wasn't your fault. I

lane, of advantage. He stole your innocence. You're not to blame."

"What a She whispered, "Yes, he stole my innocence." And then she admitted without every possible way."

The hard glint in Dane's eyes turned into a burning flame. Like a knight, he'd have thrown Rufus out on his butt. After running him through, or of with his sword.

But she had yet to admit her full culpability. "One day, a deal of mine went south. Someone had gotten wind of what he'd planned and stepped in. They subverted him, obviously taking the profits for themselves."

"She Dane squeezed her hand so tightly it would have been painful if she were into anyone else's touch. "It. Wasn't. Your. Fault," he said succinctly, each word its own sentence.

"I was so excited for Clyde's big deal." The words seemed to rush through her then. "It was going to be wonderful. And Clyde was so thrilled he'd have stopped, held her breath, then finally made herself add, "And I told you about it."

"Even then, you still didn't get it, did you?" Dane said softly. "You were wonderful still innocent. You had no idea there were people like that in the world."

She sighed. "I didn't have a clue." It shamed her even now to think about what she'd done. "When I was in Clyde's office, and he was railing against me, and no one knew about the deal except him and his lawyers, I suddenly saw that Rufus more knew about the deal." She put a hand to her chest. "And Rufus knew because I told him." Her soul felt like a bleak landscape as she remembered the moment she realized Rufus had used her information against them.

"I had to admit to Clyde what I did." She swallowed hard. "He didn't even yell at me. He just said that when we're young, it's hard to know who to trust and who not to trust."

"Did Clyde ever do an investigation?" That's what Dane would have said if he had known. "I told you about it."

"He found a shell company that eventually led back to Rufus. That was her shame. And her broken heart."

A menacing growl rose up Dane's throat. "I hope Clyde crushed Rufus. But even as he fisted one hand, he stroked her knuckles gently with the other."

But her story wasn't over. "I realized right then I had terrible taste in men, and that no matter what, they would find a way to screw me over in the end. Except Dane. He'd never screwed anyone over."

"Then I met you on the golf course. And we... you know." She smiled.

painfully. Though it had been only one night, she'd once again choked, "Inwrong man. Even if she hadn't known it. Her shock the next day when she found out he was the man she was interviewing with had been like a gallant blow she couldn't recover from. "But Clyde was leaving, and I desperately needed the job to support my uncle."

"That's why we needed the rules, wasn't it?" Dane said for a moment. Clyde's sounded almost as sad as she'd felt that day.

He stepped in to "It was clear I was so bad at choosing who I slept with that my judgment couldn't be trusted."

It was as if he were "But what we did was amazing." His gentle declaration was a word poignant and sweet, thrilling her and saddening her at the same time. He traced a finger across her knuckles. "There was nothing bad or wrong, and I'm proud of it. It wasn't a mistake."

"I know it wasn't wrong. And you weren't one of my bad mistakes." She said. "I know it wasn't wrong. And you weren't one of my bad mistakes." Rufus shook her head. "But it was never going to work out either."

Now that she'd revealed her first shameful secret, why bother with the rest? "I dated after that, but if anyone got serious, I cut them off." She slashed a hand through the air. "Just in case I was making another mistake about decision. I swear, I never told anyone anything about your business."

He sat back, his dark brows scrunching together. "How could you have done that? I'd ever believe you would? I trust you absolutely."

"Even now? After what I did for Rufus?"

"You were the innocent. You didn't do it *for* him. He was the one who admitted to who *used* you." He balled his fist. "If he were here..." He let the silence hang. Then he whispered, "You said you made two big mistakes. One was about the other guy."

"It was five years into working for you," she said, so softly he leaned close to hear.

"Five years after *their* night. Five years of their rules. Five years of watching him date so many other women.

It cut her every time she'd set up a dinner date for him or sent in another one of his ladies. She'd torn herself apart wondering if this one could be *the one*. But she'd chosen the job and her uncle over anything she could have had with Dane. She'd made the irrevocable decision the day she'd wanted to discover that her prospective employer was the man she'd slept with the night before. The man she would have to work for. The man who would

sen the property to every woman who came sniffing around.

n she'd And especially to her.

a body So she'd ordered the gifts and made the reservations and wrapped  
erately in cellophane so tight nothing could puncture her.

And she'd been doing that for twelve years.

er. He

\* \* \*

dgment

Dane's heart tied itself into knots. She'd bared her soul to him, and h  
is both what that cost her. In so many ways, she was a very private person  
me. He never known about Rufus Mayhew. Clyde had never said a word. I  
g about Clyde had thought Dane wouldn't hire her if he knew. But he would  
hold an innocent young woman's mistake against her, especially whe  
s." She knew how very much Clyde trusted her.

Clyde obviously knew she'd never make the same mistake aga  
holding she'd learned so much more. She'd learned not to trust at all.

m off." If she'd never met Rufus Mayhew, would things have been d  
her bad twelve years ago? Would they have made the same rules the next m  
Or would they have thrown out the rule book completely?

u think But Mayhew had happened, and Cammie had received an almost  
wound. Yet she'd recovered. And she'd remained strong.

She'd said it was five years after coming to work for him bef  
nonster allowed herself to fall for another man. That would have been bef  
entence moved Lochlan and sold the house.

ell me Five years. Which made it seven years since the Rufus Mayhew c  
Didn't they say things turned in seven-year cycles?

aned in And now it had been another seven years.

She'd never told Dane about this second man, but he'd known sor  
ears of was up. He'd become used to reaching her almost immediately when  
needed her, even in off hours, but she'd stopped picking up the pho  
roses to away. Sometimes she'd even had to call him back. She'd dressed u  
ould be more, wearing slightly more low-cut blouses—nothing untoward. He  
ld have though still circumspect, had been a little tighter, showing off her  
lked in Curves he couldn't help salivating over. She'd worn a little more n  
vith the and her lipstick had become bolder.

as a hot Now she told him the whole story. "He was actually a very nice gu

Doyle. He'd worked for Uncle Lochlan before my uncle had to retire and came to the house one day, and Uncle Lochlan lit up. He talked as if he himself was wrong—not a single sign of dementia.” She looked at Dane and remember how bad he got seven years ago, when I had to put him in a care?”

Dane nodded. He remembered so well her trauma over the decision. “But he was himself again. The uncle I used to know. For days after he remembered everything they'd talked about even though Arlo had e knew there only a couple of hours. I actually thought I must have imagined t 1. He'd in him, that he couldn't be as bad as I thought.”

Perhaps “I understand completely. I had a similar day with my grandfather. d never An old school chum of his grandfather's had come to visit. The n n Dane known him before the war, before he'd changed. And for that or in. But Grandpa had been a completely different man—the man he must have when Dane's grandmother married him, when he'd been fresh out of c with hopes and dreams the war had yet to destroy.

ifferent Dane still treasured that glimpse of the grandfather he'd never know orning? Cammie nodded. “I thought I could make the phenomenon happen so I invited Arlo over.” She closed her eyes, and Dane reached for h mortal once more. “But I couldn't duplicate it,” she whispered.

ore she He stroked her warm skin before he withdrew and let her go on. e she'd “Uncle Lochlan liked Arlo so much. And I thought he was sweet. T lebackle. asked me out. I said yes. I didn't intend for it to get serious.” She away what might have been a tear, so it didn't fall. “He told me right that he was separated, not divorced yet, but that he'd left his wife months before. I appreciated his honesty. And he was so good to r laughed together. We watched movies together. He liked all the old nething the way I do. We went to that old theater on University Avenue in Pal ever he the Stanford, where they played classic movies, and we saw *Meet M ie right Louis*. Margaret O'Brien, who played the little sister, gave a talk bef up a bit movie. It was amazing. We had pizza afterward.”

r skirts, His heart flipped over, and he had to admit he was jealous. curves, watching classic movies was their thing. And he was incredibly sadakeup, hadn't been the one to take her to see Margaret O'Brien and *Meet M Louis*.

ly. Arlo She shrugged. “Anyway.” And she left it at that.

Arlo He wanted to see her laugh. But they had to get through this. He didn't ask if she'd slept with this Arlo. He accepted that she had. And he didn't. "You inwardly, since he'd skated through his always brief relationships.

memory She pressed her lips together for a moment, before she finally said, "Then he told me his wife wanted to patch things up. And that she was pregnant."

forward, Her words tore a hole in the pit of his stomach. "I'm so sorry." Even now, she straightened her shoulders. "I kept my dignity. I was very proud of myself," she said with the barest of smiles.

him, "Go back to your wife for the sake of the child." She waved a hand as if she were shooing a phantom away. "And if you need a good therapist, I'll find you the best one. I'm good at finding what people need. That's what Cammie always did—found exactly what a man needed when he needed it.

college, "It was a thousand times worse than Mayhew, wasn't it?" he said, wanting to hurt her, but realizing she needed to get it all out, that she needed him to understand why it could never work between them.

again, "You see, she was only three months pregnant. And we'd been dating five." She swallowed. "Which meant he'd slept with her while he was with me. He'd been playing both ends. Maybe he hadn't meant to." She shook her shoulders as if giving Doyle the benefit of the doubt even now. "Then he made me realize I wasn't—" She paused.

blinked He knew exactly what she'd been about to say. "But you aren't away enough. He was a two-timing ass."

a few Her eyes were bleak. She was back in that moment, feeling the pain. We over again. The first guy she loved had only wanted her for Clyde's classics and his business acumen. He was a leech, a thief. The next guy had to be Alto, the rebound. He might not have meant to screw her over, but he had. In between, there was Dane himself, seducing her on a golf course, taking her back to his condo, and making love to her that very night. Rushing her. Pushing her.

Binge- And the next morning, allowing her to make up all the rules that kept them apart for twelve years.

in St. He should have told her right then how he felt—though truthfully, he hadn't known the extent of it.

But he wouldn't believe it was too late.



She didn't "Remember when you brought me those flowers?" she asked.

He nodded.

"You knew how hurt I was even though I tried to hide it from you."

"I knew. And I hurt here." He put his hand over his heart. "So bad he was you."

"Then you brought T. Rex into our lives." She sniffed. Though tracks traced her cheeks, he knew she was crying inside. "I'd just come

to the office restroom, where I'd been crying, when you walked in with

the box and two coffees from the corner café." She laughed, though it was

hard as if "And you said some lady outside the coffee shop was giving away puppy

to my family. He smiled with the memory. "I couldn't resist those sad puppy-dog

eyes." Just as he couldn't resist Cammie. He'd known something was

going right wrong, and he'd been pretty sure it involved a man. He'd have done anything

to make her feel better.

He said, not Her laughter came stronger now. "Then you said I'd need to help

figure out what to call him. And how to get him in and out of other countries

when you traveled so you wouldn't have to leave him behind." He

was laughing forshone with her laughter, and he felt his heart beat normally again. "You

gave me a task to take my mind off the bad stuff."

She hugged She reached for him then, laying her hand over his. "Every time I think

of "But it how sweet you were that day, it makes me cry all over again. And you

me that stuffed T. Rex after we named our puppy."

It was good "You've still got him too." Dane had seen the puffy thing on her

face had been such a small thing to do, yet it made her smile. Even the

pain all wanted to make her smile.

She contacts She put her fingers to the corners of her eyes to wipe up the tears

she'd seen on Rex chose that moment to pop up from beneath the table and put his paws

on her thigh. Cammie tugged him onto her lap, and he curled into a ball, trying

to bring her he always did when he thought she was sad. The way he had when

she'd come home after her uncle died. The way he had that very first day

Dane brought the puppy into the office.

It would Dane told her what was in his heart. "I've always known what

you needed me, even if you tried to pretend you didn't."

Finally, he After a deep breath, she said, "It's the same for me."

He turned his hand over in hers and held on. He wanted to be right

there the little dachshund was, his head cradled in her lap, her fingers

through his hair.

But he'd told her he would wait for her to make the next move, nothing else, he was a man of his word.

He knew, even if she didn't, that her revelations were a huge step

And for him. She'd kept this locked inside. And he'd never asked, no tear he'd known she'd been terribly hurt. She'd put herself out there, e out of prove she wasn't good enough and that her judgment sucked. At least h a big what she'd told herself.

shaky. He understood now why it had been so important to her to ask "pies." promotion. It wasn't just about being more involved or wanting "eyes." responsibility. It was about her self-esteem, about finding the courage terribly for what she wanted. And she'd done it.

He wanted to pummel those two jerks into the ground for the way treated her, but he was so damn glad the relationships hadn't work elp you would never do the same to her. He couldn't push her. He could untries expectations on her. He couldn't take control away from her.

Nor could they let things go on the way they had for the last twelve ou gave He had to be as honest as she had been. They both had their fears. A both needed to move past them.

"Thank you for telling me all this. I understand so much better now bought wanted to pull her into his arms, but the time wasn't right. "We made rules that day in my office, and we've lived by them ever since." He bed. It until she looked at him again. "But those rules don't apply anymore. W n, he'd to throw them out. We need to change everything. We need more." He

stopped by her chair, put his hand on her cheek. "It's been a long trav rs. And Let's sleep on it." He kissed her forehead and whispered close to her jaws on hope you'll dream of me."

He'd dream of her. He always had. He always would.

she'd

y when

\* \* \*

The sound of his footsteps faded as Rex snuggled into her lap. She'd en you Dane had been in the dark about her affair with Arlo until that big flowers had appeared on her desk. She remembered asking, "Who ar t where from?" She'd brushed aside the leaves. "There's no card."

Dane had stood before her with not so much as a smirk on his fa running

said, "You must have a secret admirer."

, and if But she'd known it was him. He'd never taken credit for any of the things he'd done for her. For how he'd helped her uncle. Even in giving her the promotion when she asked for it, he'd blamed himself for not having promoted her long ago.

only to Maybe that day, as she'd cried her eyes out in the bathroom, she thought, that's been crying so much for Arlo and the way it ended, but for the way David

always seen inside her, even the things she hid from him. Maybe she was crying out of gratitude and longing and a sense of regret. What if the next moment she'd walked into his office the morning after the golf game to ask to see the man of her dreams, she'd told him right then she couldn't wait to see him because she wanted to be in his life as far more than an assistant?

or they'd If she'd found the courage to ask for what she wanted all those years ago, what might have been?

It put

the years.

and they

now." He

picked up the

and waited

but we need

to stand,

one day.

One day, "I

thought

vase of

these

pace and

said, “You must have a secret admirer.”

But she’d known it was him. He’d never taken credit for any of the nice things he’d done for her. For how he’d helped her uncle. Even in giving her the promotion when she asked for it, he’d blamed himself for not having promoted her long ago.

Maybe that day, as she’d cried her eyes out in the bathroom, she hadn’t been crying so much for Arlo and the way it ended, but for the way Dane had always seen inside her, even the things she hid from him. Maybe she’d been crying out of gratitude and longing and a sense of regret. What if, the moment she’d walked into his office the morning after the golf game and seen the man of her dreams, she’d told him right then she couldn’t work for him because she wanted to be in his life as far more than an assistant?

If she’d found the courage to ask for what she wanted all those years ago, what might have been?

## Chapter Twenty-One

True to his word, Dane left her alone. After sipping the last of the champagne in her glass, Cammie picked up Rex. He hadn't moved except to lift his head when Dane left the room.

She carried the dog up the wide manor staircase to the first landing where a portrait of some naval hero took pride of place on the wall. The stairs separated, going up each side. She took the right-hand stair heading to her room. She kept clothes and other necessities at the manor. She hadn't brought much with her. At the top, her door stood open.

She had a fleeting wish that Dane would be waiting inside.

But when she stepped across the threshold, the room was empty. She set Rex on the bed, he curled into a ball, falling asleep right away. He would stay there all night as if guarding her, where he could jump at any moment's notice.

In the bathroom, she wiped away her makeup and the residue of the day.

A voice inside told her the truth. *Dane always comes to me when I need him.*

When Arlo betrayed her, Dane had recognized her distress and soothed her with flowers, then the cutest puppy in the world.

Now that she thought about it, he had the office space on the Peninsula because of her. He would have been more centrally located for business if he'd been in the city. But he'd chosen that location so she wouldn't have a long commute and could drive home quickly if her uncle needed her. After she'd put her uncle in memory care and sold the house, Dane had set up that office. Then he'd offered her a place in each of his homes—a massive suite that was as big as an apartment. He'd helped her pay for her uncle's care.

He'd done so many kind and thoughtful things for her, many of which she hadn't even recognized. When she'd called him with the news that he was near the end, he'd rushed to her side without hesitation. He'd stayed with her, held her, comforted her.

She pulled her flannel pajamas from the bureau. Even though it was May, English nights could be cool. She climbed into bed, then tugged covers to her chin. Wrapping her arms around the stuffed dinosaur, of course she'd brought it with her—she hugged it as if it were Dane, who curled into the crook at the backs of her knees.

So many times, Dane had gone above and beyond for her. He was his headbest friend, always there. At the barbecue, he'd noticed she was feeling and followed her into the house. He'd held her so tenderly, never allowing anything from her. Her grief at the time had been all about him, about wondering what she wanted from him, about knowing what she'd never have. But he'd thought she was grieving for her uncle, and he'd held her.

