

THE COURSE
OF TRUE LOVE
A Castle Clubhouse Romance

Malinda Martin

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Dedicated to all the child stars that brightened my life
and to all the directors who had to work with them.



Chapter One

THE CAMERAS WERE ROLLING, the music was playing, and the kids were dancing. Josh Butler was in his element, studying every movement, every nuance of the performance. It was his job as assistant director.

As the song finished in a grand crescendo and the kids raised their arms in glee, large smiles firmly set on their lips, he held his breath, waiting for the director's cry of "cut" so he could maneuver everyone into position for the closing shot of the episode, the last shot of the day.

"Good show today," William "Bill" Whittaker said to him as he and Donovan Baxter, another of the actors, took their places behind the young cast of the enormously popular show *Castle Clubhouse*. The fifty-something man with the salt and pepper (mostly salt) hair smiled widely, ever the optimistic leader of the children's television show. Josh still wondered at times why the classically trained actor had settled for the part of a kids' show instead of performing Shakespeare in some hallowed theatre.

He watched as Bill patted a young girl's shoulder and said, "You feeling better today, Jamie? I heard you were a bit under the weather yesterday."

The wide grin from the girl reflected how all the kids on the show felt about the man. They adored him. "Yeah, Bill. I'm good."

The longsuffering director, Stanley Lockes, clapped his hands to get everyone's attention. "Okay places, kids. One more scene and we can all go home for the weekend. Joey B, I need a real smile for your close-up, okay? No cross-eyed expressions. Sammy, don't block the others or I'll put you in the back. And Matthew Mackenzie, eyes up here. Not on any other performers." He didn't need to say Jennifer Van Dyke, another

er performer. There were chuckles and giggles as Stanley looked over the group of teenagers and frowned. “Laura?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Is there something in your hair?” Josh joined him in walking toward the group, trying to make out the foreign substance.

Next to Laura Manchester, Nick Varela, a very talented sixteen-year-old said, “I’ve got it, Stan.” He plucked the round object off the girl’s head and held it up for everyone to see.

“Is that . . . a ping pong ball?” the stunned director asked.

“I’ve been looking for that! How’d it end up in Laura’s hair?” Joey Trent, known as Joey B, asked.

There were more chuckles and giggles as Nick said, a twinkle in his eye, “Beats me. Maybe Laura’s head is like the new lost and found.”

Josh cleared his throat to stop from chuckling. It was apparent to him and probably everyone there that Nick had put the ball in Laura’s hair, as he was always bothering her. Predictably, Laura shot Nick a glare.

As Stanley took the ball and gave it to Joey B, and Josh tried to get everyone focused back on the camera, another sixteen-year-old, Samuel Delaney, or Sammy as everyone called him, raised his hand. “Stan? Sir?” His expression was one of feigned innocence and restrained mirth.

Sighing, Stanley said, “Yes, what is it Sammy?”

“Could I check Laura’s head for my missing basketball?”

And that ushered in more laughter from the kids. Laura threatened bodily harm to Nick, who expressed outrage at her accusations. Young Mandy Summers gave a wave to her agent and using her hand to imitate a phone, mouthed the words “call me.” Joey B slid on a pair of sunglasses to annoy Stanley.

Josh shook his head, giving the kids time to vent before trying to herd them back to the task at hand. Patience. It was, he knew, one of the things that made him a good assistant director.

It wasn't easy to shepherd ten very different personalities, especially teenage, hormonal young people. Even now he could see Sammy mumbling to Nick, never a good sign. Those two were plotting something for sure. Jennifer was trying not to glance at Matt, Matt was trying not to glance at her. Also, not good. Young love at this age and in front of the cameras was never easy. And young Joey B was pulling out his yo-yo, obviously to try out a few new tricks, and probably wreak havoc. Definitely not a good sign.

When he received the nod from Stanley, Josh stuck two fingers in his mouth and blew loudly. Always a signal to the kids that enough was enough and punishment would be doled out if minds were not directed back to work.

The cameras were set, makeup touched up, sound checked. Josh moved between the kids making sure everyone was on their spot.

"Everybody good?" He watched for nods, thumbs up, nothing potentially catastrophic, and got out of camera range. "Good to go, Stanley."

Action was called and as cameras rolled, the final scene of the show was filmed, in which Bill reiterated the lesson of the episode so that the kids could go home as better citizens.

If only life were that easy.

He mentally shook his head, not wanting to dwell on the negative. Once his work was done for today, he'd leave and not think about the show until Sunday night, checking in on his mother, then spending his time at Santa Monica, soaking up sun and riding the waves. No other commitments, no other obligations. No other problems. He'd had his share in the past.

"Okay, everyone. That's a wrap for this week. Good job," Stanley called out. Josh checked his notes for everything he needed to do before donning his wetsuit and hitting the beach.

A subtle scent of flowers grabbed his attention, making him think of a faraway, tropical Hawaiian beach. Nice. He looked up to see the source of such a heavenly smell, a smile lifting his face.

Which instantly fell when he spied the woman standing a few feet away. He knew this woman, although he hadn't seen her in a couple of years. Sunny Whittaker, Bill's daughter. Their last meeting had been . . . a little tenuous, being that she was an intellectual student at Harvard while he was a lowly employee of her father's show. The fact that she had long, beautiful blonde hair and a stunning face to go along with it had nothing to do with his discomfort. She'd put him in his place long ago.

He glanced back at his list, determined to ignore her.

"Hello, Joshua."

Before he greeted her, he reminded himself she was Bill's daughter. He should at least be polite. "Hey, Sunny. Long time, no see."

She let out a dainty chuckle. "I see you're still going strong as assistant director, writing your little notes, answering to everyone's needs."

"It's what I do." He turned to her and cocked his head. "How's the professional student. You still slumming at 'Ha-vahd'?" He knew she'd graduated but wanted to see if he could get a rise out of her.

He gave her points for not reacting. "Actually, I've graduated. I'm thinking over my options for graduate school."

"Of course you are."

"Daddy!" Her face lit and she hurried over to Bill, giving him a big hug. Yeah, she was a piece of work but she did love her father, as Bill did her. It was nice to see. He knew she'd just gotten back from a skiing trip in Austria, a graduation present from her folks.

Holding on to each other and chuckling over something, they walked back to Josh. "Did you say 'hi' to my little girl?"

"Yeah, sure did. Hey, listen. You mentioned something about the lighting over the west end of the set. That still bothering you?"

"Didn't notice it today, but I wasn't on that end."

“Okay. I’ll still have the lighting crew check it out. Have a good weekend.” He turned to hurry away, but got only a step away before Bill stopped him.

“So, what do you think about the news?”

Never liking to be surprised, his jaw tightened. “What?”

Bill put his arm around his daughter and grinned. “Sunny. She’s going to be working with us for a while.” He glanced at her and asked, “Didn’t you tell him?”

“I didn’t get the chance.”

Josh cleared his throat. “What exactly do you mean working with us?”

“Well, technically, I guess she’ll be working with you. Helping you out. Since she’s not busy until she starts grad school, I thought she’d like to see how her old man is making a living these days. Working on a television show should make for an interesting item on the resume, don’t you think?”

He shook his head to clear it. “Wait, what do you mean working with me?” A thought suddenly struck. “She’s going to be my assistant?” He couldn’t help the edges of his lips lifting.

“No, not your assistant. Associate.” Behind her head, Bill shook his head. “Isn’t that right, Daddy?” When her eyes went to his, he smiled and nodded. But when she turned again, he shook his head.

Josh was confused. “Okay. Well, I’ll just finish up my work. See you on Monday.”

“Oh, Josh. I was wondering if you might take just a few minutes to show Sunny around the set. I have a few calls to make that I need to get to. Would you mind?”

Yes, he minded. But when the star of your show asked you to do something, you did it. Even if it was giving his beautiful, yet infuriating, daughter a tour. “Ah, no problem.” He glanced at his list, irritated that the waves of Santa Monica would have to wait.

Once Bill was out of earshot, he said, “Okay, Ivy League, let’s go.”

“You didn’t want to do this, yet you did. Is it because you admire my father or do you feel that the assistant director of the show must do what the principal actor asks him to do? No matter how menial?”

“Does it matter?” He took off walking to hopefully get her quiet. “This is our primary set. It’s a castle that magically appears in a backyard of ‘Sir Bill.’” His hand waved in front as he pointed out the different rooms the players moved through.

“Over there is the main room of the castle. It needs to be larger since all the dance sequences take place there and the kids need plenty of room.”

“Do you think the idea of explaining lessons with dance is valid? Don’t you think young people are smart enough to sit and listen to honest dialogue?”

He stared at her. “Not really.” This college whizz was getting on his nerves. “Now, over here is the area we use for the yard. Typically, games are played here. Again, it’s a larger area so the kids can spread out.”

“How are the games set up? Are there winners and losers? Do you think that bothers the viewing—”

He faced her with a heavy sigh. “Look, I really don’t care about all the psychological ramifications, it’s not my job. If you’re going to work here, you can’t be spending time dissecting and analyzing what we do.” He pointed to the side. “Makeup tables are set here.” He stomped back toward a long hall. “The girls share a large dressing room, as do the boys. Bill and Donovan each has his own. Next to those are practice rooms. Administrative offices are one flight up, which is where I’m heading now. Later.”

It was inevitable that she’d follow him. “I didn’t mean to offend. I just find it fascinating the way people’s minds work, how individuals work together.”

“Fine. See you later.”

“Wait. Tell me, what exactly does an assistant director do?”

He stopped with his foot on the first step up the staircase. She looked sincere. Was she only playing a mental game to get what she wanted, whatever that was? Maybe he should give her the benefit of the doubt.

“What I do is take the script and break it into a shot-by-shot storyboard for Stanley. We determine the shoot order, shooting time, and I draw up the schedule. As we’re shooting, it’s my job to track our daily progress against the schedule. I arrange logistics, make daily call sheets, and deal with everything from sound to catering, and everyone, cast or crew. In essence, I work on little details so Stanley can concentrate on the actual show.”

“That’s a lot. Do you find it hard?”

“It’s enough of a challenge to keep me interested. Until Friday night at . . .” He glanced at his watch. “At five-thirty. I’m ready to head out, so if you’ll excuse me.”