He said they could make a relationship work. But they had such a working relationship now. She lay in bed, not thinking about that or how beautifully he'd made love to her, but about the intervening years.

And she saw everything he hadn't said. He hadn't said he loved her. She could see now he'd actually told her in a zillion different ways. She hadn't realized it herself. She couldn't live without him. She needed his big, beautiful hugs and his steady reassurance that told her how special she long was to him.

She could go on being afraid that it might end badly. That she wasn't *I really* good enough.

But what if their relationship *wasn't* damaged? What if he *could* love her? Lying in her lonely bed, she spoke aloud. "We've both been dummies."

And she left T. Rex sleeping peacefully.

\* \* \*

Right Dane paced the room, strategizing like an army general. "By God, I won't fail at this. She will be mine, and I'll be hers."

He wanted nothing more than to race down the hall and knock on the bedroom door. To make love to her the way he'd thought about all the times they'd lived under the same roof, and even before. To feel her skin under his fingertips, her lips against his, her body taking him to all the places he'd dreamed of.

But she needed to make the next move. He knew in his gut it was time

as earlyway it could work. He could knock on her door, and she'd probably  
ged them. She'd probably even let him make love to her again if he pushed.  
aur—of But that would be her *letting* him. Him *pushing* her. Instead  
ile Rexwanting it as urgently as he did. And choosing what she wanted.

He was thinking so hard he almost didn't hear the soft knock. T  
was herthought it had to be his imagination. But who wouldn't let his fantas  
ing badright through the door? He hurried to answer it.

sking a She wore the most adorable flannel pajamas with polar bears a  
ealizingthem. They made him want to gather her up and kiss her senseless.

ut he'd But she was already talking. Even as badly as he wanted to show  
with kisses, he needed to hear every word.

a good "You've been my whole world for so many years," she told him, h  
ight orwide, their soft jade color darkened almost to emerald.

. His body wanted to burst into flames. His heart wanted to soar i  
her, yetnight.

Even if "In every way but one." Her gaze traced the contours of his face  
ded hisI'm ready—really, really ready—to fix that." After only one step i  
cial sheroom, she added, "You're the missing piece of my puzzle."

If a heart could burst wide open and spill over the floor at her feet,  
wasn'tright then.

He got everything she was saying, totally. She'd thought of him  
ve her?past twelve years, just as he'd dreamed of her. She hadn't said she lov  
n suchHe couldn't say he loved her. But he could show her in every way poss

He grabbed her up in his arms, holding her tight. His hands on h  
she hooked her legs around his waist, and he whispered, "You have  
how many nights I've dreamed of this."

She bent her head for a kiss so gentle and so sweet, it felt like b  
wings caressing him. Then she opened her mouth and delved deep i  
will not inner being. A wealth of emotion, so much bigger than anything he  
felt in his life, welled up inside him. And he took her mouth as if he'  
on her kissed anyone before, as if she was the only one he'd ever kiss again.

ie years Memories were supposedly so much more poignant than realit  
beneath built them up in your mind, turned them into something reverential.

es he'd lips were softer than they'd ever been. Her skin beneath the pajama t  
he only smoother than he'd ever imagined. Her legs around his waist were  
begging him, owning him before he'd even entered her.

let him He felt more powerful than he ever had in his life as he carried her to bed.

of her “Nothing could be sweeter than your taste.” He let her fall to the bed and came down on top of her. She was so delicate beneath him and so strong. Then he He’d heard her siren’s call for the last twelve years. And now he was going to make her his.

Her eyes were bright in the dim light of the lamp by the door, and she wanted more light. He wanted to see every inch of her. The last time, he had done things in the dark. But he never wanted to be in the dark with her. So he reached past her to flip on the bedside lamp, bathing her in soft light.

Her eyes “I want to touch you everywhere. I need to taste every part of you.” She blinked. And then she whispered, her voice husky, sexy, “What are you waiting for?”

A piece of him wanted to go absolutely wild. But another, bigger piece, wanted to slow everything down and savor each moment.

into his “It’s going to be so much better than before.” He reached between her breasts and flicked open the buttons of her polar bear pajama top. Instead of what he had done for the gold, he trailed his fingers across her cheek, nibbled the tendril of her lobe, licked the shell of her ear.

for the Cammie shivered, reminding him of how much she liked that he did to her delicate and sensitive ears. With one last lick and a warm breath, he whispered, “There’s so much more of you I want to see.”

er rear, He kissed her neck down to the slope of her shoulder. He licked the hollow of her throat, and lying between her legs, he felt her thighs wrap around him in need.

utterfly They hadn’t talked much the last time, but now he wanted nothing more than to hear her voice. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll do it.”

’d ever Her words were a hoarse murmur. “Touch me.”

d never He trailed his fingers to the tip of her breast, circled the tight button, and she gasped. “Taste me.”

y. You Then she pushed him, her hand on the back of his head, guiding him down to where she wanted him. And that was something totally new to him. Before, she hadn’t told him what she wanted, either with words or actions. But now, she was tighter, but then, he hadn’t asked.

“Anything you want.” He looked up at her as he moved down her body.



er to his “Everything you want.”

He closed his lips around the pearl of her breast, sucking her into his mouth, worrying her with his tongue until she writhed beneath him.

She gasped. “Dane, please.”

As he spread her pajama top wide, he moved to the other peak, tugging deep, reveling in her breathy whisper of his name. Twelve years ago, but he had been no names, and it had been freaking sexy. But this was so much more than they’d had. And he was so much harder.

“Every inch of you,” he whispered.

He tasted, licked, caressed all that beautiful, smooth, delicate skin on her breasts all the way to her belly button, where a gentle lick made her laugh.

Her laugh could make a man lose everything.

Then he reached the tie of her pajama bottoms. And he looked at her. He hadn’t asked permission last time. And he didn’t need it now. At least, not the words—because her scent told him how ready she was. She wanted her to ask. He needed to know they were in this together.

“Tell me what you want.” Shifting slightly to the side, he laid his hands on her flesh just above her sex.

“I want you to pleasure me. I want it so badly,” she said on a gasp of breath. Then, on a whimper of need, she added, “If you don’t do it, I’ll do it myself.”

Amazing visions floated through his mind, of her dreaming of him, of those nights when she’d been just down the hall from him. Of her crying out his name, imagining that it was his touch on her body. Of her crying out his name, imagining that it was his touch on her body.

He should have known, should have felt the power of her touch. Maybe he had. Maybe that’s why he dreamed of her every night. Yes, every single damned night since she’d come to work for him. Even if he dreamed of himself it couldn’t possibly be that often.

He slid off the bed, kneeling between her spread thighs as she propped herself on her elbows to look at him.

She hadn’t watched all those years ago. She’d loved it, lost herself to it as well, but she hadn’t watched. And there was something so hot about her reactions—him now, something so erotic.

He slowly drew the polar bear pajamas down her legs, throwing them aside until only her panties remained. The damp patch between her

beckoned him, and instead of tearing them off, he leaned over her, b  
into his warm air on the fabric, covered her with his mouth. She ground again  
and he took her that way, right through her panties, reveling in her ta  
scent, her moisture, her heat.

aking it As sweet she'd been then, she was sweeter now. As wet as she'  
there'd then, she was wetter now. As hot as she'd been, she was on fire now.  
hotter. He couldn't wait another moment. Ripping the panties off her, l  
her with his lips and his tongue the way he'd dreamed of so many time

\* \* \*

n, from  
ade her

Cammie cried out his name the moment his mouth found her and his  
delved deep.

er. He'd been so good before—no one had ever been better. His tou  
ow—at burned itself into her brain. His taste had lived inside her, his scent fill  
But he head whenever she closed her eyes and thought of that night.

is hand But his mouth on her now was like nothing she'd ever felt before.  
it was all the years she'd dreamed of it. Wanted it. Needed it. He clam  
big warm hands on her derriere and lifted her so he could taste m  
more of her.

i shaky And she watched, relishing the sight of his dark head between her  
'll have his closed eyes as he drank her in, his powerful shoulders spread  
1, of all thighs wide. Entering her with two blunt fingers, he flipped her world  
eeding down. Just the right touch. So perfect. So—*oh my God*—

name. His mouth buried against her, he opened those blue, blue eyes.  
oughts. And she exploded, crying out his name, chanting, "Dane, Dane, Da  
s, every She'd made sounds for him before, moans, groans, sighs, but now  
'd told his mouth on her, his fingers inside her, his tongue playing her, he  
slammed up into the ceiling, raining down on her again.

Cammie And she came for him endlessly.

lf in it,  
gaze on

g them  
er legs

beckoned him, and instead of tearing them off, he leaned over her, breathed warm air on the fabric, covered her with his mouth. She ground against him, and he took her that way, right through her panties, reveling in her taste, her scent, her moisture, her heat.

As sweet she'd been then, she was sweeter now. As wet as she'd been then, she was wetter now. As hot as she'd been, she was on fire now.

He couldn't wait another moment. Ripping the panties off her, he took her with his lips and his tongue the way he'd dreamed of so many times.

\* \* \*

Cammie cried out his name the moment his mouth found her and his tongue delved deep.

He'd been so good before—no one had ever been better. His touch had burned itself into her brain. His taste had lived inside her, his scent filling her head whenever she closed her eyes and thought of that night.

But his mouth on her now was like nothing she'd ever felt before. Maybe it was all the years she'd dreamed of it. Wanted it. Needed it. He clamped his big warm hands on her derriere and lifted her so he could taste more and more of her.

And she watched, relishing the sight of his dark head between her thighs, his closed eyes as he drank her in, his powerful shoulders spreading her thighs wide. Entering her with two blunt fingers, he flipped her world upside down. Just the right touch. So perfect. So—*oh my God*—

His mouth buried against her, he opened those blue, blue eyes.

And she exploded, crying out his name, chanting, "Dane, Dane, Dane."

She'd made sounds for him before, moans, groans, sighs, but now, with his mouth on her, his fingers inside her, his tongue playing her, her cries slammed up into the ceiling, raining down on her again.

And she came for him endlessly.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

It was like believing she'd been awake all along, only to realize she had sleepwalked through her entire life.

He ran his mouth over her thighs, kissed her hot skin, worked his way up her body until he held her in his arms, kissed her. It was like a combination of his taste and her taste mingled, creating a whole new flavor she'd never before known.

"I thought I remembered how good it was," she whispered, looking into his beautiful blues. "But I never remembered it like *that*."

He chuckled, stroking her hair back from her temple and cupping her cheek. "I've imagined it all a thousand times." He dropped a kiss on the corner of her mouth. "And it's never been this good."

Her heart rolled in her chest, upside down and right side up again. It was still there, still holding her, still gazing at her with what she told herself could only be love. Even if he hadn't said the word. He would—one day, he would.

She trailed her hand down his chest. He'd been shirtless when he knocked on his door, and she followed the arrow of dark hair down the waistband of his sweats. "You have on way too many clothes. A lot of them. Nowhere near done with you yet."

He gave her the Harrington lady-killer smile. This time, it was all hers. She wouldn't think about how it had been for anyone else, ever.

He stood, grinning. "I can remedy that ASAP." He stripped, his sweats sliding down his legs until he stepped out of them.

She could only breathe out a simple exclamation. "Oh my."

Of course she remembered how stunning he was. They swam in the Caribbean all the time, as well as his Pebble Beach pool. And there was the hot tub on his San Francisco terrace. But now the room's walls were painted his sculpted muscles with bronze, and his tight boxer briefs hugged him intimately. The way she wanted to cup him.

His male beauty stole the breath from her lungs, until she gasped for air from lack of air. And from her need for him.

He circled a finger at her. "You're still wearing polar bears."

She laughed, and pushing herself up, she shimmied out of the pajama bottoms. Then she sat on the edge of the mattress and tipped her head back to him. “Let me do the rest. I want to unwrap you like you’re the most precious gift I’ve ever received.”

Desire flickered in his eyes. No, need. Need was wholly different from desire. It was a flame that burned inside him, sparking an answering fire deep within her.

Reaching for him, she slipped her fingers inside the elastic of his briefs. Slowly, ever so slowly, she rolled the fabric down. First, it was his waist, then his hips, then his thighs. Her mouth watered. He was so hard. So ready. He could take her. She wanted that.

But more than taking him inside her, she needed *this*.

Inch by inch, she revealed all his hard, male splendor begging for her touch, her lips, her tongue.

Could it be possible he was even bigger than she remembered? Memories of their time together were so much better now. Inside and out. The more he grew, the more she grew. He was growing right along with the physical, making everything bigger, better, and more satisfying.

The briefs fell to the floor, and he stepped out of them. She couldn't resist, she tasted him then, but she wrapped her hand around him, felt the weight of him, the thickness, the length.

His guttural rasp rolled down to her. “Please. Don’t tease me.”

She looked up into his burning gaze. “I am so done teasing.”

The last twelve years had been one long, agonizing, exquisite tease. And now it was over.

She bent her head and wrapped her lips around his crown, sucking on him for a long moment, loving the gasp and groan that exploded from him.

He swore, and she loved that too.

For long, incredible moments, she licked him, tasted a drop of his essence, swallowed it, and wanted more.

Then she swallowed all of him, taking him deep.

Shoving his fingers through her hair, he swore and growled. “Please, please, please. Begged.”

For what? For her to finish him? For her to throw herself back on the bed and beg him to take her?

Memories of the last time were suddenly so clear to her. All she’d

ma top, after he'd taken her to the peak with his mouth had been the need to ha  
look at inside her. She hadn't done *this* to him.

recious But now, she savored the taste of him, the feel of him between h  
the tremble in his limbs, the tautness of his muscles. Gripping him  
nt from hand, she squeezed his thigh with the other, her nails making small c  
g flame his flesh.

If it was even possible, he grew bigger, harder, filling her mouth.  
; briefs. Until he pleaded, "Let me come inside you. I need that. I want that  
just histo have it. Please. Cammie." Then he swore again.

er now. She let him slide from her lips, sucking hard one more time, and  
up at him.

Then Dane said the thing that could have made the mome  
for her completely apart. "If I know my butler, he's left a necessary little  
somewhere around here for us."

Maybe it But she wouldn't let the *necessities* ruin anything, and she stoo  
motion went up on her tiptoes to wrap her arms around his neck. "I'm on th  
righter, She didn't explain it helped her cramps. "I don't need the little packe  
don't."

ld have He looked at her with eyes such a vivid blue she thought he could  
of him, the way to her marrow. To her heart.

"I haven't been on a date since you went on family leave," he  
couldn't. Not while you were dealing with everything. All I could thin  
was you. That's why I called you on video chat all the time. So there  
no one else for so long. I want to feel all of you. And I want you to fee  
me."

ig for a Her heart burst wide open. She hadn't wanted to think he'd been o  
dating nameless, faceless women while she'd sat by her uncle's bedside  
she'd savored every one of those nightly video chats.

of his "Then don't make me wait another second," she whispered aga  
lips.

He twisted then and fell back on the bed with her on top, h  
ise," he caressing her from breast to thigh.

"I feel like I've done this a thousand times," she told him. "Every  
the bed my dreams."

He tangled his fingers in her hair. "In my dreams, it was just me  
known you and nothing between us." Then he pulled her down for his ki

ave him unique combined taste—him, her—filling her up.

She wanted to taste it for the rest of her life.

er lips, He let her go, whispering, “Take me. All of me. Please.”

in one Looking into the ocean-blue depths of his eyes, into the flames l  
lents in there, she felt as if the words meant so much more than just the pl

They offered up his heart and his soul too.

And she took him.

. I have

\* \* \*

looked

ent fall She came down on him, taking him deep. And he felt as though she  
packet home he’d always longed for.

packet He groaned as she threw her head back, letting out a long, low n  
need and pleasure.

d then, Then she leaned forward, bracing her hands on the bed, her lip  
ie pill. inches from his, her hair falling over him, her breath sweetly bathing  
t if you want slow. Real slow. Until I need it fast.”

“Take me any way you want me.”

l see all He wondered if he’d always been the one to take, if he’d never  
said. “I Except that one night with her. How could he have been so blind? But  
k about that was why this joining was so precious. Because it had taken so lon  
’s been here. Because he’d dreamed away the last twelve years.

el all of And now she was real. *This* was real.

ut there The short glide she performed on him was enough to driv  
le. And completely out of his mind. He wanted his hands on her hips, wanted  
into her, to roll her beneath him and thrust so deep they both saw stars.

le. And Yet, even more, he needed whatever way she chose.

inst his As she rolled her hips on him, she moaned, her eyes drifting close  
his skin lost herself in the pleasure. The slow ride was exactly what her body  
the top of his skull.

night in “That is so good,” she said in a voice he’d only ever heard on  
night, in the throes of her passion.

He wanted to hear that voice forever.

e inside Eyes closed, she whimpered, chanted, “Oh, oh, oh.”

ss, that His gut knew what would make this even better. Reaching betwee

he put his finger on the tight button between her legs. And he stroked her.

The chanting stopped, taken over by groans of exquisite pleasure. Her desire for him. Only him. He knew it, felt it in every clamp of his burning around her.

Her legs began to quiver, and her arms, supporting her on the floor, trembled. Her eyes scrunched closed, and her breath fell in sharp gasps from her lips.