“Fine,” she said to his retreating back. “But I’ll be here first thing Monday morning. Don’t think you’re going to brush me aside, Joshua. I’m a hard worker and I’m here to learn.”

He stopped and couldn’t help getting in one last jab. “I take my coffee with cream. No sugar.” Before she could reply, he headed up, eager to drop his notes off and slide out the backdoor.

Big Bill Whittaker leaned back in his large leather chair, chuckling. “Rosie, you should have seen it. They were at it the moment they saw each other. The electricity between them could have lit the whole studio. And when I suggested he show her around.” His laughs came out louder. “His words were accommodating but the expression on his face.” Bill could hardly talk for laughing so hard.

The woman on the end of the line giggled along with him. “I wish I could have seen that. But honey, are you sure you know what you’re doing? Sunny is so opinionated. She might . . . offend the poor boy.”

“Oh, I’m counting on it. I think they both need shaking up. Sunny from her habit of dissecting everyone else’s feelings but her own and Josh from the rut that has become his life.”

“I understand but—”

“Darling, I know what I’m doing. I love Sunny with all my heart but she’s kept herself shut up for too long. She needs that heart of hers to feel things. I’m afraid she’d kept it closed up since . . . Well, I think she needs to experience life, the real world.”

“And she’ll find that on the set of a television show?” Rose Whitaker asked sarcastically.

“Not with the show. With the people. It’ll be good for her.”

“I agree but . . . Well, I’m a little worried about Josh.”

Bill grinned. “Josh will be fine. He’s a smart one. And I don’t doubt that he’s got a few surprises in store for Sunny. They’re perfect for each other.”

“I hope you’re right about this.”

“I am. You know I love the boy like my own, Rosie. I just feel deep down that this is right. Let’s put them together and see what happens.”

Rose sighed. “Okay. As long as you keep me informed on everything, and I do mean everything, that happens between those two.”

“You got it, honey. Oh, that reminds me. You should have seen Sunny’s expression when Josh suggested that she was to be his assistant.” The chuckles came out loud once again. “It was classic.”



Chapter Two

JUST LIKE SHE SAID, Sunny was on set bright and early Monday morning. She'd conveniently forgotten to get Josh his coffee but stood ready and eager to work, a cup of caramel latte in her own hands.

When she saw him, her heart gave a slight jump. She immediately reprimanded the traitorous organ. There was no way she was going to be attracted to the man. Even though he was the quintessential California beach boy. His hair was a sandy brown with blonde streaks, obviously from spending time in the sun. He was tall, muscular, like a professional basketball player. The tan he had made his light green eyes stand out.

Not that she noticed.

She was here to obtain some work experience. To keep busy until she was accepted for grad school. She had no time for infatuations. Anyway, infatuations were merely a figment of a person's imagination. The chemical reactions were a reflection of the mind. So, all she had to do was to redirect her mind and she'd be fine."

"Morning, Ivy League. Ready to work."

She wished her mind would tell her heart to slow down. "Absolutely." She took a big sip of her coffee to annoy him, unfortunately burning her own tongue.

"Great. Let's get started." He walked to the large table set up in the middle of the studio, not commenting on her coffee. "This morning, we'll have a read through. The kids got their scripts last Wednesday so they should have it memorized by now. We'll go over the schedule and start blocking each scene. Tomorrow starts the shooting for this episode." He took her coffee and sipped.

"Hey!"

“Here’s your copy of the script. I want you to follow along during the read through. You’ll be sitting next to me. Take notes on whatever Stanley has in mind or any changes we need to make.”

She took her coffee back. “I can do that.”

When everyone was settled for the read through, Stanley introduced her to the group. Her father smiled, one of the boys leered, some smiled, and others weren’t paying any attention. The read through was interesting, as Stanley lead the cast through the dialogue and actions of the next episode. Her mind was whirling at the subtext in the conversations around the table.

Later, when the cast went to the rehearsal halls with the choreographer to practice, Josh and Sunny stayed at the table while he made a few more notes on her script.

“I just don’t see why my father’s character has to remind them of the lesson at the end of the show. Wouldn’t it be a better story if the children come to that conclusion on their own? You know, own it?”

Josh blew out a breath, obviously exasperated. “I suppose then we wouldn’t need your father. You trying to get him fired?”

“What? No, of course not. But I still don’t see—”

“Let me see if I can explain it to you.” He scooted his chair closer to hers and leaned closer to look on her script. Sunny tried not to breathe in his shampoo that reminded her of an ocean storm. There was a lingering scent of suntan lotion, a tropical coconut oil. His sandy-colored hair was right in front of her and she had to hold her hands together to prevent herself from touching the inviting strands.

“Do you see?”

Eek. He’d been talking to her. And she’d been mooning over him. How embarrassing. “Ah, no. Maybe you’d better explain it again.”

His ever-present sigh sounded, something she was sure she’d hear many times over the next few months. “If the kids discover the lesson without ‘Sir Bill’ there’s no need for the third or sixth scene here. We’d

have to completely rewrite, which takes time and money. Something Stanley frowns on. I don't know why, he's just funny like that."

"Okay. You've made your point. I get it. I forgot that time and money is king on a production set."

"It's not that we don't want to make a good product, it's just—"

He lifted his head and suddenly was staring at her, his face only inches away. She froze, watching the green in his eyes intensify.

The moment was instantly broken when he cleared his throat and shoved back his chair. "We should make the rounds now and see what's needed. Bring your pad. We'll need to check with Stanley and on the kids, the lighting, and sound." He moved swiftly causing her to almost jog to catch up.

"Fine, but could you slow down a bit?"

He glanced over his shoulder for a second. "Tomorrow you'd better wear more comfortable shoes." She looked down at her four-inch heels. Maybe he did have a point. "I'd also suggest you chuck the power suit. It means nothing here. Better to come in jeans and comfortable shirt. We move a lot around here so it's smart to dress comfortably." He stopped abruptly and she almost bumped into him. With a smirk he added, "That's assuming the Ivy League student has anything other than Abercrombie and Fitch to wear."

How could she have thought he'd been attractive earlier? Just because he smelled good didn't mean she'd overlook a bad attitude. "You'll find that I'm multi-talented. I can actually look nice and be comfortable."

"Hmm. I guess you'll have to prove it to me." His fascinating green eyes held a challenge.

"Don't worry. I excel at tests."

He turned and continued walking. "Too bad you can't make a living by taking tests. One day you'll have to actually put in hours."

"Why are you persnickety about me being a student?"

"Persnickety?" He chuckled.

“Yes. It means to place too much emphasis on trivial or minor details.”

He shook his head. “Wow. I guess that education is good for something after all. Bet you can get a job anywhere as a roaming dictionary. Might even get a gig at a carnival or fair. Let’s try another. Define nuisance.”

A gasp escaped her lips. “Listen here, surfer boy. I’m not here to get insulted. Especially by a beach bum who is a lackey for others. It’s not exactly my goal in life to follow in your footsteps.”

She immediately knew she’s gone too far. Josh stopped and slowly turned to glare at her. He didn’t speak at first and when he did, she wished he hadn’t.

“Good.” His tone was so cold, she would have sworn the temperature in the building had dropped by twenty degrees. This time when he walked ahead she closed her mouth and followed.

By the end of the week, Sunny was exhausted. “Then he said, ‘Good,’” Sunny said, recalling a conversation with Josh. She sighed into her hot fudge sundae. “I guess I shouldn’t have said what I did.”

“It wasn’t too nice, honey.” Her mother, Rose, took a bite of her butter pecan ice cream.

Josh had been right when he’d told her they moved around a lot. She felt as if she ran a half marathon each day. That first day, her feet had started to swell by the afternoon and she’d chucked her beautiful shoes to prevent extreme pain. Even now with sneakers, her feet were still screaming at her.

Bill had a public appearance somewhere for the evening so Sunny and her mom had taken the opportunity to get dinner out and were enjoying a treat at her favorite ice cream parlor.

“Maybe it wasn’t but he treats me like some . . . I don’t know. Like a snobbish five-year-old. Why should I put up with that?”

“Because he’s your boss?”

“We’re equal. I’m helping him out. I don’t answer to him.” She stabbed her ice cream with renewed resentment. “I’m only trying to help out around the set. He could be a little nice to me.” She didn’t notice her mother’s smile.

“You know, honey, there’s an old saying. You get more flies with honey than with vinegar.”

“I’ve heard it, but somehow I don’t think it applies to Joshua Butler. He’s probably allergic to honey and loves vinegar.”

“No doubt.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Rose cleared her throat. “It’s only your first week. Give yourself some time to adjust to the rhythm of the show. You’re so smart you’ll catch on in no time.”

“You sure about that? I mean, the smart part. Every time I talk to Josh, he makes me feel so stupid.”

“Hmm. I thought you believed no one could make you feel a certain way. At least not without your permission.”

She smirked. “Well, if you’re going to throw my own words back in my face. But you’re right. Okay, I’ll be optimistic.”

“And honey. Think about what I said. Try being nice to Josh. He really is a nice person once you get to know him.”

That might take a little more optimism than she had.

Tuesday morning was pandemonium. The entire cast was on center stage as the schedule called for several scenes that involved everyone. The problem was Stanley and Josh were deep in a meeting with the crew’s union that was running over the scheduled time. Her dad had left to take a phone call. Donovan Baxter was reading the trade papers.

Which left the kids with nothing to do, a recipe for disaster. The girls seemed to be chatting and laughing among themselves, yelling at the youngest boy to put his fake snake away. Several of the boys were playing thumb wars, loudly. The oldest boys were muttering to each other. Was she supposed to do something about this? If she could get

them settled surely it would be a help to Stanley and Josh when they came back.

“Um, excuse me. Could I have your attention?” No one paid her a bit of attention.

“Why don’t we rehearse or . . . something? Then we’ll be ready when the camera . . . ah, rolls.” Still no response.

The two oldest boys must have finally noticed her. One elbowed the other and nodded toward her. Together they came forward, grins on their faces. “What’s the matter, sweetheart? Did you need something?” The boy’s eyes gleamed with unholy glee while the other raised his eyebrows. Sunny was uncomfortable.

“I just thought we could all get ready for the scene to be filmed.”

The boys flanked her, getting a little too close for her comfort. “You won’t find any cooperation from these . . . children,” the other boy said. “They’re just babies.”