He remembered those sounds. He'd heard them every night for years. And he remembered how excruciatingly good that night had felt. Now, with all his senses heightened, he felt every vibration of her body, tension rising, dragging him with her. His own blastoff was so close, every ounce of willpower to hold off, to wait for her. This was all different from before, so much more—the slip-slide of her against him, the way she gripped him so tightly, the way she lost herself in ecstasy.

She bowed her head, puffed out her breath, fast, harsh. Then she cried out as her body clamped down on him. He felt her orgasm as if it were his.

With barely a rational thought, he rolled her to her back, pulled her up around his waist, and pounded into her. Her whole body vibrated, beautiful rose-gold hair flying across her face, her mouth open, gasping her satisfaction in two words. “Don’t stop.” Then three more. “Please stop.”

He couldn’t have stopped even if the world were ending around them. He took them both to a place they’d only glimpsed the last time. And prayed they would stay there forever.

\* \* \*

Her words came out part laughter, part tears. “That was...” She craved to complete the thought.

He finished it for her. “Exquisite.”

She nodded. “Yes. That’s it. Exquisite. Stunning.”

“Life-altering. Mind-blowing.”

“Out of this world.”

“Freaking unbelievable.”

They laughed together. She rolled her head to meet his gaze as she curled against him. “Are you trying to outdo me with words?”



er. He shook his head, grinned. "I could never outdo you, sweet lady and ofdrive me crazy."

er body She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "Is that a good drive-me or a bad drive-me-crazy?"

ie bed, He rolled on top of her. "It's the most amazing crazy I've ever felt ps fromlife." He kissed her quick, even though she wanted him to linger. "And want it to get crazier."

twelve Then he rolled off and strolled into the bathroom, his butt r elt. Yetripping.

dy, her He was so beautiful. So perfect.

it took She crawled to the bottom of the bed, searched for her panties, a ogetherstepping into them when he returned. "Come on, Lord Lazybones rim, onstarving."

stasy. He grinned like a naughty kid. "Me too, Lady Lazybones."

ried out She loved the banter. She loved being lady to his lord. They dress is own.ran down the stairs hand in hand, giggling like children.

legs up The kitchen was state of the art, yet it still had a touch of the old, v ed, herrange built into the ancient hearth and the refrigerator designed to lc ing outan old-fashioned icebox. Sitting on stools at the granite counter oppo e don'tsink, they finished the rest of the roast beef, Dane feeding Rex the Fernsby would yell about.

em. He Narrowing his eyes, Dane said, "I'm still hungry."

ed they She found a Sainsbury's packaged fish pie in the freezer and heat in the microwave. Seated once again at the counter, she smiled. "I like junk food sometimes. It's so deliciously salty."

ouldn't He grinned. "I agree, but you still taste better." And he pulled her stool, angling her to stand between his legs.

ouldn't Kissing her, he slid his hands beneath her pajama top, cuppi breasts, tweaking the tips until she groaned. Then he slipped in waistband and palmed her bottom. Not to be outdone, she glided insweats, pulling on him to stand up long enough for her to slide them c his ankles.

"Get on the counter," she demanded.

she lay He happily agreed while she sat on the stool between his legs. Sh love to him with her mouth until he begged her to stop. Then he hau up on the counter and spread her thighs, thrusting between her le

ly. You touching her in every perfect spot until she was the one who screamed.  
And of course, they couldn't let it end there.

e-crazy

\* \* \*

t in my  
d I only Dane couldn't count how many times they made love in the night. I  
her close, waking up hard and ready against her backside. Lifting her l  
nuscles his thigh, his fingers deep inside her, he played her for long momen  
she cried out, shattering. Then he entered her, taking her hard and swe  
the taking was mutual.

nd was Waking to bright morning sun breaking through the slit in the curt  
es. I'm wanted nothing more than to stay there with her forever.

Except that she wasn't in the bed.

It couldn't have been a dream. Not like he'd been dreaming a  
ed, then years.

He went in search of her and found her in the kitchen, where  
with the already made coffee and toast.

ok like Over the delicious aroma of rich coffee, he could smell her, that u  
site the sweet and spicy scent that could only be Cammie.

tidbits And he wanted more of her, right there on the kitchen countertop  
he'd had her last night.

\* \* \*

ed it up

e eating Over slightly burnt toast, Dane said, "That was amazing."

off the Cammie almost faltered. "It was awesome," she agreed.

But why did everything have to look different in the morning light?

ing her They drank coffee and ate their toast slathered with marmalac  
to her popped two more pieces into the toaster, one for each of them.

side his And he didn't say it.

lown to "Fernsby won't return for a while. We should go back to bed. Or  
take a shower." He winked.

She stared at him for a long moment. And somehow managed to  
"We can't let T. Rex miss his morning walk."

e made He grinned. "Then after the walk."

led her After last night, she'd expected him to say it. She wanted him to  
:gs and

And somehow it was like a knife stabbing straight through her heart and she *didn't* say it.

Dane would never lie. And that was the problem. He wasn't going to say anything he didn't truly feel. He would be honest. He wanted her. He needed her. Maybe he even needed her. And yes, deep down, she thought he held her.

But he couldn't say it.

And didn't that mean they were right back where they'd been when she'd knocked on his door last night? Right back where they'd been together along? With her wanting more than he could ever give?

\* \* \*

Okay. He could handle this. He wanted to go back to bed and make her scream all over again.

But she wanted to take the dog for a walk.

All right. He could deal with that. He wouldn't pressure her. Especially after last night. He couldn't push her and ask if what they'd done last night meant as much to her as it did to him. Last night, she'd said he was the missing piece to her puzzle. He'd taken that to mean so much.

But maybe it hadn't meant as much as he wanted.

That was okay. He'd give her time. He wouldn't push. He wouldn't make her run away. And tonight he'd take her to bed again and show her over and over how much she meant to him.

But that would be tonight. For now, he said, "You know, we really need to hire an assistant for you. With you being in charge of the new project, we're going to need more help. I'll start looking for someone."

He couldn't read her expression. It was suddenly flat, not a hint of an indication of what she was thinking.

Then she smirked. "Oh, no. I'm choosing my own replacement."

She put both hands on the counter and levered off the stool. "I'll take a shower and get dressed. Then I'll take Rex for a walk before we get to work."

Just like that, in the space of a moment where he hesitated about saying anything, she was gone. He watched the empty doorway through which she had disappeared.

Mentioning the assistant had been his way of giving her time. And

when he knew she was his equal. It hadn't been a way to avoid talking about feelings.

But she was running away. Even though he could swear he hadn't desired her. But maybe he'd pushed over dinner, telling her the next move had been hers. Setting up an expectation. And she had made her move. Except the morning, she regretted it.

That day after the Maverick meeting when he'd thought she'd been before to quit on him was the closest to a heart attack he'd ever come.

*Don't push too hard, don't ask too soon, just play it low-key.*

All he could do now was wait and see. Even if the wait might kill him.

love to

especially  
that night  
was the

't make  
ever and

ly need  
project,

single

I take a  
work."  
what to  
h she'd

I letting

her know she was his equal. It hadn't been a way to avoid talking about his feelings.

But she was running away. Even though he could swear he hadn't pushed her. But maybe he'd pushed over dinner, telling her the next move had to be hers. Setting up an expectation. And she had made her move. Except that this morning, she regretted it.

That day after the Maverick meeting when he'd thought she'd been about to quit on him was the closest to a heart attack he'd ever come.

*Don't push too hard, don't ask too soon, just play it low-key.*

All he could do now was wait and see. Even if the wait might kill him.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Cammie couldn't flat out ask Dane, *Do you love me?* She just couldn't would break her to ask. She'd laid her heart on the line last night when she told him he was the missing piece to her puzzle. What else could that be except that her heart was only complete with him in it? Yet, even as it was as last night had been, as out of this world, he hadn't said he loved her.

Was Dane even capable of love after his upbringing? His parents had pretty much abandoned him and all his siblings when they were young. Something like that left irreparable damage. If that were so, they didn't stand a chance.

It hurt her head to think about it.

Sitting at her computer, she busily searched for an assistant for the resort while she managed the special needs resort. The office suite, formerly a library, was a darkly paneled room, with bookcases floor to ceiling, a fireplace, and only two smallish windows looking out on the garden. The lack of light made the entire room dark.

She could barely concentrate.

Especially with Dane sitting at his desk busily throwing a rubber ball at Rex. The dog went crazy, running into walls, rolling across the carpet, on the hardwood that wasn't covered by the rug. At any other time she would have laughed at T. Rex's antics. And Dane's.

But it wasn't any other time. It was the morning after he'd made her fall in love to her.

And she could think of nothing else but why he hadn't said he loved her.

The slam of the front door made them both jump.

"Good God," Dane said, sitting up straight. "That can't possibly be Fernsby."

Of course it wasn't. Fernsby would never slam a door. Yet who else could it be?

A moment later, the man himself stood in the office doorway. Grinning. The man who never smiled was actually *grinning*.

"I'm one of the contestants on the show." His fist moved as if he

to punch the air and only barely held himself back. “I beat that scourge of earth, Digbert.” He laughed, a raspy sound, as if his throat muscles knew how to laugh. “He actually made *croissants*.” Glee trickled through his voice. “How did he get past the first round? Even one of your sister’s monstrousities would have been better.”

It didn’t. It Cammie had never—absolutely never—seen this side of Fernsby. In she’d uncannily that sheer happiness had freed him. Or had victory over his rival meant it brought it out?

perfect She wasn’t about to miss this opportunity. Not for anything.

. She jumped out of her chair and hugged him.

nts had Then, miracle of miracles, Fernsby, the staid, stern butler, waltzed around the library with a young woman.

It’s not have Who even knew the man could dance?

\* \* \*

From both sides, the Dane had expected Fernsby to start in on him the moment he walked through the door, pulling him aside to ask what the heck had happened with Cammie. Which Because they obviously weren’t all lovey-dovey the way Fernsby predicted. They were still miles apart at two separate desks.

If Fernsby even noticed, he didn’t say a thing. He was too happy.

ball for Fernsby and *happy* had never before gone together in his lexicon. Sliding Fernsby danced Cammie around the library, his face lit up with irrepressible joy. She

glorious Dane must be dreaming. Or it was a nightmare. He couldn’t tell what

glorious Suddenly releasing Cammie, Fernsby seized Dane, waltzing him around the room just as he’d waltzed Cammie.

and her. It was like something out of *My Fair Lady*. The horror remake.

ibly be Yet Dane couldn’t help laughing—loud, uproarious sounds welling up from his throat.

e could Fernsby grabbed Cammie again, whirling them both hand in hand as they were dancing around a maypole. Until Fernsby abruptly let go, the only way Dane saved himself from falling was by latching on to Cammie and dancing across the floor with her.

inning. All he wanted to do was hold her close, kiss her luscious lips, and take her upstairs to his bed.

e of the The maniacally happy Fernsby—or maybe just maniacal—dan  
s didn'tway out of the room. Cammie pulled away from Dane.  
ugh his And that was that.  
s vegan

\* \* \*

. It was Fernsby stopped outside the door, overhearing Camille say, “I’m so ha  
remesis him. But we still need to find that assistant.”

zed her He’d given them the most romantic setting, the perfect food, t  
champagne, all of it whispering romance into the air. And now... nada  
Fernsby muttered, “A butler’s job is never done.”

What had he said to the Mavericks? Ah yes, that he was the only  
who could handle a boss too big for his britches.

Dane obviously still needed a kick in the pants.

\* \* \*

through Maybe he should have carried her upstairs the moment Fernsby frolic  
ammie. of the library. Or kissed her senseless. Maybe waiting her out was a mi  
by had

But his cell rang. Cammie pushed him toward the phone lying  
desk. “You’d better get that.”

on. But He grumbled, wondering if it was just an excuse to pull out of his a  
ressible But then he looked at the screen. “It’s Daniel Spencer. It must b  
o’clock in the morning back home. What the hell?”

rich. Her eyes widened. “It’s got to be important.”

around He put the phone on speaker and demanded, “Why are you callin  
three in the morning? You should be sleeping.”

g up his “Because I knew you were in England,” Daniel said, as if that r  
everything. “And this can’t wait. I’ve been going over the numbers all  
“Which ones?”

rd as if “I’ve found the perfect property right on Lake Tahoe.” He l  
and the sounding as if he were buffing his fingernails on his shirt. “We all agre  
nie and Tahoe is healing—the beautiful waters, the clean air—and that we  
place relatively on its own away from the big casinos.”

rd drag “Tell us everything,” Cammie said, Daniel’s excitement vibrating  
way across the air waves and grabbing her. Or maybe that had been th



ced his around the library.

“It’s on the waterfront with an amazing stretch of beach and its own park close enough to send kids on bus trips for the day.”

Cammie pelted him with questions. This was her show. “What now?”

“An old resort, defunct for ten years. There’s sewer, power, infrastructure.”

Cammie gasped, hand over her mouth. “Are there any hazardous issues? Asbestos?”

“Nothing disclosed. Though we’ll still do a survey. It’s on the only because a real estate development company was renovating, and run out of money. We’ll probably need to tear down the existing structure and start over, but that’s no big deal. That’s what the development company should have done instead of working with what was already there. You’ve got into all sorts of trouble with that. But we need to jump on this now. It’s not last long.”

Dane leaned over the phone, fists on the desk. “We’ll get right on the plane and head back to you ASAP.”

“Good. Like I said, this won’t last long.”

“Thank you, Daniel,” Cammie added, smiling at the phone as if she could see her. “I knew you’d find the perfect spot.”

“It’s what I love to do. I can’t wait.” Then he was gone, probably rushing to get to bed after pulling close to an all-nighter.

Dane wanted to waltz around the room all over again.

“Let’s get packed.” He looked at his watch. “We can be on our way in ninety minutes.”

Then he’d have a ten-hour flight to work on her.

\* \* \*

laughed,

She stared at Dane. So smart, so competent, so assured. But this was her project. If Dane went along, everyone would defer to him, just as Dan called him instead of her even though Dane had already informed the Mavericks that she was in charge.

If he was there, she’d look to him for approval the entire time.

She had to take charge. Without Dane as backup. Otherwise  
n dock, always be Dane's little assistant.

d snow Even more than proving to everyone else that she was good enough,  
needed to prove it to herself.

's on it That made her straighten her spine. She was good enough.

As Dane headed for the door, she said, "Since I'm one hundred per  
all the charge of this project, I have to take charge of it completely. Which means  
I have to do this myself."

s waste He stopped dead and looked at her. "What does that mean?" His  
sounded bewildered, his brow scrunched in puzzlement, his head  
marketslightly, as if he were Rex asking why Dane had stopped throwing the  
they've "Can you understand?" She paused a long moment. "I have to  
structureswithout you."

company

You run

t won't

\* \* \*

He was doing it again. Holding her back. He hadn't given her a pro  
on the years ago. And now, he was rushing to do the very thing she needed  
herself.

Yet he couldn't help asking, "You don't even want me to fly hor  
Daniel you?" He sounded like a little boy begging her not to leave him behind  
way he'd so often begged his parents when he was young.

But this was different. He had to tell himself that.

wanting "If you do, we'll talk about it the whole way, and my plan will take  
your plan." She put her hand to her chest. "This needs to be all me."

way in "Of course it does," he said softly, wanting so badly to touch her  
knowing he couldn't. "You're right." Then he picked up his phone  
make the arrangements. You go pack."

She looked at him one long, last moment and whispered, "Thank you."

As she walked out of the office, he shoved away the thought that  
her go now, it would be for good.

was her But sometimes the only choice you had was to set a person free  
Daniel had what they needed to do. And pray it led them back to you.

ied the He had to set her free, like so many of the animals he'd nurtured  
was a kid. And pray she'd return. Even if none of the creatures or the  
he'd loved before ever had.

, she'd

\* \* \*

gh, she Cammie had finished packing. She hadn't brought much, since most of what she needed was already here. She snapped the carry-on closed and hefted it under the floor. Rex lay on the bed, looking up at her with the saddest pair of eyes she'd ever seen. Sort of like Dane had downstairs. The dog whimpered and she pulled up the bag's handle.

s voice She scratched him behind the ears. "I won't be gone long. I promise." The dog licked her hand as if saying he understood.

tipped "Are you going somewhere?"

ball. She jumped at the sound of that deep, stern voice. Bracing herself, she faced Fernsby in the doorway and said, "Daniel just called. I'm heading to California. He's found the perfect property in Lake Tahoe, and I see it. Since I'm managing the project, it's my job and my decision."

It was funny, or odd, how Fernsby just seemed to know things without being told. He knew all about the new resort and her promotion.

He raised his hands to applaud her. "You'll do a smashing job, Cammie. I'm very proud of you." His expression turned even more grave, if it could actually be more grave than usual. Except when he was walking with her, he must talk to you before you go. In private," he added ominously.

nd. The Her heart dropped all the way to her toes. A shiver ran through her and she trembled like a teenager at boarding school being brought before the headmistress. Fernsby had never asked to speak with her privately before.

rn into She wondered if she'd come out of this alive.

And she tried to forestall the dressing-down. "But the plane is waiting." Daniel had called back to say he'd chartered a plane for her and she would meet her when she arrived in California. She couldn't take Dane's place. "I'll meet her when she arrived in California. She couldn't take Dane's place. How would he, Fernsby, and Rex get home?"

ou." But Fernsby said unequivocally, "The plane will just have to wait. I'll meet her when she arrived in California. She couldn't take Dane's place. How would he, Fernsby, and Rex get home?"

if he let What choice did she have? When Fernsby made a demand, you had to obey.

e to do "Is it about the baking show? You want to make sure you can have some time off? Dane's totally behind you on this." She prayed that when he wanted to talk about.

people He'd been so out of character this morning. Something was going on. But Fernsby merely strode across the room and squished his talons.

into an armchair. Then he pointed to the other chair on the opposite side of the table, where she liked to read.

of what She had no option but to sit.

ted it to And Fernsby began. "Once upon a time..." He paused for effect.

of eyes Cammie stared, wide-eyed.

l as she "There was a woman." He gazed at her with unblinking gray eyes. "I made a mess of it."

e." Oh yes, this was totally out of character. His sudden soul-baring moment was a little awkward. "I'm so sorry." She didn't know what else to say.

He looked at her, his silvery eyes silencing her. He would say whatever she needed to hear, no matter what she did. "I have never spent a day when I regret losing her." He held his hand up, almost as if he were examining his fingernails. The hand where a gold band might have rested. "If I could change that, I would in a heartbeat." That couldn't be a smile twitching without showing teeth.

without lips. No, not Fernsby, despite his display in the library. "I know you believe I actually have a heart."

Cammie. She had to refute that. "Of course you have a heart. You absolutely do." Fernsby Rex. And I think you love Dane too."

zing. "I If Fernsby was capable of an eye roll, which she didn't believe he was, that expression in his eyes could have been just that. "I don't like dogs."

bones, even like people." He waited a beat of the heart he claimed he didn't have. "But I will admit to having a soft spot for that." He pointed at the bed.

ore. Rex lay, giving him the evil eye. "And I have a soft spot for Mr. Harrison." Good Lord. Fernsby admitting to a soft spot? Unheard of. She didn't believe it existed, just as she knew his heart existed, but to have him say it aloud was a little embarrassing.

l would "As I was saying." He looked at her, his gaze adding the words to the conversation. "I was so rudely interrupted."

lane, of was so rudely interrupted. "If I could go back in time and change this, I would. He didn't finish the sentence. "But I can't. I had so many reasons it wouldn't work. She had so many reasons it wouldn't work. By the time you get old, you realize all those reasons are poppycock."

' had to age, you realize all those reasons are poppycock."

ave the Cammie wondered how old he really was. "The truth is that we were just afraid to fail at love. And now I'm doing the same thing to yourself." He gave her another stern look.

is what don't make my mistakes. We both know the truth about where you belong. "I don't make my mistakes. We both know the truth about where you belong."

on. His pause closed around her heart. "And who you belong with." "I don't know." She didn't know what to say. Was there really anything to say? I don't know.

l frame She didn't know what to say. Was there really anything to say? I don't know.

side of had actually been in love. Once upon a time. It was almost unfathomable. Even more unfathomable was that he'd told her about it. She felt like Alice in Wonderland. Was Fernsby the Cheshire Cat? Or the Mad Hatter?

"Fernsby," she said, trying to keep her voice as calm as possible. Sure she accomplished it, "I'm afraid you might be misreading things." "Yes." "I He raised one long finger and wagged it at her. "You and I both know the truth. I realize you wish to deny it. Just like I wanted to deny the truth made her those years ago. But while you're gone, I want you to think about everything I've said." His hard gray gaze made her shudder.

What he She wanted to tell him that she knew exactly what she wanted. She I didn't wasn't sure Dane wanted the same thing, even after they'd made love. Because that wasn't the same as *being* in love. And what if Dane could I could admit it? She couldn't discuss any of that with Fernsby. She couldn't go on his couldn't admit they'd made love last night. That was beyond the pale. I don't after Fernsby's uncharacteristic confession.

Fernsby stood then to tower over her. He intoned like a judge on the bench, "I have faith in you. You will know what to do when you come home."

Then he rolled her suitcase out of the bedroom. "What if he was right? What if she was just afraid to fail at love?"

I don't have. \* \* \*

I where A car waited in the driveway, ready to take her to the airport. Fernsby already laid her case in the trunk.

? There was nothing to do but walk away. And yet, she couldn't. She before Dane had left so much unsaid.

ings..." Cammie turned to find him right there, so close she could breathe. He gazed at her with his heart in his eyes. At least, she wanted to believe she couldn't.

t to my He cupped her face in his big hands. "I know you can do this." He whispered. "I believe in you with every fiber of my being."

Then he kissed her—the sweetest, most beautiful, most heartfelt she'd ever known. It wasn't dueling tongues and passionate lips.

"Please simplicity, it was so much more. It was the splendor of what they'd done together that night and the tenderness of his arms around her as her uncle lay dying.

along." the thoughtfulness with which he bought her flowers when her heart Fernsby crushed and the sensitivity when he eased her pain by bringing her the

omable puppy ever. It was the purity of friendship.

Alice in When he stepped back only an inch or two, she said, "Thank y  
understanding that I need to do this on my own."

and not He brushed his lips across her forehead. "Of course you do. I shou  
' seen that without you telling me."

ow the Then she climbed into the car and let it carry her away from him.

ruth all God, how she loved that man. Turning in the seat, she looked i  
rythinghim, still standing in the drive long after Fernsby had gone inside.

She'd wasted the morning being angry with him for not saying the  
she justshe wanted to hear. They could have made love again.

e love. But she knew he loved her. He understood what she needed,  
d neveraccepted it. If he didn't love her, he could never have let her go. Dane  
ertainlyto be in control. He was always smack in the middle of everything. H  
e, evendecision-maker.

It must be killing him to let her make this tremendous decision  
on thehim.

back." It was another of the many reasons she knew he loved her, l  
straight through to her heart and deep into her soul.

As the car turned the corner on the long, long drive, Dane disap  
behind a hedgerow, and the manor house vanished from view.

She needed to complete this deal. She didn't have to prove he  
Dane. She had to prove it to herself. He'd mentioned once that he'd h  
by hadback, but she was the one who'd held herself back.

Not anymore. This deal was hers.

she and Then she'd return and persuade Dane to admit he loved her,  
couldn't live without her.

him in. Exactly the way she felt about him.

ve that.

his," he

elt kiss

. In its

one last

. It was

art was

e cutest

puppy ever. It was the purity of friendship.

When he stepped back only an inch or two, she said, “Thank you for understanding that I need to do this on my own.”

He brushed his lips across her forehead. “Of course you do. I should have seen that without you telling me.”

Then she climbed into the car and let it carry her away from him.

God, how she loved that man. Turning in the seat, she looked back at him, still standing in the drive long after Fernsby had gone inside.

She’d wasted the morning being angry with him for not saying the words she wanted to hear. They could have made love again.

But she knew he loved her. He understood what she needed, and he accepted it. If he didn’t love her, he could never have let her go. Dane liked to be in control. He was always smack in the middle of everything. He was a decision-maker.

It must be killing him to let her make this tremendous decision without him.

It was another of the many reasons she knew he loved her, knew it straight through to her heart and deep into her soul.

As the car turned the corner on the long, long drive, Dane disappeared behind a hedgerow, and the manor house vanished from view.

She needed to complete this deal. She didn’t have to prove herself to Dane. She had to prove it to herself. He’d mentioned once that he’d held her back, but she was the one who’d held herself back.

Not anymore. This deal was hers.

Then she’d return and persuade Dane to admit he loved her, that he couldn’t live without her.

Exactly the way she felt about him.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

With that tender kiss, he let her go. He'd played it cool, hadn't push understood why she had to do it. But he couldn't help the fear. What didn't come back? Or what if she did, and they had to start over again the beginning? What if she didn't quit, but wanted the rules reinstated even added new ones to the list?

Dane had barely closed the front door behind him when Fernsby at

Though with Fernsby, the word *attack* was relative. He was his severe self—gone was the impish man who'd waltzed around the library and a light burned in his silver-gray eyes that turned them to ice.

“Sir,” he said with a hard edge like a slap, “it’s obvious you FUBARed the entire operation.”

If Dane hadn't been so miserable, he would have laughed at Fernsby's use of the WW2 acronym. But it was true. Dane had effed up beyond recognition. Though he wasn't sure exactly what he should have done.

Fernsby was on a roll. “I did my part.” He waved his hands in the air. “Details, sir, but you clearly did something wrong. Because the two of you are not together.” He enunciated each word sharply. “And I'm not talking about the fact that she's off to do this amazing new job, which we both know was meant to do. And at which she will excel.” If possible, Fernsby was even taller, until he was almost Dane's height. “I saw the two of you leave the library. It was obvious.”

It was obvious even to Dane. “I told her I wanted us to be together on the flagstone floor beneath his feet suddenly felt incredibly hard. And cold.”

Fernsby eyed him critically. “Did you get down on one knee and tell her she is the perfect woman for you?” When Dane shook his head, he was asked, “Did you tell her she is the most important person in your life?”

He said very quietly, “No.”

Fernsby spoke without raising his voice. His frustration was all in his clenched fists. “Did you tell her you love her?” The words were capitalized and underlined five times. “Or did you just tell her you wanted to have sex with her?” More capitalized words, with extra-extra underlines.



Dane fought back. “I certainly did *not* tell her all I wanted from her sex.”

Fernsby’s wrinkled brow and glowering gaze said, *What the hell do you say, you imbecile?* But he only asked, “Do you love her, sir?”

There was only one answer. “Yes, I do.”

“Do you love her with every cell in your body?”

The answer was simple. Just repeat. “Yes, I do.”

Fernsby exhaled like a fire-breathing dragon. “Then why can’t you repeat that? Or her, man?” Not *sir*, not *Mr. Harrington*. Not *Lord Bradford*. Not even *Braindead*.

Dane had no choice but to admit the truth. “Because I don’t want to hurt her so hard she runs away.”

Fernsby’s head jerked slightly, like an automaton who suddenly understood its programming. “Haven’t you figured out that not telling her how you feel is the exact thing that *will* drive her away?” His lips fell into a grimace as he added, “Sir.”

“But in my experience—” Dane stopped, not only because of Fernsby’s cold, flesh-flaying glare.

“Camille is nothing like your parents,” Fernsby prompted.

“No, she isn’t. You always want too much from people, Dane.”

In his experience, people you loved always left. Especially if you loved them too much.

Fernsby said in the mildest tone he’d used yet, “Your parents were very self-centered, in my opinion.”

He knew that. He’d said often enough that they were bad examples. He blamed his siblings’ lack of relationships on them. But even so, sometimes, deep inside, he’d always thought that if he’d done something differently, his parents might have been different too.

Dane cocked his head. “Cammie knows how to love.”

Fernsby stretched his lips in a facsimile of a smile. “She showed me the way. Time and again with her devotion to her uncle.”

“Where Cammie’s concerned, there can never be too much love. I said it almost with wonder. As if the thought had never occurred to me before, when he’d actually known it almost from the day he’d met her.”

The day he’d fallen in love with her.

Cammie would come back. Absolutely. But she’d only stay if he gave her what she needed.

ner washis heart. If he had the courage to let his love envelop her.

He pounded his fist into his palm. “Damn it, I totally screwed up.”  
*did you* He loved her with all his heart. But for all he’d told himself protecting her, the truth was, he was safeguarding his own heart. “Th day, you told me she was my heart’s desire. And she is. And yet—” his gaze away from the flagstones and looked at Fernsby. “When i right down to it, I didn’t open my heart all the way for my own you tell reasons.”

*en Lord* Fernsby looked on him now with something that might hav kindness. Which was so un-Fernsby-like it threw him off.

to push “Camille will always tread lightly upon your heart. She will never it.”

iddenly “I know that.” He shot out a determined exhale. “She and I nee ing hertogether. She’s my other half.” He remembered her words to him. “Sl attenedmissing piece of my puzzle.”

Fernsby raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Thank the Lord you fina rnsby’sthat, sir.”

Dane didn’t have time to think about it. More important things hand. He hadn’t bared his soul to her. But she had given hers completely. That metaphor revealed her love for him. He hadn’t said u loved Instead, he’d tried to get out of it by showing her with his body.

“You’re right,” he told Fernsby. “I haven’t been honest. I didn’t e rathereverything I felt about my parents.”

Sitting at the dining table last night, Cammie had told him of he s. He’dhow hurt she’d been by the men in her life, how hard it was to put her ewherethere again. But he hadn’t reciprocated by revealing how hard it had itly, hisgrow up with parents who didn’t care. Or how hard it was now to heart in another person’s hands. Even hers.

Yet that was what Cammie deserved to hear.

*us that* Standing taller, he vowed, “I’ll tell her everything. I’ll fly out the now.”

” Dane Fernsby opened his mouth.

to him Dane held up a hand. “But... I know I can’t. She asked me to let this on her own. I have to abide by that. But when she’s done, I’ll t there like a shot.”

ave her Raising both arms, Fernsby seemed to strain forward, almost a

wanted to waltz around the front hall the way he had in the library. His hands dropped. And he said with a deep intonation, “A wise decision, Dane,” he was Dane could swear his eyes twinkled. Almost as if he were the other godfather.

He tore

it came

\* \* \*

selfish

Each minute that dragged by was torture. Dane had never been so impatiently waiting. And every time the grandfather clock in the hall chimed out the hour, he wanted to shout—or punch something.

But as badly as he wanted to fly to her, he couldn’t. For her sake he needed this. He had to give it to her.

She’d proven to him how well she deserved this promotion was, proving it and over again the full scale of her capabilities. She’d had the courage to tell him what she wanted, not just in his bedroom, but that day after the meeting when she’d asked him to promote her.

Still, he couldn’t help constantly refreshing his phone, waiting for her to magically appear.

Fernsby brought in a tray of something that probably tasted delicious. Dane didn’t want even a bite as he stared at the screen.

Until Fernsby reached over the desk and tore the phone from his hand. “Sir, you must let her do this. This is what she’s always needed. And you have to do it.”

After a harsh exhale that burned his throat, Dane said, “I know. The wait is killing me.”

As he raised a brow, the corner of Fernsby’s mouth twitched. I didn’t know better, he’d say a smile was trying to claw its way out. And the man had actually danced.

“You can’t rain on Camille’s parade, sir,” Fernsby said, quoting a song. “But there’s no reason we can’t fly home now and wait for her there. That way, it won’t take you so long to get to her.”

Dane jumped up from his desk to throw his arms around Fernsby. “Dear man, you’re a lifesaver.”

Fernsby stepped back, brushing away the wrinkles Dane had left in his bespoke suit. “I’ve taken the liberty of informing your pilot,” he said, looking at the air.

But his Dane would have hugged him again if Fernsby hadn't already walking away.

a fairy "I knew there was a reason I kept you around all these years, called after him.

Without turning, Fernsby raised his hand. Was that the man's finger? Then he looked again, and no, there were all his fingers, v Dane must have imagined it.  
good at  
another

\* \* \*

ke. SheThe jet was flying over the Rockies when Cammie called. And if Dane ever doubted he had a heart, he knew it now, because it was just about to burst out of his chest.

e to tell Her voice was like a caress over every single nerve in his body. "I've done a deal," she said. Joy and triumph infused her voice. And maybe you wonder too. She flew off into a soliloquy, her words almost merging together. "This place is perfect. It's got practically a mile of private beach. A room for a baseball diamond. A volleyball court on the beach. Basketball, tennis, pickleball, just about anything you could think of, Dane. I walked the perimeter back by the trees and counted at least a dozen trailheads. I've even a trail up to a gorgeous waterfall. You're going to love it. I've got contractors and inspectors en route, and as soon as we're done we come back to England."

But the She told him the price she'd negotiated, and Dane whistled. "You brilliant."

if Dane He heard her smile all the way over the mountains. "I detailed the developers all the work we'd have to put into tearing down the old structures, getting new construction permits instead of renovation permits. The old yadda, yadda. And suggested that perhaps we should look for something that already had the structures we needed and necessitated only the minimum of modification." Then she laughed. "They had no idea. My desperate I was to grab it before it was gone."

So excited for her, he blurted, "Damn it, you're freaking amazing. I love you."

nose in After a three-second silence, she laughed it off. "You always smile when I make the perfect deal."

y been All right. She didn't want to hear it now. But she would soon. Ver  
"Congratulations. Only you could have made this deal. You didn't n  
" Daneassistance at all."

She whispered, "Thank you."

middle Then, before he could blurt out everything he felt, because it  
waving.couldn't be done over the phone, he told her, "We're on our way ba  
I'll have the pilot divert us to Tahoe." He looked at his watch. "I sh  
there in a couple of hours."

"You're going to love it," she told him.

ane had more.  
it ready "I already do." She was talking about the property, but he meant s

He'd fallen for her on a golf course. And he'd never recovered.

It had just taken him a long, long time to admit he never wa  
"It's a recover.  
a bit of  
together.