“Hey, I heard that.” The youngest boy stopped waving his snake around and got into a ninja position, complete with fierce expression. The boys just laughed.

“Don’t worry, baby. We’ll protect you.” The first boy put a hand out, connecting with the ninja boy’s forehead, holding him in place, making him yell. Loudly.

A piercing whistle sounded and the kids quieted and looked in the direction of the sound.

“Everyone on your marks. We’re going with scene two. Let’s go.” As if the starting gun had gone off, everyone hurried to do Josh’s bidding. He came striding in, moving between the kids, Donovan, and Bill, who had returned. Stanley got in his position, viewing the scene through the camera, going over final details with the cameraman. Sunny got out of the way.

“We’re good, Stanley,” Josh said and also moved out of the way. Action was called and, with cameras rolling, the kids were transformed in-

to model citizens, Donovan into the caring nephew of Bill, and her father into . . . just what he was. A compassionate, loving individual.

As scene after scene was filmed, she began to get the flow, the rhythm her mother spoke of. It was like an incredible ballet or symphony. Everyone knew their place and what was expected of them. She could have just watched the movement, the flow. But seeing Josh standing off to the side, making notes, she joined him.

“What do you need from me?”

He did a double take, which almost raised her ire. He whispered, “Nothing right now. Just observe.”

Which she did. He explained more about how the filming took place, the blocking, the lighting.

She’d never taken the time to watch the show but now she saw that each of the ten children had a certain role to fill. Her psych professor would have been impressed.

“I’ve never really met the cast. Can you tell me about them?”

They whispered as “Sir Bill” led the kids through the “Castle Clubhouse” after an imaginary difficult day at school.

“Okay. First, Donovan Baxter.” She glanced at the handsome man standing next to her father. When filming began, a spark had come into his blue eyes. The man definitely had the “it” factor. “He’s the kind nephew of ‘Sir Bill’ on the show. *Castle Clubhouse* has been his big break. Word is that he’s looking to break into the movies. That’s his goal anyway, although he assures me he’ll stay with *Castle Clubhouse* for the duration. All the girls have had a crush on him. Except Jennifer Van Dyke who only has eyes for Matthew Mackenzie. Poor girl. The boys either irritate him or want to know what starlet he’s seeing. Bill tries to be the buffer between Donovan and the kids. And a father figure.” He didn’t go into details.

“Now kids, oldest to youngest starting with sixteen-year-olds. Nick Varela.” She recognized him as the first boy that approached her. “On screen, he’s like a big brother. Off screen, resident bad boy. Next is

Samuel Delaney. He's probably our best actor, although please don't tell him. He's got a tremendous ego already. Laura Manchester. Never have to worry about her not knowing her lines. She's the most organized kid I've ever seen. Unfortunately, she's also the most sensitive. Nick loves ticking her off. Jamie Brogan. That girl will be successful in anything she chooses. She's ambitious and driven, but, amazingly, not in a bad way.

"Fifteen-year-olds. Dylan Van Dyke. You probably recognize the name. His father is big in the entertainment industry. The kid has talent but it's divided with his love of drawing buildings. Good-natured kid. Ashley Anderson. She's our yoga girl. Keeps us calm and serene. Loves anything natural. You getting all this?"

Sunny nodded. "It's fascinating. Go on."

Stanley reprimanded a boy for staring at one of the girls and Josh moaned. "That's Matthew Mackenzie. He's thirteen and in his free time sings with his brothers in a band, you might have heard of them. They're pretty popular. He's currently having problems with his focus since he's got his eyes on Jennifer Van Dyke, also thirteen and Dylan's sister. She's a sweetie. Very talented, very loving." He frowned. "Hope she has the sense to stay away from Matt.

"That leaves the youngest two, both twelve years old. Mandy Summers, our golden girl. The industry is looking for big things from her."

He let out a big sigh as the last cast member blew a huge bubble from his gum, which was forbidden on set, and the ensuing pop covered his face in the sticky substance. "Joey B Trent. Doesn't want to be here and lets us know that fact daily." Josh moved to get a wet wash towel and hand it to Joey to clean his face.

While she had a moment, she studied the kids, making her own mental notes. When Nick winked at her, she held back an eye roll.

Her gaze went to Josh. The man seemed to instinctively know how to deal with the kids. Where her father loved them, Stanley instructed

them, and Donovan basically ignored them, Josh dealt with their problems, concerns, and shenanigans.

After dealing with Joey B's face, he answered a question from Jennifer, helped Mandy with a ribbon that was coming loose in her hair, had a word with Nick and Samuel, and slapped Dylan on the back, telling him his dialogue in the last scene had been stellar. Sunny smiled.

They reset for the next take and Josh returned to her side, intently watching the cast. She chanced a sideways glance at him. His strong profile showed his focus, his dedication to his job. He really was very good at what he did. It occurred to her that he was wasting his talents in his position as assistant director. Why hadn't someone recognized that and made him a director? Surely there was a need for excellent directors in Hollywood. Why was he hiding out here, on a kids' show, of all things. She desperately wanted to know the answer but knew he probably wouldn't appreciate her asking him the question. He was so touchy about her questions.

Her smile returned. That's okay. She had an inside source, one that she'd tap at lunchtime.



Chapter Three

“WELL, IT’S BEEN A WHILE since I had lunch with a beautiful blonde.” Bill winked at her. “How’s the job going?”

“Okay.” They took their tray from the commissary and found seats. “I’ve got to admit, it’s harder than I thought.”

“Ha. You thought we did nothing but play in front of a camera all day, now didn’t you.”

“Maybe so. After the past two days I know that’s far from the truth. And . . . I respect what you do even more.”

His eyes twinkled. “Nice to hear. Think I’ll keep you around, Sunny Day.”

“Dad! Bad enough you call me Sunny. Please don’t call me by that nickname in front of anyone.”

“Why not? You are my sunny day. Always were.” He pulled a strand of her hair, grinning. When she only raised her brows at him, he chuckled. “Okay, not on set.”

“Thank you.” They began to eat. Sunny wondered how she could subtly find out about Josh. “I really am enjoying being on the set. It’s very interesting watching how things come together.”

“Mmm.”

“I can’t believe how much work it takes. The wardrobe, makeup, sound, lighting, directing.”

“We’ve got a tremendous crew behind us. Sure couldn’t do what we do without them.”

“I understand that.” They went back to eating. “So, Stanley’s been with you since the beginning?”

“From the pilot. Of course, not everyone else started then. I think Maxine in makeup started midway through the first season. We’ve

changed a few of our soundmen. Other than that, most everyone started with us during the first season.”

She added salt to her fries, thinking she’d just come out with her real question. “What about Josh? When did he start?”

“After the pilot, Stanley wanted to choose his own AD. He’s heard from a few others about Josh and checked him out. When he found out Josh was between jobs, he grabbed him. It seemed to be destined. Josh has been a lifesaver on the show more times than I can count. Anticipates problems better than any AD I’ve seen in my career. We’re very lucky to have him.”

“Yeah, I don’t understand something.” Fully engaged, she pushed her plate away and leaned her elbows on the table. “I agree with you. He’s excellent at what he does. So why is he still at the low level job of assistant director? Why isn’t he out there directing a major motion picture or something?”

Bill smiled at her. “Maybe he doesn’t want to.”

“How could he not want to excel in his industry?”

He wiped his mouth and leaned back. “Joshua Butler is a very exceptional individual. He keeps an eye on his widowed mother up in Venice and he goes to Santa Monica to surf. Add in his job and you’ve got his life. He seems to like it that way, without the major stress of the responsibilities of director. He gets to knock off at a fairly decent hour everyday and only answers to the director instead of producers, investors, studio heads.”

“I understand, but if he were director, with his talent, he’d be so successful he’d be able to determine which projects he wanted and how much time to put into each project. Why, he could be another Stephen Spielberg if he wanted.”

“Maybe. But could he finish out the week with us before he goes to direct another ‘Jaws?’” He chuckled.

A month later, she still thought about all her father had told her about Josh, as she stood next to him, watching filming. Why did the

man fascinate her so much? Sure, he was handsome, but that was superficial, nothing out of the ordinary in Los Angeles to see a handsome man. They practically grew on trees.

But there was something about Joshua Butler. There was a depth behind the green eyes that changed color with his mood. There was a strength in the physical work he did but also a gentleness in his personal dealings.

Even now, as they were between shots he was soothing a weepy Mandy who'd accidentally been tripped by Samuel. Her head spun with the timing, practice, and patience needed for the energetic dance scenes the kids engaged in.

She continued to monitor the schedule, reminding tech of each upcoming scene and where equipment needed to be moved. It was probably the best place for her since she didn't want to deal with the talent as much as observe. Had Josh known that when he assigned her?

"Hey, Josh. Looks like surf's up in Santa Monica this Saturday. You going to be there?" Nick asked.

"You know it. If you think you can stand the cool water, maybe I can teach you a thing or two."

"I think you have it mixed up who's the pro and who's the amateur, amateur."

What looked like cutting remarks between the two guys were only the playful bantering of workers who seemed to respect each other.

He stepped next to her as shooting commenced once more. The kids nailed their dialogue and went smoothly into their dance number. It looked so effortless but she knew many hours had gone into it. Her eyes went to Josh, who was studying the scene, looking for any flaw that would show up on screen.

Soon the cameras were repositioned so the same scene could be shot from a different angle. Josh helped the cameraman move the huge machinery to another point in the room, while answering a question from Jamie.

Glancing down at her clipboard, she saw they were right on schedule. She moved toward the large curtain at the side to be out of the way before “action” was called. Everyone moved to his or her place, waiting.

Before the scene started there was a creaking sound that grew louder and louder. She turned trying to find the source when suddenly her body was knocked hard and she was airborne, falling to the stage with a heavy thud, followed by a loud crash. She couldn’t move, mainly because there was about a hundred and ninety pound weight on top of her.

She blinked and looked into the eyes of Josh, directly above her. “What . . . what happened?” He didn’t speak but continued staring at her.

“Sunny! Are you all right?”

Her father’s worried voice had her glancing over as he hurried to her. “Josh! Get off the girl, let her breathe.” Josh rolled off her and helped her up. “Do you feel faint, honey? Hurt? Dizzy?” Bill’s hands went to stroke her arms, her back, and her head, checking for injuries.

She swallowed hard. “I’m okay, I guess. What crashed?”

“A piece of the set came loose and fell. It was headed straight for you. Good thing our super hero AD Josh was on the job.” Bill slapped his back. “Can’t tell you how grateful I am you’re looking after my little girl. She could have been hurt if that piece had fallen on her.”

Josh glanced at Sunny, then back to Bill. “No problem.” He brushed himself off and retrieved his clipboard to return to work.

So much for the knight in shining armor. Not that she was looking for one, but for Pete’s sake, couldn’t he have said something? Made sure she was okay?

“Sunny,” he called, waiting for her to get back to work.

“I’ll run get you a bottle of water from my dressing room,” Bill said. As she watched him walk away, she thought now that was a knight in shining armor.

Not that she was looking for one.

Several hours later, the cast had been dismissed and she and Josh were in the office going over the next day's schedule.

"Scene five should be first up tomorrow. It's another dance number but this time only the four oldest. Best to get that done since Nick will invariably do something to irritate Laura, and Sammy will brag to Jamie about his latest commercial. After the shot we can separate them with scene seven, which is a group scene."

"You know these kids pretty well, don't you?"

He grinned. "The more I know, the smoother the filming, the easier my job is. It's that simple."

She scribbled the order of scenes on her board.

A knock sounded followed by a dark blonde head appearing around the door. Donovan Baxter. "Hey, Josh. Just wanted to let you know. I have a meeting tomorrow at five at Universal. I'll need to leave at least by four."

Josh made a note of it. "Got it." Donovan nodded, gave Sunny a smile, and started to leave. "Hey, Donovan?"

"Yeah?"

"Good luck, man."

The television star seemed to soften slightly at the comment. "Thanks. I'll keep you posted."

After Donovan left, she raised her eyebrows waiting for an explanation. "I mentioned Donovan's trying to break into the movies. Word is he's up for a part in a new film, *Midnight Chances*."

"Nice of you to encourage him." Josh shrugged, writing something on his calendar. "Listen, I want to thank you for . . . helping me out today."

"It was nothing."

It was silent. That was it? He thought it was nothing? "Well, I certainly think it was a big deal. I mean, my life is very important to me." Her tone was biting.

"I didn't mean—"

“No, no. When you say ‘nothing’ it tells me just what you think of me. Okay, fine, no problem. You don’t have to—”

She was stopped mid-rant by Josh’s finger coming to his lips, his brows furrowed, his attention toward the hall. Faintly, she could hear the sound of tapping coming from a practice room. Josh glanced at his watch. “I thought everyone’d gone home.”

“Me, too.”

After another moment of tapping, Josh said, “Come on.”

They walked softly downstairs to one of the practice rooms and peeked inside. Dylan Van Dyke was there, tap shoes on, concentrating on a dance number.

“Dylan?”

The boy’s head jerked up and he blushed slightly as Josh and Sunny entered the room. “Oh, hi Josh. Sunny.”

“What are you doing here? You should be long gone.”

“I . . . needed more practice. My dad says I was a little slow on the last number today so I’m just brushing up.”

The fifteen-year-old kid had been working since eight that morning and it was approaching seven at night. Sunny was infuriated. How could a father push his son so hard? “Dylan, you weren’t—”

“Sunny,” Josh stopped her. “Why don’t you get Dylan a soda? I’m sure he’s thirsty.”

She didn’t want to leave, but sensing Josh wanted to share a word privately with the boy, she nodded and headed to the vending machines. When she returned, she lingered quietly in the hall, curious as to what was going on. She caught a bit of the quiet conversation going on between the two.

“I know, but he says I have a lot of talent and I’m wasting it if I’m not the best I can be.”

“Well, I suppose only you know if you’re the best you can be. However, neither Stanley nor I saw anything but complete competency from you today. You know we would have said different if we thought

it.” Josh’s voice was low, comforting. “You do have talent, Dylan. Only you can decide what you want to do with it.”

Sunny heard the child sigh heavily. It saddened her for Dylan to feel such a burden at an early age. He should be allowed to be a kid.

“Is he still pressuring you to audition for that musical?”

“Yeah. He says it will help build my resume so once *Castle Clubhouse* is over, I’ll have connections to get on Broadway.”

“Is that what you want?”

It was silent for a long moment. “I don’t know. I like to perform, I really do. But I also like to build things and work with my hands. But Dad would never approve of that.”

She peeked in to see Josh put his arm around the boy’s shoulders. “It’s tough sometimes. You want to please parents but you want to do your own thing. Sometimes you think you’ll never please them. But in the end, you’ve got to live your own life.”

“I guess.”

“For now, you just do your best in *Castle Clubhouse*. Let us worry about your performance and if your dad gets on your back, let me know. I’ll talk to him, ease his mind about things.

“Thanks, Josh.”

“Sure. Now, how about you give your folks a call and have them pick you up. Sunny and I’ve got to close up shop for the day.”

Sunny was still marveling at Josh’s wisdom and kindness when they gathered their files and clipboards to head out for the evening. “You really should be a director.”

“What?”

She stopped and studied him. “You are so good with people. I think if you were a director, you’d get the best performance out of any actor in town.”

“You think so? Somehow I think it might be easier getting a good performance out of these kids than so-called grown-up actors.”

“Maybe.” She took a deep breath and said, “Listen, I’m very good with research. How about I find out what’s going on around town. I could find out if any studio is searching for a director. What do you think?”

He shrugged and started toward the door. “Knock yourself out.”

His response floored her. Not only didn’t he care about a possible promotion, but he’d just brushed aside her intent and her ability to accomplish it.

“You don’t believe me?” She hurried to catch up. “Really, I think you’re wasting yourself on *Castle Clubhouse*. You could be doing bigger things.”

“I happen to like the people I work with here. Besides, I know this town. It’s not as easy as you think to get a good directing gig. But if you want to waste a few hours finding that out for yourself, who am I to deny you that privilege?”

“You could be a little more enthusiastic about the idea?”

“Hooray,” he said, blandly. She couldn’t resist a smirk.

They stood at the large doors to the set as Josh reached behind her to shut down the power, casting the sound stage into total darkness. The glow from the outside lights glimmered through the doors, like moonlight, giving just enough light to linger on his face, only inches from hers. They both froze, as if shocked by their nearness and, even more, the attraction that sizzled between them.

Sunny had been attracted to men before, that wasn’t anything new. But this was like lightning in the midst of a summer storm. His dreamy eyes pinned her with new interest, a deepening awareness and she found she couldn’t catch her breath.

Before she could stop herself, she was leaning into him, he into her. Their lips met tentatively, then firmly. And all thinking ceased for her as she enjoyed the coolness of his lips, the alluring confidence he displayed in kissing her. His hand palmed her face gently, causing her heart to slowly melt.

Long before she wanted, he backed away. His eyes met hers briefly before he turned to the door. "Sorry. Momentary insanity. Guess I'm more tired than I thought."

His words were a slap to her face. Which had just recently been cupped in his hand. Her mind instantly adjusted, cleared. She was back. "No problem. I'll just remember to stay away from you when you're tired, since you do stupid things."

"Since it's dark let me walk you to your car."

"It's not necessary."

"When Stanley's not here, I'm in charge. I don't want to be responsible for anything happening to you while you're on my watch."

"Your watch? You don't think I have brains enough to walk to my car on my own?" All the good feels were gone, replaced by the irritation Josh seemed to have a talent for bringing out of her.

A muscle twitched in his neck as if he were trying to control his growing annoyance. "I think you have plenty of brains, Sunny, but don't be a fool. I can't vouch for the safety of anyone alone at night on the studio lot. There's safety in numbers so just shut up and let me walk with you to your car." Without another word, he stood, eyes glaring, hands on hips, waiting.

Trying not to let on that she was actually pleased that he cared about her safety, she huffed out a breath and walked toward the parking lot. He walked in step with her, neither speaking, which was just as well.

She wanted to relive the kiss they'd shared.



Chapter Four

“OKAY, THANKS FOR THE information.” Sunny hung up the phone and made notes. Josh had been right about the few openings for director. Apparently, each studio already had their favorites and was keeping them busy.

But she wouldn't be daunted. Somewhere was a position perfect for Joshua Butler and his talents. Why was she so interested in finding him a better job? She went through the possible reasons for her mission. She'd like to think it was because he was just that talented and deserved it. Or that her mission in life was to help others.

Could be that she always loved a challenge. When he'd scoffed at her suggestion, it made her only want to dig in her heels and work harder. Her brothers had relied on that weakness in her to make her do a variety of difficult or stupid things when they were kids.

No matter, she'd done all she could do and glancing at her watch, she saw her lunch break was almost over. Josh had been very cool to her today, issuing instructions and leaving her alone to fill them. In fact, he'd been irritable and short with her for the past week. Ever since the kiss.

She walked back to the set. No one was there except one of the older girls, Laura. Sunny watched the girl leaning over a small journal, writing furiously. A moment later, she looked to the ceiling, her gaze a million miles away.

The inquisitive side of Sunny couldn't let this go. Added to the example Josh and her dad set in being interested and helpful to the kids, she decided to approach the girl.

“Laura? What are you doing?”

Obviously embarrassed, she quickly closed her journal and sat straight. “Oh, nothing much. Just . . . writing, you know.”

Sunny sat next to her. “A diary? I used to have one of those. In fact, I still try to write a little each day, about what’s going on in my life, goals for the future.”

“It’s not really a diary. It’s . . . it’s different.”

“Different? Hmm. That sounds important.” The reluctance on the girl’s face had her considering just letting it go and leaving Laura alone.

“I like to write stories.”

She was so pleased that Laura had decided to share, she almost cheered. “Really? That’s great. Tell me about them.”

“It’s not that big a deal. I just like to write about people dealing with problems, falling in love, that kind of thing.”

The girl’s cheeks pinkened and Sunny smiled, wondering what a sixteen-year-old could know about love. Probably more than her, since, other than family love, she’d never experienced the emotion herself.

“I think that’s great. Do you want to write for a living?”

Laura’s eyes lit up. “Oh, I hope so. I mean, I love being on *Castle Clubhouse*. It’s great you know? The people are wonderful.” A sour expression covered her face. “Well, most people, anyway.” Sunny grinned at the obvious reference to her nemesis Nick Varela.