\* \* \*

There's

ketball,Dane had followed the sun home to her, arriving at the Tahoe air  
ked themidafternoon. Fernsby took T. Rex to the hotel along with the bags  
There'sDane drove out to the site.

already It was just as Cammie had said. Perfect. The property sloped down  
, I canbeach on the lake and far back up into the mountains. The sun was bri

May day warm, the peaks still snow-covered. Tahoe had been blessed  
ou aregood snow year, and there was still skiing on the highest slopes.

The buildings were old, a seventies-style that didn't fit the beauty  
for theland. Cammie was right, as was Daniel, that demolishing the e  
existingstructures and building a new resort that fit the landscape and the need  
permits,guests was the only way to go. The cracked and weedy parking lot was  
ing elsework trucks with a variety of logos, from contractors to demolition ex  
e barestinspectors. When he rounded one of the building's crumbling corner  
ea howhe saw her.

Cammie wore a tailored suit that hugged her curves and made his  
, and Iwater. Not because it was sexy or revealing, but because it was her.

He'd never salivated over her. He hadn't let himself, because they  
ay thattheir rules. But now they'd broken every single one. His body knew  
brain knew it, and so did his heart. His every cell wanted her. Not just

y soon, but in need.

eed my He needed her in his bed, in his life, in his heart. Forever.

Holding a clipboard, she was surrounded by a gaggle of men and who hung on her every word. He overheard a smattering of phrases simply *hazardous materials* and *bringing things up to code* and *confirming* ick, but *lines are sound* and *power lines are connected*.

ould be His beautiful girl Friday directed, questioned, instructed. She v capable, confident woman she'd always been. But she was a girl Fri more. In fact, she'd never been his girl Friday. She'd always been in o much—of him, of his life, of his work, just as she was in charge of the n women standing before her now. She was his idea genius and his right

His partner.

nted to And she charmed the group as easily as she'd charmed him fr moment he'd first seen her.

Why had they waited twelve years? But he knew the answer. Tl how it was meant to be. They needed to be workaholic colleagues a friends and equals. They needed to know each other inside and out.

port by They needed to love each other *before* they fell in love.

is, while As he watched her now, totally in charge, respect gleaming in the f the professionals surrounding her, he realized this was what they' n to the working toward. A partnership of equals.

ght, the With a smile and a wave of her hand, the group broke up, off to l with a tasks she'd assigned them. He couldn't wait another moment. Eve contractor turned back to her with a question, Dane commanded her at

7 of the Before the man could open his mouth, Dane said, "Excuse us. W existing, back in a moment." Grabbing her hand, he pulled her into a copse ( ls of its near the lake.

s full of She looked up at him with her beautiful green eyes, perfectly a perts to among the wildflowers surrounding them. "What are you doing rstones, whispered. "I'm in the middle of a meeting."

is mouth "You have them completely corralled. They all have their tasks. I set everything in motion and handled it all." Still holding her hand, l

y'd had "And now it's my turn." He went down on one knee in the moist, sand She gasped. "You're getting your suit filthy."

7 it, his "I don't care." Because a five-thousand-dollar suit was replaceable in lust, But Cammie, the love of his life, could never be replaced.

\* \* \*

women  
es, like  
of sewer  
Cammie put both hands to her mouth. She wanted to laugh. She wanted to cry. This was everything she'd ever wanted. But she whispered, "Get up."

He held her gaze a long moment, his true-blue eyes compelling her until I bare my soul."

was the  
iday no  
charge  
men and  
hand.  
"But, Dane—"

"Shh," he whispered. Her heart wanted to burst.

Then he told her everything. "For so long, I was focused on taking care of the family. Clay and Troy and Gabby were so young when our parents

She'd seen how hard he worked to make sure their needs were met. When she came to work for Dane, Troy had just won his first gold medal and was poised to win so many more. After attending night school, Ava had graduated from college. Clay was a sophomore at university. And Gabby was in high school for cooking school.

Dane had navigated all of that with his siblings, always cheering them on from the corner.

She said softly, "I know how hard you worked. You and Ava did an amazing job raising them."

He'd given up so much to do it—his dreams of being a veterinarian, dropping out of college to handle the financial debacle his parents left behind when working at a resort just to keep food on the table and pay for his siblings' college educations. He'd worked so hard so his siblings could achieve their dreams while he had to give up his own.

"I admired you from day one," she admitted. "Especially when I saw everything you did for them."

He put up a hand. "I'd do it all again. They're my family. But I can never give them the love of good parents, much as I wanted to."

She wanted to drop to her knees and hug him close. "You gave them the love they needed to help them grow into the most incredible adults I've ever known."

Something sparkled in his eyes. It might even have been tears. He knew better than to point it out.

"The thing I couldn't give them was the example of a loving family of parents who cared for each other, supported each other, parents who spent time with their children. Parents who inspired them. Like Susan."

Bob Spencer.”

She held out her hand. And he took it. “Don’t you know you inspired them?”

“But not in all the ways I wanted to. Look at them. Not one of them had a meaningful relationship.”

“Not” “They have loving relationships with you and with each other.”  
pulled him to his feet. He was just too far away from her down there on the ground.

Dane shook his head, his hair falling over his forehead. “But I can never show them how to love. Because I was afraid.” He put his fingers to his lips as though he thought she’d deny it for him. “I drifted from woman to woman, never knowing what I truly wanted or needed.”

She squeezed his fingers. “You have so much love in you, Dane. I know. And everything you’ve done for them. And everything you’ve done for me.”

His eyes melted to baby blue, sadness creeping into them. “I never gave you the piece of my heart you deserved.”

“Did you ever think that maybe I wouldn’t let you? That it was a tightrope street? We had our rules because we both needed them. But you showed me how you loved me all along in everything you did for me and Uncle Lochlan.”

You moved me into your homes so I’d have more money to take care of my in-laws. You were always there, listening to me, comforting me. And you showed me how possible for me to make the last years of Uncle Lochlan’s life the best it could be for his sake.”

He laughed, a sharp sound in the quiet. “For God’s sake, I didn’t give you the promotion you deserved. I never let you manage a project. The worst is that I didn’t even realize you truly wanted to.”

All she could say was, “Dane, please.”

He shook his head as he barked out his anger with himself. “You deserved so much more than I gave you. You were the one who showed me how to put heart into all my projects. That wasn’t me. It was all you.”

“You always gave me everything you could.” She wanted to tell herself at him, hold him. But he had to let all his feelings out before he could.

He shot out a harsh breath. “I didn’t give you my love. And Camm loved you since the moment I met you. I loved you that first night. I hadn’t come into my office the next day, I would have searched heaven and earth for you.”



earth to find you. I should have told you that the moment you sat  
always don't know why I didn't. Maybe I couldn't recognize what I felt back  
Maybe I knew all along I'd screw it up."

em has He tightened his fist; she was afraid his nails would break the skin  
palm.

r." She "If I had been a better man, I would have offered you not only the  
on the also myself." He tipped his head back and closed his eyes as if the spr

burned his irises. Then he looked at her again. "I have fallen more  
I could with you every day since. And every day, I told myself we had our ru  
r to her perfect working relationship. That you were my best friend. That I sh  
man to ask for more. Because I didn't believe I deserved more. There's alwa

a part of me that believed that my parents ran away from *me*." He  
Look at hand over his heart. "That somehow, I didn't know exactly how to g  
" loving, and I pushed them away because I smothered them. I never wa  
er gave mother you."

She laid her hand over his and whispered, "You've always had  
no-way heart. And you could never have loved your parents too much. Re  
ved me can't smother. They were the ones who let you down."

ochlan. He nodded. "I figured that out. Yesterday. After you left the man  
of him. smiled. "And with a little pep talk from Fernsby."

made it Cammie laughed. "He gave me a pep talk too."

est they Then he said the thing she'd craved to hear for twelve long years.

you, Cammie. And I don't care about our damned rules." He held her  
it's even his, right over his heart. "I know we can't possibly screw this up. Be  
ct. And love you too much. I want you too much. And I will do everything  
power never to disappoint you. To always hold you close. To think  
first, to love you, to be the man you deserve."

. "You She wanted to throw herself at him. "And I love you because  
ved me always had heart. You didn't need me to show you that. You've  
deserved love. I've always known how focused you are on taking care  
throw family and what a terrible example of love your parents gave you. I  
ore she learned how to love in spite of them."

He smiled, his heart shining in his eyes. "Now you know everything  
ie, I've is to know about me."

If you "I've always been afraid of losing what I had," she admitted. "I  
ven and the rules because I was afraid to risk. I was afraid of not being good e

down. I've been afraid of asking for too much, just the way you have."

He trailed his hands up her arms, then cupped her face. "I would give up the entire business for you. I'd give up everything in the world for you. Everything I do and everything I am, if I could be the perfect man for you."

"You *are* the perfect man for me. You don't need to give up your job, but because I've loved you from the first moment I saw you too." She pressed her head against his, letting his warmth soak into her body, and tipped her head back in love. "Let's make a new rule that takes precedence over all the other rules. Let's make a rule that we'll never need any more rules. That we won't be afraid to ask for what we need or ask for what we want."

"And that we'll love each other for the rest of our days," he said, leaning his head close enough to see streaks of blue flame in his irises. "That all we want is each other."

"And our family."

"And to watch it grow." Then he kissed her, his taste so sweet, so soft, so beautiful. The taste of love.

Dane looked down at her. "The moment I saw you on the putting green all those years ago, I knew there would never be another woman for me." He was sorry it took me so long to admit it. But Fernsby was right. I was afraid I was a coward."

She smiled. Fernsby. Of course. "A man of so few words," she said. "I love what he says is everything we need to hear."

"Except to have you say you love me."

"I love you," she whispered.

He wrapped her tightly in his arms, his words drifting through her hair. "I have always loved you. I love you now. And I will love you endlessly."

you've  
always  
been the  
best

big there

needed  
enough.

I've been afraid of asking for too much, just the way you have."

He trailed his hands up her arms, then cupped her face. "I would give up the entire business for you. I'd give up everything in the world for you, everything I do and everything I am, if I could be the perfect man for you."

"You *are* the perfect man for me. You don't need to give up a thing, because I've loved you from the first moment I saw you too." She leaned against him, letting his warmth soak into her body, and tipped her head back. "Let's make a new rule that takes precedence over all the other rules. Let's make a rule that we'll never need any more rules. That we won't be afraid to say what we need or ask for what we want."

"And that we'll love each other for the rest of our days," he said, pulling her close enough to see streaks of blue flame in his irises. "That all we need is each other."

"And our family."

"And to watch it grow." Then he kissed her, his taste so sweet, so loving, so beautiful. The taste of love.

Dane looked down at her. "The moment I saw you on the putting green all those years ago, I knew there would never be another woman for me. I'm sorry it took me so long to admit it. But Fernsby was right. I was afraid. I was a coward."

She smiled. Fernsby. Of course. "A man of so few words," she said. "But what he says is everything we need to hear."

"Except to have you say you love me."

"I love you," she whispered.

He wrapped her tightly in his arms, his words drifting through her hair. "I have always loved you. I love you now. And I will love you endlessly."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Fernsby looked down at his phone the second after it chirped. He didn't dare to open the text to read it. The three brief words shouted from the screen were *right!*

Fernsby did not punch the air. Another man might have, but he was more subdued, in keeping with his persona as the best butler any billionaire could ever have.

Despite his frenzy of dancing in the library.

Holding Lord Rexford in his arms, he whispered to the dog, "Fernsby is always right."

He surveyed the room, making sure he'd missed nothing. He'd tucked up the bed, neatly folding the duvet at the bottom. On the way to the Lake Tahoe's most distinguished hotel, he'd stopped to buy some new cleaning supplies.

Fernsby always thought ahead. He hadn't had time to prepare a room for lovers, but room service had delivered quite an excellent meal. He stepped back to assess his work. Yes, everything was in order.

Only then did he type back a reply: *Your room is ready, sir.* He included the room number and passcode. While other plebeians in the hotel receive key cards, the luxury suites on the top floor each had a lock that could only be accessed with the designated code.

He'd canceled Camille's room and had her suitcase transferred. She would never need a separate room again.

Fernsby backed out with one last appraisal. It was perfect. Then, looking both ways along the hall and finding no one in sight, Fernsby allowed himself a smile. Bending his head to Lord Rexford in his arms, he murmured, "Do not tell you that true love always wins?" He grinned down at the dachshund. "A butler's job is to knock a few heads together until they reach what's best for them."

Then he fished a treat out of his pocket for the dog, who had been so happy today while Fernsby worked his magic.

\* \* \*

Standing at the bedroom door, Cammie gaped. “Did you have all this s  
Dane could say only one word. “Fernsby.”

The suite had Fernsby’s fingerprints all over it. The scrumptious n  
i’t have two on a dining trolley, a candle and bud vase in the center. The rose  
en: *You* sprinkled on the sheets. The candles sweetly perfuming the room from  
every flat surface, on the sideboard and the tables surrounding the cush  
s much the bedside tables and the bureaus, even in the bathroom.

lionaire “You told him *everything*?” Her eyes sparkled, as polished as a p  
jade.

Dane grinned. “Fernsby told *me*. He said he knew all along w  
nsby is meant to be together.”

She glided across the plush carpet to loop her arms around hi  
turned “Fernsby. He’s a man of many talents.”

back to “He’s a magician.”

cessary “He’s an all-knowing seer.”

Dane couldn’t wait another moment to lower his head to hers and t  
neal fitlips. The kiss was so sweet and yet so hot. It turned him upside dow  
stepped way she had that night. The way she had in his dreams.

He whispered, “That delectable meal is a Caesar salad topped  
ncluded salmon. And it’s cold.”

l might Those beautiful eyes of hers twinkled at him like stars. “Which me  
c which don’t need to dine until later.”

He kissed the tip of her nose and backed her toward the bedroom  
ed. She thoughts exactly.”

When the backs of her knees hit the bed, he began undoing the bu  
looking her elegant business suit.

himself “What are you doing?” she asked with the sexiest lilt in her voice.

, “Did I “I’m undressing you.”

ie little When the last suit button popped, she reached for his jacket, deftly  
realize it off his shoulders. “Two can play this game, Mr. Harrington.” She sta  
the buttons of his shirt.

so good He busied himself undoing the gold cufflinks Ava had purchased  
after he’d made his first million. Before Cammie had helped him f  
heart.

The cufflinks made no sound on the carpet as she thrust his shirt down his arms and threw it aside.

“Set up?” Staring at his cotton-clad chest, she murmured, “I decree that you never wear a T-shirt under your dress shirt ever again.”

He raised one eyebrow, Fernsby-like. “Why not, pray tell?”

She ran her fingers over the soft cotton undershirt. “Because I don’t want any more impediments than necessary when I undress you.”

He picked her up then, swinging her around the room until she gasped.

Then he set her back on her feet and dragged the T-shirt over his head. “I don’t intend to let you be dressed at all.” He went at the buttons of her blouse with gusto.

“You want me to work in my robe?”

“In your robe with nothing underneath.” His heart leaped with needs and desires racing through his body. “Or your workout clothes you know that’s why I never worked out with you? Those tight leggings yours damn near drove me insane.”

She laughed, a low, husky tone that made him twitch. “And here I was dying to see you get all sweaty and sexy while you lifted weights.”

“I can see a lot of workouts in our future.” He kissed the tip of her nose.

“Here’s another idea for office attire. One of those sexy sundresses you always wear on the island. Those little dresses haunted my dreams.”

She ran her finger down his chest to the waistband of his slacks. “I know you have this sexy line of hair that goes right down here? I saw it the time you raced into the ocean for a swim.” She trailed her fingers over the outside of his slacks.

At her touch, he surged to full strength.

“Oh, that deserves payback,” he growled, pushing aside the lapels of her blouse to stroke her breasts through the tantalizing lacy bra.

She moaned as he unsnapped the front clasp. Then he did what he was bending to take a tight pearl into his mouth.

His name fell from her lips on a groan. “Dane.” Then she pushed herself up to a standing position once more, her skin glistening where he’d licked her.

“Do you know how many times I’ve cried out your name in the shower?” she whispered.

And here he’d thought she had her emotions under lock and key. “I heard you.”

own his “I was very quiet. But I never stopped thinking about that night. I stopped wanting it again.”

ou shall He framed her beautiful face with his hands, her skin smooth against his palms. “I thought about you every night. I wish now we hadn’t waited so long.”

it want She swirled his chest hair beneath her finger. “We needed to know each other inside and out.” And Lochlan had needed to be her priority.

jiggled. “We needed everything that happened in the last twelve years to be read. “There’s no one else in the world for us but each other.” He whispered, “I need her silkyou.”

Then, as if every minute of all those years had just caught up with him, he kissed her with all the passion inside him, all the lost nights, all the feelings that filled his dreams, all the moments he’d looked at her across the room. Don’t stand wanted her, needed her.

gings of Even with his lips locked to hers, he reached behind her and unzipped her sexy pencil skirt, letting it fall to the carpet. And she worked his belt. “I was unzipping and pushing his slacks over his hips. Her bra fluttered to the floor as he slid the straps down her arms.

er nose. Then he toed out of his shoes and socks, never letting her lips slip from his. “I was unzipping and pushing his slacks over his hips. Her bra fluttered to the floor as he slid the straps down her arms. Then he toed out of his shoes and socks, never letting her lips slip from his. As she plundered his. Finally, the last scraps of fabric that kept them apart—his boxer shorts, his briefs, his Did you panties—fell to the floor.

it every And he dove on her.  
ver the

\* \* \*

s of her She’d waited so long to feel Dane’s weight on her. He’d made love to her in the manor, and that had been beautiful and perfect. But he hadn’t loved her. And she hadn’t been able to confess she loved him.

craved, Now, there was nothing between them, nothing held back. He kissed her with the passion of her dreams. He kissed her with the memory of the night so long ago, when it had been so good she’d needed rules to make it last. “I didn’t happen again. He kissed her with the love they shared.

night?” Pulling back slightly, he dazzled her with the laser blue of his eyes. “I need to taste every bit of you, like I’ve never tasted you before.”