Sunny patted her hand. “Unfortunately, there will always be people that are hard to work with. The trick is to act as if his behavior doesn’t affect you.”

“Won’t that make him just try harder to irritate?”

“Hmm.” Maybe this whole helping teenagers wasn’t as easy as she thought. She’d love to run this question by her psych professor at Harvard. “Or he could get tired of trying.” Laura’s thoughtful look confused her. If she didn’t know it was impossible, she would have thought that in some way Laura wanted Nick to continue his hassling.

Their conversation ceased as others drifted back on to the set. Stanley was admonishing Samuel to throw out his gum. Ashley found a spot

to sit crossed-legged and proceeded to meditate. Jamie walked in discussing something with Josh. Sunny took a breath to slow her racing pulse, willing herself not to react.

Her father appeared, his arm around Nick, both chuckling over something. Her heart warmed at the sight of the most important man in her life. Bill Whittaker was everything to her and watching him with the kids, she knew she wasn't alone in her adoration. Even though Nick Varela enjoyed his attention.

“Did you get the schedule for next week done?”

Her heart rate spiked at the nearness of her own nemesis. “Yes. I emailed it to you for your approval.” Thankfully, her tone was even, official.

“Good.” Josh glanced at his clipboard, making notes. “Dance sequences are next today. Let's get the kids situated.”

This tended to be the hardest part of the week. Even though the kids were extremely talented, dancing in pairs timed perfectly to music, along with lip-synching to previously recorded singing wasn't the easiest thing to do.

They set the pairs on their spots—Samuel and Jamie, Nick and Laura (what were the writers thinking!), Dylan and Ashley, Matthew and Jennifer, and finally Joey B and Mandy.

“All right, let's go through a rehearsal before filming. I want to see happy, friendly faces. Act like you're having the time of your lives.” Stanley narrowed his eyes in scrutiny. “Everyone open your mouth.” Sunny squeezed hers shut to keep from chuckling as the director checked for gum. “Okay. Matt, don't stare at Jennifer.” Jennifer smiled shyly. “Joey B, pretend that you actually want to be here. And for crying out loud, people, smile! Let's run it through.”

While they rehearsed, Sunny found herself watching for any flaws, just as Josh always did. “So, how's the search for my position as director going?”

She turned to see him grinning. Obviously, he thought her search was a joke. “Actually, quite well.”

“Uh-huh.” He didn’t look over but continue studying the kids’ dance.

“I should let you know something soon.”

“Good.” The grin widened.

“You don’t think I can find anything, do you? Well, will you be surprised, mister, when I lay the opportunity of a lifetime in your lap. Sunny Whittaker never shirks from an assignment. No matter how hard.”

He was laughing at her and she hated that. Maybe she should take some of the advice she’d given Laura and act as if his behavior didn’t affect her.

As with so much advice, it was much easier to give than to receive.

Why was it so much fun irritating this woman? Was it because it was too easy? Even now he could feel the waves of frustration coming off her, delighting him. Perhaps it was seeing the fire light up her big amber eyes, or the flush on her heart-shaped face.

Or it could be a protection device to inhibit the attraction between them.

As he watched the kids sing and dance, he remembered last year when he’d met her. She’d come to the studio a couple of times to have lunch with Bill. He’d tried not to think much of her because, well, daughter of the lead actor and student at Harvard. Two very good reasons not to get involved.

But that last time, it was after work and she’d been waiting for her father. Josh had gone onto the set to straighten up and she’d been there, sitting in the middle of the “castle” reading a book. The lights were dim, it was quiet. And she was so lovely. In his imagination she was sitting at a table for two, in a softly lit restaurant, waiting for him with a bottle of champagne. It was an enticing daydream.

She'd glanced up, her eyes a little fuzzy from reading and he could have sworn her eyes had flickered with attraction for an instant. Impossible.

He'd walked to her and the next thing he knew, they were arguing about the effect of television on kids, the double standards and hypocrisy of Hollywood, and the lack of peace in the Middle East. It was insane. They hadn't been able to stay in the room for a minute before being at each other's throats.

He had thought it would be impossible to work with her but amazingly she was coming along.

Until he'd gone and ruined everything by kissing her.

Of all the emotions he felt for Sunny Whittaker, and there were plenty of them—agitation, frustration, amusement, curiosity, insecurity—he never would have believed the one currently warring inside of him. Desire.

Like being swamped by a seven-foot breaker off Oceanside, their kiss had knocked the breath out of him. All week he'd comforted himself with the fact that they'd been in the dark, close, so of course what would a red-blooded American male want to do but kiss the pretty girl next to him. Especially when her eyes had darkened and she'd leaned forward, so, it actually wasn't even his fault.

And he'd quickly rectified the situation and left.

Why was he still thinking about it?

The thing to do was to make sure their relationship stayed professional, not allowing any time for the personal to disrupt. No late nights together, no darkened doorways. No breathing in the scented shampoo she used. No memorizing the shape of her lips or remembering the feel of said lips on his.

"Joey B's shoelaces are loose."

He jolted back to the present to follow her pointed finger. And cursed himself that he was so engrossed in . . . well, her, that he'd failed to be on top of his duties. "Maybe there's hope for you yet. I got it."

The rest of the afternoon of filming was relatively stress free. Well, except when the boys laughed at the yoga positions Ashley attempted between takes. Or when Mandy insisted she had to take a call from her agent, but other than that nothing too serious.

Still, Josh was drained. In his office, he set his clipboard on his desk and stretched. What he needed was a few hours on his surfboard to work out all the tension his body was holding. His dream of an early departure died when Sunny walked in, a scowl on her face, her hands on her hips.

“Can I help you?” he drawled.

“Yes, you can.” She marched to her work area, a small table placed against the wall and a folding chair, and slammed her clipboard down. “You’ve done nothing but pick on me all afternoon. Now I’ll be the first to accept a little constructive criticism.” His brows rose sardonically at that. “But I will not be put down, made fun of, or ignored while I am employed here. Is that clear?”

She wanted an argument? So be it. He straightened to his full height, his stance firm, arms folded in front. “What you don’t seem to remember is that as an employee, you’re low on the totem pole. You don’t get to make the rules. But seeing as how you don’t seem to know them, let me inform you. I am over you. I believe the term is boss. While you are here, you do my bidding. If you can’t handle that maybe you should ask ‘Daddy’ for some other job.”

The flare was back in her eyes. Good. “Seeing as how you don’t seem to know how to be a decent human being, maybe *I* should inform *you*, I’m not speaking of the actual job or even . . . you’re being over me in the structure of the work.” He couldn’t hold back the grin at her phrasing. “What I highly object to is the continued cuts and criticism, something you would never do with the kids.”

“Of course not. They’d have me fired.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “If you’d like a letter of reference, I’d be happy to write one for you. No problem.”

He waited for her blast, telling him she was leaving. Then the tension in the back of his neck would surely evaporate. Instead she cocked her head and seemed to be examining him. It was very disconcerting.

Shaking her head, she narrowed her eyes. "This doesn't make sense. It can't be about the work, I'm doing an excellent job."

He snorted. "You have a highly inflated idea about your abilities."

"I think the word you're looking for is honest. No, this is about something else." She swallowed before continuing. "It's about the kiss, isn't it?"

Josh glanced out into the hall and closed the door. "Why don't you just shout it? You think I want to everyone around here to know that we . . ."

"Kissed," she finished for him.

"Yeah, well, I already apologized." The back of his neck was heating up. He sincerely hoped he wasn't blushing.

"Yes, you did." She continued with the scrutiny.

He shifted between feet. "What?"

"I find your behavior interesting." As if a light had come on in her brain, she added, "Maybe that's why you've been so surly this afternoon. All week, as a matter of fact."

"I haven't been surly. And what kind of word is 'surly'?"

"A perfectly good word meaning bad tempered and unfriendly. Exactly what you've been today. Did that kiss mean more than you're ready to admit?"

Her completely clinical observation had his jaw tightening. He did not want her to continue in her analysis. "That's absurd." *Brilliant comeback, idiot.*

"Hmm. I'm going to have to think about this." She reached into the bottom drawer of a file cabinet, pulling out her purse to leave.

The detached attitude she displayed not only had him envious but also insulted his male ego. "Hold on a minute. You're going to leave without me having a chance to respond to your question?"

“I believe your response was ‘That’s absurd.’ I wasn’t aware that you wanted to add anything to that.”

The smarty-pants college student was back and he wanted to hit something. His body tensed and he paced the small office to hopefully diffuse himself. “You want to talk about that kiss, we’ll talk. We’ll discuss how *you* leaned into me, presenting your lips like a pagan offering from someone who considers herself to be a goddess.”

“A pagan offering? A goddess? Ridiculous. And don’t go blaming me, pal, you were right in there with that kiss as much as I was.” It gratified him that her highbrow language was deserting her in the heat of the moment.

He faced her, arms again crossed. “I already explained it, momentary insanity and exhaustion. What was your excuse?”

“Maybe I felt sorry for you, you ever think of that?” She sure was cute when she was angry.

“So you go around kissing every man you feel sorry for? Honey, that alone would be a fulltime job. Too bad there’s no job description along with a six figure salary to go with it.”

She moved forward, coming toe-to-toe with him. “Anything would be an upgrade to working with you.”

“No one’s stopping you from finding something else.”

“That kiss really scared you, didn’t it?” Her whiskey-colored eyes pinned his.

He started to repeat, “That’s absurd,” but stopped himself in time. “Not in the least, sweetheart. And just to prove it—”

Before she could even gasp, he pulled her to him and kissed her. He expected her to jerk away, slap his face, find her father, and insist he be dismissed immediately.

Instead, her lips softened, she whimpered, and relaxed against him, to his utter annoyance. And exuberance.

Her arms wrapped around his neck, enticing him to take the kiss deeper. Probably unwise, but happening. They stayed locked in the kiss that went from angry to dreamy in less than five seconds.

When she whispered his name, he leaned back and did a bit of studying himself. Her eyes were unfocused, her lips swollen from their kiss. A slight glow dusted her cheeks making her more attractive, if possible. He was in trouble.

Gently, he let her go and stepped back. "Sunny," he murmured and ran a frustrated hand through his hair.

She cleared her throat, seeming to come back to the reality of the moment. "I know, I know. This is crazy. And not something either one of us wants."

With a sigh, Josh sat in his desk chair. "The question is what do we do about it? It can't be very healthy to bicker with each other all day and then find a quiet corner to make out."

"Hmm." The woman was back to her cerebral musings. He didn't know whether to be frustrated or hopeful that she'd come up with a solution.

She began to pace the room, her finger tapping her chin as she walked. "The problem seems to be that we have this . . . strange kind of attraction that causes us to fill with emotions that must be vented in some way."

A lot of words, but he agreed with the sentiment. "Okay, doctor, continue."

"If we find an appropriate release valve to those emotions, there would be no chance of them bottling up inside of us." She stopped. "Makes sense, don't you think?"

"Maybe we can get Ashley to teach us a few of her yoga poses."

She shook her head. "No, I don't think that would deal with the root of the problem, but I think I do have a solution." She walked to stand in front of him. "Since there seems to be a need for us to . . . be close, maybe we should do just that."

“What?” He jumped up from his chair, again putting him close to her. The sudden nearness had them both freezing. They stared at each other, neither seeming to know what to do. Without his brain’s permission, his finger went to lightly trace down her arm and he was gratified to see her shiver.

She glanced at her arm. “See? What is this?” Her eyes went back to his. “I think if we actually spent time together, outside of the work environment, we’d not only get rid of this tension, but also the ridiculous magnetism between us.”

He was trying hard to listen but her nearness was fogging his brain. His hands stroked her arms, lightly going up and down, enjoying the goose bumps appearing on her creamy skin. “You think so?”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? Infatuation always dies down, I say we just give it a little help by actually spending time together.”

His arm went around her waist and pulled her closer. “You’re sure that’s what will happen?”

Her hands went to his chest. “Of course. Josh, think about it. There can’t be anything between us. We’re very different people. I’m going to graduate school later this year and you’re going to be a director. We’ll be in different worlds. Besides, we don’t even like each other. Much.”

The tiny part of his brain that heard her words knew she made sense but that didn’t stop the powerful urge to taste her lips. “So, you’re giving me permission to kiss you?” He gently leaned forward, just a breath away from her lips.

“If that’s what we need to get through this, yes.” She sighed and breeched that last inch between them. “How about tonight?”

“What?” His mind occupied, he kissed her cheek, her forehead, and her neck before returning to her lips.

“Tonight. How about we go get some dinner. Talk.” She followed him, kissing his face, dropping a sigh.

“Can’t. In fact . . .” He glanced at his watch. “I’m late already.” He gave her one last quick kiss. “Gotta go.”

“I think we should assign our . . . togetherness to outside of office hours. Don’t you?”

Josh held the door open for her. “Good idea.” They walked companionably out the building. “I don’t think it would be a good example for the kids to see us anyway.” He grimaced. “Or your father.”

“He likes you, Josh. Why wouldn’t Daddy be pleased that we were seeing each other? Not that we’re seeing each other,” she quickly added. “We’re merely . . . you know, getting rid of the crazy attraction.”

It was such a beautiful sight when the scholar got flustered. Made him just want to give her a big hug. And an even bigger kiss. “Maybe you’re right. Let’s keep this . . . whatever it is just between you and me. No need to get anyone else involved.”

“Agreed.” They stopped at her car and she stuck out her hand to shake.

Blandly he said, “Really? You think we should seal our arrangement with a handshake?” With a grin he stepped forward, cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. He had meant to give her a kiss to haunt her all night but it slowly softened, becoming tender.

Maybe he was the one to be up all night.



Chapter Five

EITHER HE WAS THE SMARTEST man of all time or the stupidest. He wasn't sure. If he were honest with himself, he'd admit that he would have agreed to anything to kiss the woman again.

As he drove to his mother's little home in Venice, he did a little analyzing of his own. In his twenty-nine years of life he'd never been as dumbfounded by a woman. He had to be careful. There was no way on earth that he was going to fall desperately in love with anyone. He'd seen the consequences when that love was lost. He dealt with it every day.

The sight of the gray clapboard home with the bright turquoise door had him smiling. He pulled his Jeep Cherokee into the driveway and walked the stoned path toward the front door. The sun was dropping quickly as he walked under the green arbor filled with budding baby's breath. He knocked once and, using his key, entered. "Mom?"

"You're late. We've got to get going."

He heard the squeak of wheels as the only woman he'd ever loved came from the kitchen. Her smile was bright as she maneuvered her wheelchair toward her son. "Hi, sweetheart. Long day?" She lifted her face to receive his kiss.

"Yeah. Listen, let me just drop off my briefcase and we'll be on our way."

He hurried out the backdoor to the converted garage. His own home. It wasn't ideal—a kitchenette, pullout couch, small bath. Definitely not the image of a successful Hollywood assistant director, but it enabled him to keep an eye on his mother, which was crucial to him.

Back out front, he picked up his mother and gently set her in the front seat of his small SUV. He folded her chair and slid it in the back,

before settling into his seat. The short drive with his mother would hopefully get his mind back to where it belonged.

“What has you so quiet today?”

Or not. “Nothing I really want to discuss. Just work stuff.”

He could feel her eyes searching his face. “Trouble with one of the kids?”

“No. They’re good. Well, relatively speaking.”

“Okay. Then Donovan? Bill? Stanley? One of the tech crew?”

He sighed. “No, Mom. Really, just work.” He did not want to get into a discussion about Sunny with his mother. She still dealt with a lot because of her accident and the last thing he wanted was to burden her with the rocky road of his personal life.

“Okay, then.” He knew she wasn’t satisfied but resigned with his answer. “I think Barbara is going to work out fine as ‘Essie.’ She really nailed her audition last week. I really was concerned since Candace had to drop out of the play.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re doing splendidly as ‘Grandpa.’ I really don’t understand why you didn’t go into acting instead of directing.”

“Because directing let’s me use my organizational skills and tell others what to do.” His mother chuckled. “Acting is a hobby, not something I’d like to invest my life doing.”

“Well, okay. But I think the world is missing out on seeing what a great talent you are.”

“All they have to do is to come to the Jefferson Playhouse in Santa Monica and they’ll be dazzled by my performance in *You Can’t Take it With You*. That reminds me, did the flyer information get to the printer?”

“Constance took it over yesterday.” She sighed. “The girl is a real talent. She’ll make a great ‘Penelope Sycamore.’” Her brows rose. “Pretty, too. Single. Why don’t you ask her to coffee sometime? You two have so much in common.”

“Like what? She’s a schoolteacher who likes to quilt and read. Besides, she has a thing for Thom.”

His mother cocked her head. “Thom? ‘Paul Sycamore’ in the play, that Thom? Why would you think that?”

“Because last week she told me, ‘I have a thing for Thom.’”

“Oh.” She blew out a breath. “Pity. Such a nice girl. Perfect for you.”

“I didn’t know you were trying to set me up with a female. What, you tired of my company?”

“Of course not. Well, not exactly. I just hate to see you live your life alone. You need someone.” Her voice lowered. “I’m not going to be around forever. You won’t have to take care of me.”

The guilt in her voice softened his heart. He reached over and took her hand, kissing it. “Did it ever occur to you that I might like taking care of you?”

Her eyes welled and he was afraid she’d start crying. He wondered if Sunny ever cried. She seemed a strong woman, hardy against sudden onset of tears.

She sniffed. “You are a good son. And I love you with all my heart.”

“That’s all I ask.”

Chuckling, she said, “I wish that one day you’d find your heart’s desire, Joshua. I pray that she’s the perfect match for you—tender and caring, yet strong, ready to join you for the adventure of life. I hope you have what your father and I had.”

He choked up at the mention of his father. Sometimes he forgot that his mother still grieved for the man. Since he couldn’t speak, he nodded.

They pulled next to the small theatre in Santa Monica and Josh helped his mother into her wheelchair and into the building. Everyone, excited about the show, greeted them.

“Good to see you, Margaret. Looking good.” Calvin, the young man playing the part of Ed Carmichael winked, making Josh’s mother giggle.

This was so good for her. Years ago when his father, a semi-successful actor succumbed to lung disease, he'd wondered how his mother would go on. He had been her life. Then the horrible accident, her confinement to the wheelchair. It hadn't been fair to see such a lovely, vital woman as Margaret Butler wither away. With a lot of sweat, tears, and good ole hard work they'd founded a theatre company in Santa Monica, dedicated to the memory of the father and husband they'd lost.

His mother still had her struggles, but the theatre gave her a goal, a reason to get out of bed in the morning. She was clearly a talented director and organizer. Probably where he'd gotten those bents himself. And he'd admit, he loved performing with the group of talented actors. These were real life people—clerks, cooks, teachers, construction workers—not ego-dominated adult children that were paid insanely large amounts of money to act. These friends were acting just for the sheer pleasure of the craft, looking for no payout. Which was a good thing, since all proceeds from their performances went to pay for expenses.

They took their places for work on a difficult scene. Josh emptied his mind of everything except his role—an eccentric, yet happy old man who delights in the antics of his family.

For the next three hours, he lost himself in the joy of acting. And if occasionally his mind drifted to a blonde, full of fire and energy, yet kissed like a dream, he filed it under the category of Grandpa thinking of a romance from long ago.

When rehearsal ended, several wanted to go to the nearest coffee shop for a cup and slice of pie. Josh was worn out and wanted nothing more than bed. Well, his pullout sofa. But the look of excitement in his mother's eyes meant more to him than a little shut-eye.

"How's the world of television?" Carter Newberry, "Mr. De Pinna" in the cast, asked.

"Same as always. Singing, dancing, everyone learns their lesson before the show's over."

Carter chuckled. "Too bad that's not real life."

His wife Marsha, in charge of wardrobe, joined in. "I personally think the world would be a much better place if everyone sang and danced and learned their lesson."

"That was my Jefferson's philosophy of life. He lived and loved every moment he was alive." Josh put his arm around his mother. "Don't know how Josh came to be so serious."

Maybe it was because he'd had to grow up fast when his father died. Maybe it was because he loved his mother and wanted to make sure she was cared for. Wisely, he stayed quiet.

"You look tired, Josh," Marsha noted.

"Yeah, why don't they hire more people to help you out," Carter added. "Surely they can afford an extra employee or two."