To beg was a delight. “Please.”

I never He helped her back onto the rose petals Fernsby had scattered across the sheets, the sweet scent rising up to mesmerize her. Or maybe that was because of Dane's silky dark waves beneath her fingers as he kissed his way down her neck. His tongue on her throat made her tremble, his mouth on the tip of her breast dragged a moan from her lips, his fingers trailing down her abdomen drew a shiver of need from deep inside. Then he fell into the crook of her legs, looking up, his gaze so hot it scorched her flesh.

each us "Put your legs over my shoulders," he urged her.

"I love She opened for him, locking her ankles behind him. He touched her with one finger sliding down her center until she quivered with desire. A moment later he whispered, "You naughty, naughty man."

fantasies He looked at her steadily. "I'm the man you want me to be. You gave me an office heart. You gave me back my soul, though I was afraid I'd lost it years ago. You made me who I am."

ped her She reached down to hold his face in her hands, loving the sexy feel of him between her legs and the emotion in his eyes. "You've always been the man I want you to be. The man I admire. The man I love."

He looked at her with so much love in his eyes, love she'd never experienced before. "All I want right now is to see you smile, love. You can never again live without me. You can't even make me feel good."

er silk "Just make me feel, Dane. That's all I want. Just to feel what you can do to me."

Then he took her with his mouth.

It had been so good that first night, so unforgettable, then even more so when she'd come to him in the manor house.

o her at But it had never been like this. His lips, his tongue, his fingers did things to her, things she'd never have imagined. Her body climbed, said he higher, until she felt as if she could touch the sky, as if she could feel like as if her body were no longer tethered to the earth, but tethered to him. He climbed to a beautiful somewhere only Dane could take her to.

at night He closed his hands on her bottom, holding her tight against him, sure it pleasure was more than she could bear. She cried out, clamping her fingers in his hair, twisting the silky locks, unmindful of the pain she might cause. "I But he never stopped. He didn't let her go, didn't let her come down, didn't even let her breathe. Until the climax slammed into her like a rogue wave, tumbling her head over heels, the sensation so powerful she thought she'd die."



ross themight have lost consciousness.

the feel Then Dane climbed her body, holding her as she tremble  
own heraftershocks. He lay between her legs, hot, hard, ready.

ht bead She trapped his face between her hands and whispered, "I love  
wn herwant all of you. Now." She raised her legs to his waist, and he lifted  
e vee ofso she could wrap her hand around him, guiding him inside.

He entered her then, giving her all that he was. "This is what I've  
wanted." He held her gaze. "You. Me. Together just like this. Forever.  
er then, He moved gently inside her, taking the gift she offered him and  
and sheher the gift of himself. Pulling him down, she kissed him, her lips on h  
filled her up with everything she'd missed for twelve long years.

gave me He was strong, powerful, yet he took her with a gentleness that or  
ars ago.could bring. Clamping her legs around him, she begged, "Take me. P  
need you to make me all yours."

look of Going up on his elbows, his hands framing her face, he gave her  
een thethan she could ever have dreamed of.

As he whispered, "I love you," they went over the cliff edge to  
xpectedAlways together and never apart again.

ow is to

\* \* \*

u do to

He'd never known another woman like her. He'd loved her from the r  
he first saw her. And he would never let her go again.

n more As she lay soft and sweet in his arms, he murmured into her hair  
know, I was always rooting for you in your relationships. I never wan  
d crazy to be sad and alone. You're my best friend, and I always wante  
higher, happiness." He kissed her forehead. "But I always secretly hope  
heaven, relationships would fail."

m. She She leaned up to meet his lips. "Me too. I wanted you to be happ  
never wanted you to fall for any of those women."

and the His gaze traced every feature of her face, from her forehead, to h  
ngers in lashes, to her sweet lips. "You know the reason why I could never t  
se him. into a relationship?"

, didn't She smiled. "Because you loved me the whole time, just the way I  
e wave, loved you."

ght she Truer words had never been spoken.

“Absolutely, Lady Brilliant.” He kissed the tip of her nose.

“Ooh. Lady Brilliant. I love it.” She raised an eyebrow. “Does that mean your real title is Lord Brilliant?”

“If the shoe fits.” Then he rolled her beneath him and showed her how brilliant they were together.

And, like the stars, the night was endless.

always  
”

giving  
is as he

ly love  
lease. I

er more

gether.

noment

r, “You  
ted you  
ed your  
d those

y, but I

er lush  
uly get

always

“Absolutely, Lady Brilliant.” He kissed the tip of her nose.

“Ooh. Lady Brilliant. I love it.” She raised an eyebrow. “Does that mean your real title is Lord Brilliant?”

“If the shoe fits.” Then he rolled her beneath him and showed her just how brilliant they were together.

And, like the stars, the night was endless.

## Epilogue

*Two months later*

The Maverick and Harrington clans filled Dane's home theater. He clicked the lights for a crystal-clear screen, his gaze roaming the assembly. Fernsby, Susan sat with Bob in the front row. He thought they must be holding hands.

His heart did a two-step as Cammie slipped her hand into his and their fingers, the two-step turning into a waltz. He didn't want to be so ridiculously romantic about it, but his heart waltzed like Belle and the Beast in Cammie's favorite movie.

Not that he would ever admit that to anyone. Maybe not even Cammie. Although he had watched the movie twice with her.

The opening credits came up on the season finale of *Britain's Greatest Bakers*.

Everyone in that room had sworn, even pinkie sworn, not to watch the last episode. It was actually why he'd agreed to back-to-back showings of the animated and live-action versions of *Beauty and the Beast*. It had been the only way to placate Cammie.

He'd been on saccharin overload ever since. But it had kept him from watching the last episode of *Britain's Greatest Bakers*.

They'd chosen Pebble Beach for the viewing. It was Fernsby's territory and Fernsby's show. And it was the first time Dane had hosted a weekly barbecue. Correction—it was the first time he and Cammie had hosted.

Fernsby sat in the place of honor, front and center. Even Noah and Keegan didn't squirm in their seats the way two seven-year-olds normally would when faced with a baking show.

In the second row, Paige and Evan each held a baby. Miracle of miracles, both Keegan and Savannah slept soundly.

Dane had led Francine Ballard to a seat on Fernsby's other side. The two appeared to get along famously.

He was happy to see Troy and Clay had made it, too, as well as his sisters. Dane felt surrounded by family, and the thought made him wrap his arm around Cammie, holding her close.

As the show began, Bob and Susan put their heads together, whispering, and it struck him how utterly adorable they were. That a couple who had been together as long as they had could still whisper and giggle together like lovers amazed him.

Next to him, Cammie's hand found its way to his hair. She smiled up at him, so sweetly that he felt his head get all jumbled up just knowing she was his and he was hers.

The opening credits ended, the show began, and all the while they were talking, the show stopped.

Fernsby actually looked pretty damn good up there on the big screen. He wasn't quite movie-theater size, but it was still ginormous. Dressed in a white chef's apron and a chef's hat cocked jauntily on his head, he looked years younger. He actually seemed to smile.

Cammie tugged on Dane's hand, pointing at the screen, and mouthing, *that a mirage?*

Flummoxed, Dane wasn't sure he even recognized the smiling man. Fernsby had to be acting. Obviously, they couldn't have a staid, butler-type on the show. No one would vote for him.

He hadn't even smiled like that the day he'd returned from filming. Yeah, it was totally an act. It had to be. But then Dane remembered the waltz in the library. Who knew?

But there was Fernsby, smiling, up on the big screen. Even though it was a vegan day. Yes, Fernsby had to make a vegan dessert. It was crazy. Dane suddenly terrified the man hadn't won after all. Because he certainly hadn't gone to Gabby, the vegan and gluten-free expert, to ask for advice.

As the show unfolded, Dane held Cammie's hand the entire time, his fingers crossing their fingers. Because, really, what would happen if he wasn't the winner? The thought had never occurred to Dane. And then he realized himself had locked his lips on the secret.

Except for the voices and sounds up on the screen, the theater was entirely silent. He couldn't even hear anyone breathe.

Then it happened. The judges tasted and reviewed, talked and argued, going on forever, making Dane want to jump up and shake his fist.

as his long it was taking. Couldn't they just fast-forward?

Until the moment the head guy—Dane hadn't even listened to his which was very unlike him—stopped in front of Fernsby. Then he h spering, his hand. Fernsby shook it. It was as if the entire show on screen 'd been entire theater went into meltdown, jumping, shouting, Susan pulling I ke new out of his seat and actually hugging the man, who remained undeniably

And Cammie whispered in Dane's ear, her sweet scent washing ov t a kiss reminding him of all the sweet nights in his big bed and all the definiti insides moments when he made her scream wildly, endlessly.

"The handshake means he won!" She practically bounced out of he spering You'd never be able to tell by Fernsby. Even as Susan gave h resounding hug. But then Fernsby whispered something in her ear, and reen. It Spencer laughed. It was crazy. It was Fernsby. Always full of surprises ed in a Francine Ballard patted him on the hip—all she could reach from h twenty And Fernsby turned, taking her hand in his and bowing low to brush across her knuckles.

Cammie whispered, "Will wonders never cease?" Then she lo thed, Is Dane. "Did he tell you about his lost love?"

Dane was reeling from all the shocks, but this one might have lanc g man. taciturn on the floor if he hadn't been holding her hand. "A lost love? *Fernsby*?

She nodded, leaning in to kiss the side of his mouth. "You're . Lord Blowfish."

"He told *you*?" His voice rose on the last word.

Cammie sighed. "Let's just say he felt compelled to. But it's his r it was She pecked him on the nose. "You'll have to ask him about it."

He would never ask Fernsby about it. He turned, gazing at his butl ne was hadn't was taking all the backslapping and hugs and congratulations breaking his composure.

"We can't just wait here," Cammie said. Then she rushed down both of Fernsby front and threw her arms around Fernsby in a bear hug, or at least as b he man hug as someone smaller and shorter could give.

Was that a slight bending of the man's spine?

No. Dane must be imagining it.

The hugs and congratulations continued, Cammie edging farther gabbed, the way to give Fernsby room.

Then it was Dane's turn. He strode down the aisle to the front, :

wasn't flabbergasted. As if he hadn't had the rug torn out from under his name, And all the other clichés he could think of.

held out "Fernsby, congratulations."

and the Just when Dane thought all he'd have to do was stick out his hand and shake Fernsby's for all the man was worth, he suddenly found himself stiff. enveloping his butler in a manly hug.

for him, It was probably the craziest thing he'd ever done. Besides taking a whole lot of hot years to tell Cammie he loved her.

Oddly, maybe wondrously, Fernsby actually hugged him in return. Dane stepped back, his hands still on Fernsby's shoulders. "I know you can do it."

and Susan Fernsby, with the sternest, straightest face the man had ever exhibited, said, "I had faith you could do it too, sir."

for her seat. Then, with yet another miracle of miracles—could there be more than a kiss miracle of miracles?—Fernsby looked at Cammie. And smiled.

looked at

\* \* \*

led him Good Lord. Cammie glanced at the ceiling to make sure it hadn't fallen on her. Fernsby had smiled. An undeniable, endless smile. The hug her two brothers and men shared hadn't shocked her as much, even though she'd never seen Fernsby hug anyone, ever. But this was Fernsby's day.

And that hug had the flavor of father-son bonding. Whatever the two of them said to each other, it had made Fernsby look at her.

And smile.

er, who Cammie wouldn't dream of smothering her answering smile. She'd had everything she'd ever wanted. Dane professing his love for her and taking her into her in every decision she made for the new resort. Dane taking her to the beach where they hiked the trails of Pebble Beach or walked along the beach with the waves pounding the shoreline. Dane beneath her on his soft mattress, whispering all the naughty things he wanted to do to her, then actually doing all those naughty things.

Even now, her cheeks flushed with the glorious memories.

out of Her cheeks grew even warmer when she looked at Evan and Paige and their beautiful babies, now three months old, a reminder of that beautiful day when she'd realized she wanted Dane and love and family. All the people as if he

er him. ladies, Lyssa, Ari, and Rosie, were also a sweet reminder. And the very pregnant now—huge, in fact, all far into the third trimester. A women were triplets, they each held their hands on their bellies, the and and glowing.

himself Someday, she thought, automatically searching for Dane. She fo gaze on her, and he smiled. Then he glanced from her to the pregnan twelve and back. She understood his meaning. He wanted what these wo Mavericks had as badly as she did.

As if there weren't several heads and bodies between them, he mo ew you love you.

She mouthed the words back at him.

hibited, Back in January, watching the Harringtons take on the Mavericks soccer field, she could never have dreamed of this. She couldn't eve han one for it.

But Dane would always be hers. Just as she'd always been his, rig the beginning, before she even knew his name. They belonged to each From this moment on. Forevermore.

Then she simply couldn't stop her feet from carrying her to him llen in, arms from winding around his neck, pulling him down for a kiss. favorite showy, blatant kiss, just the soft, gentle touch of lips on lips that seal er seen love.

When she surfaced, Fernsby was once again smiling.  
wo had

\* \* \*

he had Now that was a lot of very pregnant ladies. Lyssa Spencer looked a trusting could have her baby right here. So did Rosie. And Ari couldn't be far t hand as Ava resisted the urge to shudder. The gooey looks their res with the partners gave each of them were a tad frightening.

atress, The entire group assembled out on the patio. The July sun beame y doing on them from a cloudless sky. Flowers bloomed in the beds surround pool deck, and from beyond came the distant sound of golf clubs wlf golf balls and the incessant shush of the waves hitting the beach. Th ge with dachshund barked wildly at Charlie Ballard's Zanti Misfits hiding in t arbecue garden.

regnant Following his onscreen triumph, Fernsby had laid out a spread t



...y were every mouth watering. Today's centerpiece was his winning vegan, ...  
...s if the free Victoria sponge.

...ir faces Ava was sure it had never been done before. But Fernsby, a man  
...depths more profound than she could have imagined, had done it.

...und his And now he did the honors before any of them could even tackle  
...t ladies of the gourmet banquet. "You must not be full for this tastier  
...nderful announced. "This isn't the end of our meal, it's the beginning." How  
...he was of his lighter-than-air sponge.

...uthed, I The mini dachshund ran up to sit at Fernsby's feet, as if he might  
...a slice, or even a crumb. But Fernsby offered the first piece to Gabby,  
...sternest critic. Even the televised handshake would be nothing compared  
...on that Gabby's assessment.

...n hope A hush fell over the Mavericks and Harringtons, as if they were  
...family rooting for one of their own. Somehow, since January's soccer  
...ht from Ava, her siblings, even Fernsby and T. Rex, had become Mavericks  
...h other. They'd been accepted. Susan Spencer, standing beside her, linked  
...with Ava, as anxious for Gabby's opinion as anyone who'd known her  
...or her for the last fifteen years.

...Not a The Maverick matriarch was a tall woman. Ava topped her by only  
...ed their an inch.

She felt something in their clasped hands—energy flowing between  
The synergy Dane talked about. Ava knew in her heart that this group  
Mavericks, which included all the Harringtons now, would do great  
together.

But now they needed Gabby's judgment.

...s if she First, she sniffed. Then she tested the cake's texture with a finger.  
...behind. she sliced into the Victoria sponge with a dessert fork, just the tip of the  
...pective Fernsby had cut for her, and raised it to her mouth.

Ava could almost feel Fernsby vibrating.

...d down Other than her chewing, there was no expression on Gabby's face  
...ling the wanted to laugh as her sister played Fernsby to the hilt.

...racking With another bite, she allowed a thoughtful frown to gather between  
...re little brows.

...he rock Fernsby's fists clenched, as if he might have to throttle her if she  
...offer her opinion soon.

...hat had Though she hadn't finished her piece of vegan, gluten-free V

gluten-sponge, Gabby looked at Fernsby.

Ava defied the entire assemblage to read her sister's expression. Fernsby gave nothing away. Until finally, she said, loudly enough for everyone to hear, "I know we've had our differences over the years, Fernsby." She then rested dramatically, everyone wanting to scream at her to hurry up. "But I'd like to beg, please, to grovel at your feet and ask you to create a Fernsby special for my company. It would be my greatest honor."

Emotion flickered in Fernsby's normally detached expression. As he received sure, if there had been no one else to witness it, he would have picked up Gabrielle, held her in his arms and whirled her around the pool deck. Instead, holding her rigidly, he intoned, "My dearest Gabrielle, I will make a Victoria special for you." Then something glittered in his gray eyes. "But I also have something even bigger in mind."