"Actually, I do have someone working with me and she's helping out a great deal." He wished he could have pulled the words back. Why did he say that? Now he was going to be grilled about his "assistant," especially since he'd mentioned the assistant was a "she."

As if on cue, his mother's eyes widened. "She?" Josh mentally cringed at her tone. "I hadn't heard this. Does 'she' have a name?"

Everyone stared at him, waiting. For some reason he could feel his face heating. "Of course she has a name. It's Sunny. Sunny Whittaker. She's Bill Whittaker's daughter."

"What a nice name. Sunny," Margaret said slowly, as if savoring it on her lips. "Why don't you bring her over for dinner one night?"

Okay, here was the dilemma. How could he bring Sunny over to meet his mother when their relationship, if you could call it that, was purely for the moment, going nowhere. And anyway, to the world they were just co-workers. If he introduced her to his mother, the cunning eyes of Margaret Butler would surely see his interest. Not going to happen.

"She's only here for a few months, Mom. We're so busy now I don't know if there will be time."

“Oh, that’s a shame.” Josh took a deep sip of coffee to prevent his mother from studying his face too hard. Before she imagined something there.

“If I were you, I’d make sure they had someone lined up to take her place.” Josh could have hugged Carter for getting the attention off of his “she.”

Come to think of it, he couldn’t wait to see his “she” the next morning.



Chapter Six

IT WAS CRAZY ON SET the next day. As if someone had spiked the water, the kids were restless and uncooperative. Stanley was pulling out what little hair he had left. The stage mothers and fathers were out in full force, demanding on behalf of their little stars. Sunny couldn't understand it.

They were behind, causing Josh to instruct her multiple times to adjust the schedule. Creating conflicts with the tech crew.

Just before lunch, during another break, Bill approached the both of them. "Any idea what's set them off?" Josh asked.

"Could be the teen magazine that hit the stands last night. There were several articles on our little group. One in particular wasn't too pleasant. It actually ranked the kids on different levels. Talent, likeability, future success, vices. No one likes the results."

Josh murmured a curse. "That's brutal." He glanced over at the ten young people, Sunny's eyes following his. She could see the strain in the kids she hadn't been able to pinpoint earlier. "And explains a lot," Josh added.

"That's not right. For goodness sakes, they're just kids. They shouldn't have to be scrutinized for everything they do."

"Preaching to the choir, babe."

"It is a shame." Bill's eyes went to the children he loved. "It's a life that, whether or not they chose, is theirs. It can either make them stronger, better people, or I'm afraid it can break them."

"What can we do?" Sunny asked.

Bill smiled warmly. "Be understanding. Listen. Give them a safe place to vent. They're not stupid. If we're good examples to them, I believe they'll seek our wisdom and advice." He frowned before he said,

“Excuse me,” and walked away. They watched Bill approach a weepy Mandy and put his arm around her.

“Your dad . . . he’s really something special, isn’t he?”

Sunny couldn’t respond. All her attention was focused on Bill as he comforted the young girl. Again she was reminded how blessed she was to call him father. He challenged her to be the very best she could be. To honor him. “Yes. He’s the very best.”

Stanley appeared, clapping his hands loudly. “All right people, let’s see if we can get at least one good take today. Places.”

When lunch was called, Sunny glanced at her notes to see that they actually were catching up. She had to give credit to the cast. Bill had given the kids a quick pep talk, not mentioning the magazine, but reminding them of their talent and responsibility to all the viewers. The warmth and love of his voice must have gotten through and the following takes were magic.

“Hey, everyone, don’t go far,” Josh called out and grinned. “How about a pizza party for lunch?” His question was followed by deliverymen bringing in two dozen pizza boxes and liters of soda and sparkling water. The kids cheered.

Sunny walked next to him. “What’s this? When did you . . .” Her eyes went to his and he winked at her. She swallowed hard, uncomfortable with what she was feeling for the generous man. Clearing her throat, she said, “I’ll get napkins.”

In the breakroom, she found Ashley sitting in lotus position on the floor, her eyes closed, her chest rising and lowering with deep breaths. Sunny walked softly to her. “Um, Ashley? Are you hungry, honey? Don’t you want some pizza?”

“What?” Her eyes fluttered open, unfocused for a moment before she found Sunny. “I was just relaxing. The vibes have been so wonky this morning.”

“That’s true.” Sunny walked to a cabinet to pull out a package of paper napkins. “How’re holding up today?”

The girl joined her, pulling out paper plates. “Okay. I guess you know about that magazine articles on us.” Sunny nodded. Ashley took another deep breath. “I mostly ignore the articles but sometimes it’s hard. Especially for some of us.”

“I’m sure it is. I don’t envy you.” They turned, heading toward the set.

“Neither do I sometimes. But my mom tells me it comes with the territory.” She huffed. “I don’t care that they call me nature girl or spacey. I do hate when they say I’m stupid. I’m not, I just like to think things through. Especially before I speak. It’s a lot easier than trying to take something back.”

They stopped at the table the crew had set up. Sunny put her things down and wrapped an arm around Ashley’s shoulder. “You are wise beyond your years, sweetheart. I’m glad I know you.”

As if she’d been given a precious gift, Ashley’s face lit up. Sunny’s throat tightened. She wondered if the girl got the encouragement she needed to thrive. Or survive. She wrapped her arms around her and hugged tightly.

Before the moment got too sappy, she said, “How about a slice of pizza. I’ll bet Josh ordered several veggie specials.”

Josh enjoyed the quietness of the set once the cast and crew had left for the day. He and Sunny were revising the schedule and going over final notes. “Unbelievable that we’re only one scene behind after today. Let’s knock it out first thing in the morning, when the kids are fresh.”

“I’m not surprised. Only impressed.” She smiled at him. “With my dad’s little talk and your pizza, those kids were ready to give their best. I was inspired by them. And you.”

He couldn’t stop the warm feeling coursing through his veins, but shrugged as if it were nothing. “It’s what we do around here. Whatever we need to do to get a quality product.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s more than that. You care about those kids, don’t try to deny it.”

“They grow on you.” He closed his case and sighed. “And now, that we have endured yet another day of corralling ten super-talented and irrepressible youngsters, I think we deserve a break.”

“Oh, you do, do you?”

“Wait right here.” He disappeared for a moment and returned with two cans of soda. Sunny giggled.

“You really know how to treat a girl. Thanks,” she said catching the tossed can.

“I’m talented that way.” He pulled the tab and took a deep sip. “Man, some days I don’t think they could pay me enough to do this.” He leaned back and propped his feet on his desk.

She slid down in her folded chair and imitated his pose. “Are you about ready to embrace my hunt for the perfect director job?”

With a snicker, he said, “Almost. I told you already, you’re free to look all you want.”

“Which I am doing.” She took a sip, her eyes staying on his.

“Let’s change the subject to you. Have you thought more about grad school? By the way, what are you doing to study?” Not only didn’t he want to talk about himself, he was really interested in her ideas of her future.

“What do you think? Psychology.” She smiled taking another sip.

He chuckled and shook his head. “Should have seen that coming. It’s a perfect fit. I feel sorry for the man you marry, though, always getting analyzed.” He drank deeply, hiding a grin.

“Says you. I predict that I will be perfectly able to leave my work at the office. No home examinations.”

“I hope that’s true for you. Anyway, Sunny Whittaker, I think psychology will be perfect for you.” He saluted her with his soda can and took a sip. “So where does a brilliant scholar go to learn all there is to know about psychology?”

“There are many excellent schools but I think I’ve narrowed it down a bit.”

He hesitated about wanting to know where she'd be attending. Not because he didn't want to hear she was heading across the country or to a foreign country but he didn't want to delve too personal.

Still, he couldn't help asking another question. "So, how long am I going to have to put up with you until you leave for school?"

"Probably to the end of the season. Sorry." Her cheery smile indicated she was anything but.

He was equally not sorry but contained his pleasure. "I guess there are tougher ways to spend a day than looking at your plain ole mug." He grinned.

"Ditto." She ran her finger around the top of her soda can, the edges of her lips lifted. "So, you got any plans tonight?"

Josh took his time answering, instead enjoying a moment to gaze at her "plain ole mug." It was anything but that. Her bright eyes were glowing with interest and her lips were curved, tempting him to touch. Did he have plans? His mind was filled with only her as he continued to stare.

"Your phone's ringing."

"Huh?" Her grin widened just before he realized the phone on his desk was buzzing. He blinked and reached for it. "Yeah?"

"Honey, just wanted you to remember, you're suppose to bring snacks for rehearsal tonight. And don't forget, Carter can't have nuts and Betty's trying to lose weight."

His mind snapped back to his real life—he had obligations and even a pretty face wasn't going to keep him from them. "Sure, Mom. I got it." He'd have to hurry and run by a grocery store before rehearsal.

"Oh, and that nice man doing the sets, Roger Banning, is taking me tonight so you don't have to rush to get me there."

This was new. He knew Roger from his freelance work around the studio. The older man was quiet and considerate, always reliable. But still, this was his mother. "You sure? It's no trouble to swing by the house and pick you up."

“Nonsense. You don’t have to cater to your old mother all the time. Roger offered and I accepted.” Had he and his mother struck up a friendship? Where had he been when all this was going on? He’d absolutely have to keep his eye on this.

“Okay, if you’re sure. I’ll be at the theatre by seven-thirty. You need me for anything, call. You hear?”

Her light chuckle eased his mind. A bit. “Of course, sweetheart. See you later.”

He clicked off the phone and frowned at it, sighing.

“Bad news?”

His eyes shot up. He’d forgotten Sunny was in the room, hearing at least his side of the conversation. “No. Not really.” He took a deep sip of his drink.

“Well, my curiosity is certainly piqued. So much about that phone call intrigues me.” She leaned over, her elbow resting on his desk. “Why don’t you have to pick up your mother? What theatre are you going to by seven-thirty? And does that mean you aren’t available tonight?”

He didn’t answer but took another sip, not sure what to say. Her eyes told him she was genuinely interested. He shrugged. “That was my mother.”

“I gathered that.”

“We . . . have rehearsals tonight in Santa Monica. I’m in charge of snacks. Good thing she called since with the craziness of today I’d totally forgotten.”

Her brow crinkled. “Wait, rehearsals? Are you directing a play or something?”