The entire Maverick group, including the two boys, Noah and James, as well as the babies—held their collective breath.

Until Gabby couldn't hold it a moment longer. "What? What would Fernsby make?" She took a big gulp of air.

"A butter tart." Fernsby paused a long beat, as if waiting for Gabrielle to half-deflate. Only to blow her up again with his next words. "A butter-free tart."

Gabby gasped, her hands flying to her mouth, covering the shriek she wanted to burst out.

Then Fernsby smiled. Again. Shocking Ava to her core. Again.

"It will be the most delicious tart any of you have ever tasted," he declared with ultimate confidence.

Finally, Ava threw herself into Fernsby's waiting arms.

"Oh my God. What's happened to Fernsby?" Ava said without thinking. "And what's happened to my sister?"

Susan squeezed her fingers and whispered, "Synergy."

It was so true. After all the years since they'd lost their parents, even long before that, she and her family had finally found a home.

Maybe it was the Maverick synergy that had shown Dane the way to Cammie. She looked at them now, hand in hand, beaming like new parents. What had happened to her brother was almost too hard to believe. Not even she had known Dane was in love with Cammie almost from the start.

Ava hadn't known Dane was in love with Cammie almost from the start. Especially after he went ballistic when Troy simply asked her out. But

truly believed her brother would never figure it out. It had taken so long for Gabby to come to believe he was exactly like her, that he knew how those relationships could be, and he wanted none of it.

Yet here he was, looking at Cammie as if he was starstruck.

And Cammie gazed up at him so adoringly that, had Ava been a different woman, she might have been moved to tears. Just the other week, she

Cammie she didn't need to pay back any of her uncle's care fees. Ava had made a bank transfer and said she'd go on doing so until the debt was paid. She even insisted on paying Dane too.

That was Cammie. A woman of her word, a woman who never let anyone down for what someone else had done for her. A woman Dane deserved.

And yet, despite all evidence to the contrary surrounding her here

Maverick barbecue, Ava knew relationships didn't always work—Especially not for her.

She felt eyes on her then and searched the crowded patio, only to find those eyes belonged to Fernsby. Deliberately, he turned his gaze on Dane.

Cammie. And back to her once more.

Then he winked.

*Oh my God, Fernsby isn't thinking about matchmaking for me, is he?*

It was enough to strike terror into her heart.

lek that

\* \* \*

ed," he **Thank you so much for reading ENDLESS IN LOVE! We hope you loved Dane and Cammie.**

**Are you ready for the next Maverick Billionaire romance, REUNION IN LOVE? Ava Harrington, brilliant billionaire businesswoman, conquered the world. And yet, scarred by a love lost fifteen years ago, she's built a wall around her heart, swearing off love forever. Ransom Yates's culinary genius has taken him to the pinnacle of success as a magnetic celebrity chef. But that success came at a devastating cost when he left behind the woman who held the key to his heart. Reunion is anything but sweet when Ava must swallow her pride and seek Ransom's help, though he's the last person she ever wanted to see. But the sparks flying between them are hotter than anything she's ever experienced.**

ng thatand their undeniable chemistry reignites their long-buried passion  
ow badsteamy kisses and sultry nights. Ransom can't help but fall for  
woman he never stopped loving. But Ava's heart is still hardened  
the memory of how their long-ago affair ended. Can they find a  
ifferentchance at love? Or is their love forever lost in the ashes of their past?  
e'd told

nd yet,  
ntil the

ot forgot

e at this  
rk out.

to find  
ane and

ie?

pe you

NITED

m, has

rs ago,

ansom

ss as a

g price

. Their

de and

to turn

ever—

**Order REUNITED IN LOVE now!**

[Kindle US](#)

[Kindle UK](#)

[Kindle AU](#)

[Kindle CA](#)

**Please sign up for our new release newsletters to be notified as soon as new Maverick Billionaires are released.**

**Click <http://BellaAndre.com/Newsletter> to sign up for Bella Andre's Release Newsletter.**

**Click <http://bit.ly/SkullyNews> to sign up for Jennifer Skully's Release Newsletter.**

**If you haven't yet read the first Maverick Billionaire book about Ransom and Harper, you can read BREATHLESS IN LOVE now!**

**One-click BREATHLESS IN LOVE (Maverick Billionaires 1) is**

[US Amazon Kindle](#)

[UK Amazon Kindle](#)

[AUS Amazon Kindle](#)

[CA Amazon Kindle](#)

*“An incredible beginning to a new series that will pull at your heartstrings! A true joy to read.”*

**~ 5 stars for BREATHLESS IN LOVE**

**And if you are looking for a swoon-worthy series that is full of romance, beautiful settings and an unforgettable family, you will love meeting Bella Andre's San Francisco Sullivans! In the first book of the series, THE LOOK OF LOVE (The Sullivans), Chloe Peterson**

on withnever to make the mistake of trusting a man again. Only, with  
for the loving look Chase Sullivan gives her—and every sinfully sweet ca  
d withthe attraction between them sparks and sizzles. He'll do what  
secondtakes to prove that his love for her is real. Could Chase be the on  
st? been waiting for?

One-click the #1 bestselling book, THE LOOK OF LOVE (The  
Sullivans), now!

[US Amazon Kindle](#)

[UK Amazon Kindle](#)

[AUS Amazon Kindle](#)

[CA Amazon Kindle](#)

soon as

*"I'd recommend The Look of Love to any romance reader who li  
their love stories steamy, realistic, and with a couple worth fight  
for! Add in a unique, close knit family and you have a treasure  
your hands."*

s New ~ 5 stars for THE LOOK OF LOVE

Turn the page for excerpts from BREATHLESS IN LOVE (M  
ut Will Billionaires) and THE LOOK OF LOVE (The Sullivans)...

ow!

our

heady  
ill love  
in the  
n vows

never to make the mistake of trusting a man again. Only, with every loving look Chase Sullivan gives her—and every sinfully sweet caress—the attraction between them sparks and sizzles. He'll do whatever it takes to prove that his love for her is real. Could Chase be the one she's been waiting for?

One-click the #1 bestselling book, **THE LOOK OF LOVE (The Sullivans)**, now!

[US Amazon Kindle](#)

[UK Amazon Kindle](#)

[AUS Amazon Kindle](#)

[CA Amazon Kindle](#)

*“I'd recommend *The Look of Love* to any romance reader who likes their love stories steamy, realistic, and with a couple worth fighting for! Add in a unique, close knit family and you have a treasure on your hands.”*

~ 5 stars for **THE LOOK OF LOVE**

Turn the page for excerpts from **BREATHLESS IN LOVE (Maverick Billionaires)** and **THE LOOK OF LOVE (The Sullivans)**...

## Excerpt from **BREATHLESS IN LOVE (Maveric Billionaires)**

*Will Franconi has a dark past that he's kept a closely guarded secret. Few people have ever heard his real story and he plans to keep it that way. After surviving a hellish childhood, he's now living the dream life where everything he touches turns to gold. But something's missing. He doesn't quite know what, until a simple letter from a teenage boy brings Harper Newman into his life—a woman who just might fill up the empty place in his heart. Him...if only he could ever be worthy of her love.*

*When a man has more money than he could spend in five lifetimes, Harper has to ask herself what Will Franconi could possibly want from a woman like her. She's learned the hard way that rich men always get what they want no matter the cost. If it were only herself she had to worry about, Harper would manage, but she's guardian to her younger brother who depends on her for everything. After he nearly lost his life in a car accident, she's vowed never to let anyone hurt him ever again.*

*Still, sometimes Harper can't help but long to change her story from that of the always cautious woman to an adventurous tale of a heroine who falls in love and is free...especially when Will's kisses and caresses make her breathless. And as he begins to reveal his story to her, she discovers that he's so much more than just another wealthy, privileged man. He's kind, generous, giving, and he fills up all the spaces inside her heart that have been empty for so long. Together, can they rewrite their stories into a happily ever after that neither of them would have believed possible?*

Oh yes, Will Franconi was dangerous. *Extremely* dangerous as he drove on the passenger side of the car and her stomach fluttered with the hand-to-hand contact.

Harper hadn't dated in over a year, ever since she'd realized that she was an easy target. Not only for men who wanted to get at her brother's trust fund, but also because after so many years of working to take care of her father and Jeremy, she hadn't had much time left over to nurture her

ck

relationships. First she'd become involved with a man who wanted Je money but not Jeremy. And then she'd rebounded into a relationship guy who had sworn he would always be there for her and Jeremy— until he'd found a far lower-maintenance woman.

After that, Harper had decided love and marriage simply weren't cards for her.

t—very  
at way.  
' where  
doesn't  
Harper  
s inside

Not that getting in the car with Will was akin to dating him, of She couldn't imagine what a rich playboy like him would want completely ordinary woman like her. It was just that she hadn't be close to a good-looking man in a very long time. That had to explain v heart was pounding hard and her skin felt flushed.

Will put her hand on the roll bar. "Hold on tight right here."

fetimes,  
from a  
et what  
' about,  
'r, who  
' crash,

Everything he said seemed to have a double meaning, turning sor ordinary into something sexual. But she knew it had to be her sex-brain adding the extra meaning.

She lifted her skirt slightly to step inside, then slid down into the seat. Picking up the ends of the seat belt, she looked at them, unsure l contraption worked.

"It's a five-point racing harness," Will explained as he got i driver's seat beside her.

om that  
's wild  
utterly  
at he's  
nd and  
npty for  
ter that

When she started fumbling with the hooks and levers on the harr said, "Let me help you."

The next thing she knew, he was settling a strap over her shoul fingers brushing her collarbone as he brought it down across her chest bumps raced across her skin with the near contact. She inhaled his : shampoo and soap and very sexy male—and her body tingled. Pull harness down to her lap, he flicked the latch closed with a snap, and the pressure of his touch just below her belly. Low enough—and int enough—that her pulse rate shot up.

v her to  
to-hand  
she was  
's trust  
herself  
r other

As he started on the other strap, his fingers skimmed the air just ab breasts, not quite touching, but barely short of a breath away. Harper look up, didn't dare meet his gaze, just in case he realized the effect having on her. He snapped the second latch, buckled the belt across with a simple flip of the two pieces she'd already connected, then cinc strap.

"Comfortable?" With the sun behind him, his eyes were shadow



Jeremy's she could have sworn heat sparkled in their depths.

with a "I'm fine." Her answer was low, breathy, too close to a moan.

at least He pulled back slowly, his gaze still dark and intense, making her heart beat even harder. After he secured his belt, he started the engine with a hand on the gear shift. "Ready?"

With a man like him, she didn't think she'd ever be ready. In a moment, she managed a nod.

with a He took off with a burst of speed, and she hung on to the door with one hand, clutching the seat tightly with the other, down by the gear box with her other hand. Why wouldn't she see.

"Don't worry," he yelled over the rush of wind, "I won't go too fast. *Didn't he get that everything he was doing was already too fast?*"

nothing Her hair whipped around her face, and she had to let go of the seat to get it back. She needed two hands to bunch the thick locks at the back of her head, out of her eyes and her lipstick. She was flying free beside him, held only by the harness, as the wind screamed past her ears.

now the And he was smiling, watching her.

"Look at the road," she shouted at him.

into the She felt him brake as he went into the turn at the end of the runway. It felt like they were going too fast, but the back end didn't slide as he went into the second turn, heading down the opposite runway. Her body swayed and jostled in the leather seat. She could taste the salt air on her lips. In the distance, she could see Jeremy jumping up and down, punching his fist. Thrill

Will went faster and faster, making her blood pound in her ears. The scent—wind beat against her chest. She should have told him to slow down, but she didn't. She should be calling him a maniac, even screaming at him. Yet right then, Harper had the insane urge to raise her arms in the air like a teenager on a roller coaster. A crazy voice inside her whispered, *Do it!*

Unable to resist the pull of excitement and the thrill of the speed, she let herself go, throwing her hands up and her head back. It was as exhilarating as it was terrifying. Maybe it was the combination of fear and danger and the pure joy of soaring through the air that made her feel so alive, with every nerve firing.

Or...maybe it was the man beside her.

red, but

\* \* \*

Harper was utterly gorgeous, the sun sparkling in her wind-tossed hair, her ecstasy glowing on her face. She didn't shout or cheer—but she did let her pulse her arms. And she smiled.

“A roar,” The most beautiful smile Will had ever seen.

He wasn't even near freeway speed, yet the shriek of the motor and the rumble of the pipes, and the open sky above them made it seem as if they were flying at over a hundred miles an hour.

With one push Just as he'd promised, he took her around only once. He didn't want to push her limits.

Not yet, anyway.

“It.” While harnessing her in, it would have been so easy to touch her skin, his fingertips graze her gorgeous skin. His heart had hammered with desire to put his hands on her. Even now, his fingers sizzled with heat, and her sweet scent filled his head. But he could tell that she wasn't the kind of woman he usually spent time with—women who knew the score and would let it for what they could grab before he moved on.

Will knew he shouldn't lead Harper on. She was a good girl. Someone who deserved the fairytale, a guy who was as good as she was. It felt like an ex-thief who still battled his demons, who knew that he could change the blood he came from, no matter how much he wished he could. Speed had taken away far too much from Harper already—her birthright, her independence and her parents' lives. And yet, he could feel that she craved the rush, the thrill, just as much as he did.

and the Just as much as he craved *her*.

to stop  
him.

air like  
it.

l racing  
back.

combination  
made her

***“Don't begin this book in the evening—you will read all night long!”***

**~ 5 stars for BREATHLESS IN LOVE**

**Want more? One-click BREATHLESS IN LOVE (Maverick Billionaires) now!**

[US Amazon Kindle](#)

[UK Amazon Kindle](#)

[AUS Amazon Kindle](#)

[CA Amazon Kindle](#)

ed hair,  
hold up

tor, the  
the car

want to

r, to let  
with the  
er heat,  
like the  
were in

he was  
as. Not  
l never  
ld.  
rother's  
raved it

**ight**

κ

## Excerpt from **THE LOOK OF LOVE** (The Sullivan)

*Chloe Peterson is having a bad night. A really bad night. The large bruise on her cheek can attest to that. And when her car skids off the side of a country road straight into a ditch, she's convinced even the gorgeous man who rescues her in the middle of the rain storm must be too good to be true. Or is he?*

*Not only has Chase Sullivan never met anyone so lovely, both inside and out, but he quickly realizes Chloe has much bigger problems than a damaged car. Soon, Chase is willing to move mountains to love—and to protect—her. But will Chloe let him?*

The two of them hiked up the hillside, and the view took Chloe's mind away.

Chase took a waterproof blanket out of the basket and laid it on the ground. It was still damp from the previous night's rain shower.

"Wow, you really come prepared," she said.

"I've got a good crew."

"You certainly do. I enjoyed watching you work," came out of her mouth before she could hold the words inside.

His smile was like a warm caress over her skin. "I liked you being honest. He laughed and admitted, "I was trying not to show off."

Amazed by how easily he could make her smile, she said, "Most people don't admit stuff like that."

She half expected him to say something like, "I'm not most people." Instead, he surprised her yet again by asking, "So, what do you do?"

He was being so careful with her. She felt it in every glance, every word. Even now, when he could so easily have asked her where she was running and why she was running, he was getting to know her another way instead. He hadn't touched her without her permission last night. It was as if there was a silent agreement between them—he wouldn't push too far or get in too close unless she allowed it.

The big question was, would she dare let him in?

Chloe didn't have an answer. How could she, when she was a

even acknowledge the question?

**ns)** He handed her a gourmet sandwich full of goat cheese and grilled and orange bell peppers, and as she took it from him, she said, “Well, recently, I’ve been waitressing.”

*wise on* “But what do you like to do?”

*f a wet* Most people would have stopped at her day job. But not Chase. *ous guy* truly interested. And that honest interest went a long way toward *be true*, aside her reluctance to talk about herself.

She paused before answering, “I make quilts.”

*ide and* People never knew what to make of that. Most assumed it was a *an her* Others just thought it was plain weird or boring. Men, without exception, dismissed it as just another housewife craft. Chase, however, gave a sincerely interested look.

“Tell me more.”

*breath* Downplaying it like she usually did, she said, “I like seeing how things come together in patterns.”

*ass that* “I don’t know much about the quilting world,” he said, “but I’ve photographed a few quilt shows and art quilts for various publications. What I’ve learned about technique and the skill that’s involved in making them has been really interesting. I’d love to know more. When did you start?”

*mouth* Chloe rarely had a chance to wax on about her love for quilting. Not since she’d been a member of a quilting guild years and years ago. She’d been there.” those women—and their shared passion—terribly.

Which was probably why she actually found herself telling Chase she started quilting when I lost a close friend from college in a car accident. I had been so passionate about it. Her mom actually owned a store in town, and quilting was the only way I could think of to keep up my connection to her.

It gave me something else to think about—the motion of my hands and the needle, the patterns of fabric and shape, the building of something from nothing or could create. Sometimes I can almost feel her watching me from up there. Just as with a smile on her face.”

*ere was* “I’m sure she is.”

*oo deep* Chloe started at Chase’s words. Had she really just said all of that? Somehow he had gotten her to talk about her passion for quilting—a hobby that would have put nearly every guy on the planet to sleep. But he wasn’t afraid to snoring yet. And she found herself wanting to tell him more about

more than just her love for quilting.

yellow She wasn't at all comfortable acknowledging that Chase had just l  
ll, mostthe exception. And that it had felt so good to share herself with someo  
was really listening. Not when she knew that she was being stupid,  
herself think that this fantasy of sitting with a gorgeous guy on a hi  
He wasNapa Valley had anything to do with her real life.

shoving It didn't.

She put down her sandwich and made herself face him, but bef  
could say anything, he said, "Uh-oh. That's not a good look."

hobby. She wasn't going to smile. There was no place for grinning w  
ception,needed to set him straight, when she was about to make her position  
e her atwo of them perfectly clear.

"Why are you being so nice to me, Chase?"

"I like you."

fabrics The glow his words caused was too bright. Too warm. Forcing he  
blot it out, she said, "You don't know me."

ut I've "I'm starting to."

ns, and No pause. No smooth words. No trying to charm her into agreein  
makinghim. Didn't he realize just how much harder his honest response  
t start?"making this for her?

ot since "Is this what you do?" she asked.

missed "What am I doing?"

"You keep helping me, making me breakfast, asking Jeremy to be  
ase, "Ime all day."

ent. She He frowned, and she could see that he was confused. "Is there sor  
own. Itwrong with wanting to make you smile?"

And it Oh. Wow. Why did he have to say that?

and the She couldn't think of any other man who'd simply wanted to m  
g that smile. Not even the man she'd married. Especially not the man she'd n  
o above Frustrated with herself for being so soft—so easy to turn to gc

made herself come at him one more time with, "I get it if you're into  
people, but—"

to him? "I'm not a saint, Chloe."

subject His low voice cut her accusation off in midstream, and she found  
wasn'tunable to look away from his serious expression.

herself, "I'll always take care of my family," he continued, "but I've nev

out looking for women who need to be saved. And even though I hope you will soon trust me enough to tell me what happened to you, trying to become who I am by saving you is not why I asked you to stay.”

Feeling like a big jerk for doing anything and everything she could do to try to keep herself from doing something really, really stupid like for him, she said, “Look, Chase, you really have been nice.” Despite being slow to hand her a towel last night, she silently amended with more she “But, despite how great you’ve been—” she purposefully left off a reason as to what she’d been doing in the bathtub the night before “—we aren’t going to...well...you know.”

Ugh. She wasn’t used to having conversations like this.

She half expected—half wanted—him to tell her she was wrong. They were, in fact, most definitely going to end up doing *well-you-know* stuck around much longer.

Instead, his expression grew even more serious. “Earlier, when we were out in the vineyard, when I asked you to stay, you didn’t want to. But you let up until you finally gave in.” He ran a hand through his hair, clearing his head with himself. “I would never want to force you to do something you don’t want to do, Chloe. I don’t ever want to take something from you that you don’t want to give me.”

This was the perfect opening. It was her chance to tell him she had no intention of staying, to make it clear that there was not going to be any further connection between them, and that it was time for her to move on.

So then, why did she find herself saying, “You didn’t force me to stay.”

The pure truth of that statement resonated within her solar plexus. Because it turned out the truth didn’t care if she wanted it to be true, or not. “I want to stay,” she said again in a firmer voice. She wanted to stay—she wanted more time with Chase. She shouldn’t. But she did. “But I don’t want to stay the way.”

“You could never be in the way,” he said. And then with a grin that was softer this time, and somehow even more potent, he said, “You were worried about something about how you and I aren’t going to...?” He paused, letting the unsaid words hang in the air between them.

She should have come back with a quick retort, something to put

... you'll be at this place. But right at that moment, with the Napa Valley sun shining  
... most of my life on her and grapevines budding to life across rolling hills as far as  
... could see, there was nothing left but honesty.

... I'd think "I haven't had a male friend in a very long time."

... falling He was silent for a long moment, and even though the butterflies  
... having stomach had her keeping her eyes on the horizon, she could feel his  
... a flush on her.

... reminder "I'd be honored to be your friend, Chloe."

... I'm not Her breath caught in her throat then, and she liked him so much  
... almost impossible not to grab him and kiss him.

... Sure that he could hear her heart beating in her chest because it  
... g. That loud to her own ears, instead of kissing him, she had to be content  
... w if she was whispering, "I like you, too."

... we were ***"This story has it all – raw passion, emotional connections, and  
I didn't fun element that makes it a delight to read!"***

... y upset **~ 5 stars for THE LOOK OF LOVE**

... u don't **Want more? One-click THE LOOK OF LOVE (The Sullivans) |**  
... hat you

[US Amazon Kindle](#)

[UK Amazon Kindle](#)

[AUS Amazon Kindle](#)

[CA Amazon Kindle](#)

... d never  
... g to be  
... r to be

... o stay. I

... plexus.

... t not.

... o spend

... to be in

... hat was

... saying

... ing the

... him in



his place. But right at that moment, with the Napa Valley sun shining down on her and grapevines budding to life across rolling hills as far as the eye could see, there was nothing left but honesty.

“I haven’t had a male friend in a very long time.”

He was silent for a long moment, and even though the butterflies in her stomach had her keeping her eyes on the horizon, she could feel his gaze on her.

“I’d be honored to be your friend, Chloe.”

Her breath caught in her throat then, and she liked him so much it was almost impossible not to grab him and kiss him.

Sure that he could hear her heart beating in her chest because it was so loud to her own ears, instead of kissing him, she had to be content with whispering, “I like you, too.”

***“This story has it all – raw passion, emotional connections, and a fun element that makes it a delight to read!”***

**~ 5 stars for THE LOOK OF LOVE**

**Want more? One-click THE LOOK OF LOVE (The Sullivans) now!**

**[US Amazon Kindle](#)**

**[UK Amazon Kindle](#)**

**[AUS Amazon Kindle](#)**

**[CA Amazon Kindle](#)**

# BOOKS BY BELLA ANDRE

For a complete listing of books, visit  
[www.BellaAndre.com/books](http://www.BellaAndre.com/books)

## THE SULLIVANS

### San Francisco Sullivans

[The Look Of Love](#)  
[From This Moment On](#)  
[Can't Help Falling In Love](#)  
[I Only Have Eyes For You](#)  
[If You Were Mine](#)  
[Let Me Be The One](#)  
[Come A Little Bit Closer](#)  
[Always On My Mind](#)  
[Kissing Under The Mistletoe](#)

### Seattle Sullivans

[One Perfect Night](#)  
[The Way You Look Tonight](#)  
[It Must Be Your Love](#)  
[Just To Be With You](#)  
[I Love How You Love Me](#)  
[All I Ever Need Is You](#)

### New York Sullivans

[Every Beat Of My Heart](#)  
[Now That I've Found You](#)  
[Since I Fell For You](#)  
[Sweeter Than Ever](#)  
[The Best Is Yet To Come](#)  
[Can't Take My Eyes Off Of You](#)  
[You Do Something To Me](#)

[Every Time We Fall In Love](#)

**Maine Sullivans**

[Falling In Love All Over Again](#)

[Your Love Is Mine](#)

[There Goes My Heart](#)

[When You Kiss Me](#)

[Hold On To My Heart](#)

**The London Sullivans**

[As Long As I Have You](#)

[Stars Shine In Your Eyes](#)

**THE MAVERICK BILLIONAIRES**

[Breathless in Love](#)

[Reckless in Love](#)

[Fearless in Love](#)

[Irresistible in Love](#)

[Wild in Love](#)

[Captivating in Love](#)

[Unforgettable In Love](#)

[Endless In Love](#)

[Reunited In Love](#)

**THE DAVENPORTS**

[California Dreaming](#)

[California Waves](#)

[California Sunsets](#)

**THE MORRISONS**

[Kiss Me Like This](#)

[Tempt Me Like This](#)

[Love Me Like This](#)

**MARRIED IN MALIBU**

[The Beach Wedding](#)

[The Summer Wedding](#)

[The Barefoot Wedding](#)  
[The Moonlight Wedding](#)

**WALKER ISLAND ROMANCE**

[Be My Love](#)  
[No Other Love](#)  
[When It's Love](#)  
[All For Love](#)  
[Forever In Love](#)

**FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FIASCO**

[The Wedding Gift](#)  
[The Wedding Dance](#)  
[The Wedding Song](#)  
[The Wedding Dress](#)  
[The Wedding Kiss](#)

**BAD BOYS OF FOOTBALL**

[Game For Anything](#)  
[Game For Seduction](#)  
[Game For Love](#)

**TAKE ME series**

[Love Me](#)  
[Take Me](#)

**STAND-ALONE NOVELS**

[Falling Fast](#)  
[Sparks Fly](#)  
[Candy Store](#)  
[Red Hot Reunion](#)  
[Tempt Me, Taste Me, Touch Me](#)

**HOTSHOT FIREFIGHTERS**

[Wild Heat](#)  
[Hot As Sin](#)  
[Never Too Hot](#)

\* \* \*

\* \* \*

# BOOKS BY JENNIFER SKULLY

For a complete listing of books, visit [www.JenniferSkully.com](http://www.JenniferSkully.com)

## ONCE AGAIN

[Dreaming of Provence](#)

[Wishing in Rome](#)

[Dancing in Ireland](#)

[Under the Northern Lights](#)

[Stargazing on the Orient Express](#)

[Memories of Santorini](#)

[Siesta in Spain](#)

[Top Down to California](#)

[Cruising the Danube](#)

## THE MAVERICK BILLIONAIRES

[Breathless in Love](#)

[Reckless in Love](#)

[Fearless in Love](#)

[Irresistible in Love](#)

[Wild in Love](#)

[Captivating in Love](#)

[Unforgettable in Love](#)

[Endless in Love](#)

[Reunited in Love](#)

## RETURN TO LOVE

[She's Gotta Be Mine](#)

[Fool's Gold](#)

[Can't Forget You](#)

## MYSTERY OF LOVE

[Drop Dead Gorgeous](#)

[Sheer Dynamite](#)

n

[It Must Be Magic](#)  
[One Crazy Kiss](#)  
[You Make Me Crazy](#)  
[One Crazy Fling](#)  
[Crazy for Baby](#)

**LOVE AFTER HOURS**

[Desire Actually](#)  
[Love Affair to Remember](#)  
[Pretty in Pink Slip](#)

**STAND-ALONE**

[Baby, I'll Find You](#)  
[Twisted by Love](#)  
[Be My Other Valentine](#)

**BOOKS BY JENNIFER SKULLY writing as JASMINE HAYNES**

**NAUGHTY AFTER HOURS**

[Revenge](#)  
[Submitting to the Boss](#)  
[The Boss's Daughter](#)  
[The Other Man](#)  
[Pleasing Mr. Sutton](#)  
[Any Way She Wants It](#)  
[More Than a Night](#)  
[A Very Naughty Christmas](#)  
[Show Me How to Leave You](#)  
[Show Me How to Love You](#)  
[Show Me How to Tempt You](#)

**MAX STARR**

[Dead to the Max](#)  
[Evil to the Max](#)  
[Desperate to the Max](#)  
[Power to the Max](#)



[Vengeance to the Max](#)

**LESSONS AFTER HOURS**

[Past Midnight](#)

[What Happens After Dark](#)

[The Principal's Office](#)

[The Naughty Corner](#)

[The Lesson Plan](#)

**COURTESANS TALES**

[The Girlfriend Experience](#)

[Payback](#)

[Triple Play](#)

[Three's a Crowd](#)

[The Stand-In](#)

[Surrender to Me](#)

[The Only Way Out](#)

[The Wrong Kind of Man](#)

[No Second Chances](#)

**CASTLE INC**

[The Fortune Hunter](#)

[Show and Tell](#)

[Fair Game](#)

**THE JACKSON BROTHERS**

[Somebody's Lover](#)

[Somebody's Ex](#)

[Somebody's Wife](#)

**OPEN INVITATION**

[Invitation to Seduction](#)

[Invitation to Pleasure](#)

[Invitation to Passion](#)

**PRESCOTT TWINS**

[Double the Pleasure](#)

[Skin Deep](#)

**STAND-ALONE**

[Take Your Pleasure](#)

[Take Your Pick](#)

[Not in the Game](#)

[Wives & Neighbors: The Complete Story  
Anthology: Beauty or the Bitch & Free Fall](#)

[Skin Deep](#)

**STAND-ALONE**

[Take Your Pleasure](#)

[Take Your Pick](#)

[Not in the Game](#)

[Wives & Neighbors: The Complete Story](#)

[Anthology: Beauty or the Bitch & Free Fall](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Having sold more than 10 million books, Bella Andre's novels have become bestsellers around the world and have appeared on the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists 93 times. She has been the #1 Ranked Author on the top 10 list that included Nora Roberts, JK Rowling, James Patterson, and Steven King.

Known for “sensual, empowered stories enveloped in heady romance” (Publishers Weekly), her books have been *Cosmopolitan Magazine* “Favorite Reads” twice and have been translated into ten languages. She is a graduate of Stanford University and has won the Award of Excellence in romance fiction. The *Washington Post* called her “One of the top writers in America” and she has been featured by *Entertainment Weekly*, *NPR*, *USA Today*, *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *TIME Magazine*.

Bella also writes the *New York Times* bestselling “Four Wedding Fiasco” series as Lucy Kevin. Her sweet contemporary romances also include the *USA Today* bestselling “Walker Island” and “Married in Malibu” series.

If not behind her computer, you can find her reading her favorite authors, hiking, swimming or laughing. Married with two children, Bella spends time between the Northern California wine country, a log cabin in the Adirondack mountains of upstate New York, and a flat in London overlooking the Thames.

**Sign up for Bella's New Release newsletter:**

**[BellaAndre.com/Newsletter](http://BellaAndre.com/Newsletter)**

**Join Bella Andre on Facebook:**

**[facebook.com/authorbellaandre](http://facebook.com/authorbellaandre)**

**Join Bella Andre's reader group:**

**[bellaandre.com/readergroup](http://bellaandre.com/readergroup)**

**Follow Bella Andre on Instagram:**

**[instagram.com/bellaandrebooks](http://instagram.com/bellaandrebooks)**

**Follow Bella Andre on Twitter:**

[twitter.com/bellaandre](https://twitter.com/bellaandre)

Visit Bella's website for her complete booklist:

[www.BellaAndre.com](http://www.BellaAndre.com)

been #1 *NY Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author Jennifer Skully is a l  
nes and contemporary romance, bringing you poignant tales peopled with cha  
ior on a that will make you laugh and make you cry. Look for *The M*  
on and *Billionaires* written with Bella Andre, starting with *Breathless in Love*  
with Jennifer's new later-in-life holiday romance series, *Once Again*  
mance" readers can travel to fabulous faraway locales. Up first is a trip to Prov  
led Hot *Dreaming of Provence*. Writing as Jasmine Haynes, Jennifer authors  
raduates sensual romance tales about real issues such as growing older, facing c  
omantic starting over. Her books have passion and heart and humor and  
nerica" endings, even if they aren't always traditional. She also writes  
Today, paranormal mysteries in the Max Starr series. Having penned stories si  
moment she learned to write, Jennifer now lives in the Redwoods of N  
s and a California with her husband and their adorable nuisance of a cat who  
include runs the household.

series.

authors,

lits her

in the

London

**Newsletter signup:**

<http://bit.ly/SkullyNews>

**Jennifer's Website:**

[www.jenniferskully.com](http://www.jenniferskully.com)

**Blog:**

[www.jasminehaynes.blogspot.com](http://www.jasminehaynes.blogspot.com)

**Facebook:**

[facebook.com/jasminehaynesauthor](https://facebook.com/jasminehaynesauthor)

**Twitter:**

[twitter.com/jasminehaynes1](https://twitter.com/jasminehaynes1)

[twitter.com/bellaandre](https://twitter.com/bellaandre)

**Visit Bella's website for her complete booklist:**

[www.BellaAndre.com](http://www.BellaAndre.com)

*NY Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author Jennifer Skully is a lover of contemporary romance, bringing you poignant tales peopled with characters that will make you laugh and make you cry. Look for *The Maverick Billionaires* written with Bella Andre, starting with *Breathless in Love*, along with Jennifer's new later-in-life holiday romance series, *Once Again*, where readers can travel to fabulous faraway locales. Up first is a trip to Provence in *Dreaming of Provence*. Writing as Jasmine Haynes, Jennifer authors classy, sensual romance tales about real issues such as growing older, facing divorce, starting over. Her books have passion and heart and humor and happy endings, even if they aren't always traditional. She also writes gritty, paranormal mysteries in the Max Starr series. Having penned stories since the moment she learned to write, Jennifer now lives in the Redwoods of Northern California with her husband and their adorable nuisance of a cat who totally runs the household.

**Newsletter signup:**

<http://bit.ly/SkullyNews>

**Jennifer's Website:**

[www.jenniferskully.com](http://www.jenniferskully.com)

**Blog:**

[www.jasminhaynes.blogspot.com](http://www.jasminhaynes.blogspot.com)

**Facebook:**

[facebook.com/jasminhaynesauthor](https://facebook.com/jasminhaynesauthor)

**Twitter:**

[twitter.com/jasminhaynes1](https://twitter.com/jasminhaynes1)