He pulled on his collar at the sudden heat. Why was he embarrassed about this? “No. Actually, our theatre company is putting on *You Can’t Take it With You*. My mother is directing. I’m playing the part of Martin Vanderhof, Grandpa.”

She waited a beat before speaking. “You just keep surprising me, Joshua Butler. You’re acting in a play in Santa Monica? That’s great. I didn’t know you wanted to be an actor.”

“I don’t. Not really. I enjoy directing much better.” When she waited for more of the story, he accommodated her. “You see, my father was an actor. Not A-list but he made a good living. He died just after I graduated from high school. So, in his memory, Mom and I opened a community theatre group.” He smiled. “It keeps her busy. And happy.”

She appeared to be studying him as if she hadn’t seen him before, making him nervous. “But I do have rehearsals tonight so I—”

“Can I go?”

He took a moment to swallow his surprise. “You want to go to our rehearsal? No, really, it’s not that interesting. A lot of standing around, waiting for cues, blocking, that sort of thing.”

“You mean just like here?”

“Sort of.” He dragged out the words, trying to think of a way to dissuade her. “It’s not that big of a deal, really.”

“Great, then there’s no problem with my going.” She stood and finishing her soda, tossed it into the trash. “Give me the address and I’ll meet you there.”

“Are you sure? You’ve been working all day. Don’t you want to relax for the evening?” He stood, not sure if it was a good thing for her to attend rehearsal.

Her eyes suddenly darkened as she walked to him. Her fingers went to toy with the buttons of his shirt. “You know that release valve we talked about? Why don’t I meet you at your rehearsal, watch you work, then we could get a late supper?” She finished her question with a soft kiss on his lips.

The light touch had him yearning to spend the evening with only her. His arms automatically came around her as he took the kiss deeper. “Are you sure?”

“Josh. I want to spend some time with you. If attending a rehearsal is what will get me there, it’s fine.” Her hands played with the edges of his hair, feeling so good he wanted to moan.

“All right.” He backed up. “But first, a few things I have to tell you. The players are very . . . normal. Just everyday men and women who enjoy being on the stage. They might be a little overwhelmed when they find out you’re Bill Whittaker’s daughter. They’re big fans of his.”

“That’s sweet. Anything else?”

“My mother.” He hesitated.

Cocking her head, Sunny asked, “Something wrong with your mother?”

“She’s in a wheelchair.” He saw the concern fill her eyes. “A couple of years after Dad died, she was in a car accident and lost the use of her legs. She gets around pretty good and her attitude is great, but I didn’t want you to be surprised when you saw her.”

She took his face in her palm and kissed his cheek. “You are a thoughtful person to let me know. I’m sure she’s a wonderful woman.”

And the warm feelings returned. Being around Sunny was getting to be a habit, one that he liked. A lot. He’d just have to keep reminding himself that she was only here for a short time. Then his life would return to normal—work, surfing, mother.

But he’d miss Sunny Whittaker.



Chapter Seven

THE THEATRE WAS SMALL, homey was the word she thought of as she stood before the Jefferson Playhouse of Santa Monica. Josh had to make a stop by the grocery store so she'd beaten him to the theatre.

"Can I help you?"

Turning, she saw a red-haired, freckle-faced man about her age staring at her. "Oh, I'm just, ah—"

"Auditions are over. In fact, we're already having rehearsals. I can ask Margaret if she has something you can do, if you want. I'm Calvin. I'm playing the part of Ed."

"Hello," she said, smiling. "Actually I'm waiting for Joshua Butler. I'm Sunny Whittaker."

"Oh, he should be here soon. He'd never shake off a rehearsal." He grinned and added, "Especially if a lovely woman was waiting for him. You his girlfriend?"

To be honest she wasn't exactly sure what she was to him. And why did that bother her? "Actually, we're . . . friends. Work associates. He told me about your play and I wanted to come out and watch a rehearsal."

"Excellent. Always like an audience to play for." He opened the door and gestured her in.

She gave one last look around to see if Josh had arrived and not seeing him, went into the theatre.

There was a small group standing in front of the stage, a woman in a wheelchair speaking, clearly giving instructions. Even though she sat in a wheelchair, Sunny could see excitement and energy bursting from her. The woman was definitely in her element.

Calvin led her down the aisle, waving to the others. “Hey. We’ve got an audience tonight,” he said, gesturing toward Sunny.

Everyone turned to face her and suddenly she was uncomfortable.

“This is Sunny Whittaker, Josh’s girlfriend.”

No! Why did he say that? Before anyone could speak, she said, “Actually I’m his friend. Work associate.”

“Well, so nice to have you here tonight.” The woman in the wheelchair came forward. “I’m Margaret Butler, Josh’s mother.” She held out her hand, which Sunny took in hers.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Butler. I was so excited to hear about your theatre group that I insisted Josh tell me where and when so I could get a look.”

She didn’t miss the way Margaret’s eyes observed her. Probably a “Parent Thing.” Anyone around her son would need to be vetted. She understood.

“We’re glad to have you, Sunny. Josh told us you had come to help him on the show.”

“He spoke of me, really?” She wasn’t sure if she was shocked or more uncomfortable.

“He did and I’m so glad he’s getting extra help. He works too hard. By the way, where is my son?”

“Oh, he had to stop by the grocery store. He’ll be along.”

“So, you’re Bill Whittaker’s kid?” said a fortyish man with thinning black hair.

He’d told them about her? Interesting. “Um, yes. Bill Whittaker is my father.”

That started the whole group smiling, chatting, telling her how much they loved her father.

“He’s the nicest man on television.”

“Always gives good advice to them children.”

“It must have been great growing up with Bill Whittaker as your father.” After that comment, everyone quieted to hear her response.

She knew she'd grown up sheltered, in a very functional family where her parents loved each other and the children were loved and cared for. Even with her father in show business, his moral compass was never at question. She'd be more thankful for that from now on.

"Yes. It was great. I've been very blessed with a great father and mother."

"And an exceptional boss."

Everyone turned to see Josh walking down the aisle, two bags in his hands. Thank goodness he was here.

"Whatcha got there?" the man with black hair asked.

Josh held up the bags. "Two containers of fresh fruit. No nuts. Low fat." He smiled at the group. His eyes found Sunny's. "You beat me here."

"Yes." Why was she breathless? "I haven't been here long."

"Okay. Let me introduce you." He proceeded to do that, his hand on her back. She struggled not to shiver.

For the next two hours, she was blown away by the rehearsal and especially Josh's performance. He was amazing! Why was he hiding behind a camera when he'd be wonderful as a lead actor? His performance of the patriarch's monologue in which he explained his ideals had her giggling. His kindness with the other actors in assisting and encouraging made her fall a little harder for him.

The love and admiration he showed his mother made her respect him more.

When rehearsal was finally over and everyone had left, he came to her. "I know it's late but you up for a little supper?"

"Love to. Anything nearby?"

"There's a diner. It's not much to look at but the food is good."

"Sounds wonderful." Smiling, she wrapped her arm around his. He took her to his vehicle and opened the door for her. "Thank you."

They drove the short distance and settled into a booth in the small diner. Even though the lighting was bright and harsh, it felt like a warm, intimate restaurant to her. Because she was with him.

She smiled and he reached over and took her hand. “This really wasn’t the first date I had planned.”

“Oh? What did you plan?”

His thumb rubbed over her knuckles causing her body to warm. “I thought I’d take you to a nice restaurant. One on the ocean, followed by a stroll on the beach. We’d gaze at the moon just before I took you in my arms and kissed you. Making your toes curl.”

They already were.

“You sound pretty sure of yourself.” She cocked her head. “I like that.”

He chuckled and brought her hand to his lips. “So, what did you think of our little group?”

“It was wonderful. The people were so nice. And I love your mother. I noticed she had her own ride home.”

Josh frowned. “Yeah. Roger Banning. He’s done some work for us on *Castle Clubhouse*, set building. I mentioned the playhouse. Didn’t think he’d make a move on my mother.”

His distress almost made her laugh out loud. It was cute he was so concerned. “I’m sure your mother can take care of herself. Besides, I talked with the man. He seemed very nice.”

“Maybe. But I’m keeping my eye on him, just the same.” She couldn’t stop a chuckle and tried to cover it with a cough.

Changing the subject, she said, “I never knew you were such a good actor. You know, you’re wasting your talents. You should be on the stage, on Broadway. Why you—”

“Stop right there.” He held up his hand, his expression serious. “I have absolutely no interest in being a professional actor. None whatsoever.” His brow rose. “And knowing you, let me make it clear that I will not attend any auditions or meetings that you decide to set up in my

behalf. I don't mind you playing around with advancing my directorial career but I'm holding fast on this."

She blew out a breath. "All right. I hear you." She frowned. "What do you mean my playing around? Don't you think I can get results?"

Their conversation was paused as a waitress brought them waters and asked for their order. She could see him formulating his answer to her question.

When the waitress left, he said, "I have no doubt you can do anything you set your mind to do." He stopped and took a sip of water. "I'm not sure why you're so set on advancing my career."

He didn't know? Although she'd fussed and irritated him, especially when she'd started working on the set, deep down, she really liked him and wanted the best for him. And she couldn't forget the attraction they shared. Always had, if she were honest. She remembered last year when he'd come upon her while she waited for her father. She'd never forget the giddy feeling she'd felt when he looked at her.

Slowly, she leaned over and kissed him gently. "Because I believe in you. You dope."

Chuckling, he kissed her again, his eyes sparkling. "Good to know."

She settled back, liking the quiet, relaxed atmosphere between them. She might even get a giant chocolate chip cookie to enjoy.

"So, tell me how's the college search going?"

"Good." She didn't want to think about leaving. "I've submitted applications to about a dozen really good schools. I'm just waiting to hear back now."

"I'm sure you'll get your top choice." He cleared his throat. "What is your top choice by the way?"

"The best masters program in psychology is at Stanford University. After that I'm looking at Princeton."

"Wow. Northern California or East Coast."

"Yeah." Her voice was low. "If I want to go into psychology. Which I do." It seemed important to her in this relaxed atmosphere to share a

little of her life with him. “When my older brother died, we . . . needed help in coping. A grief counselor got us through. I don’t know what we would have done with our pain.”

“I didn’t know your family before that happened. It must have been hard.”

She smiled slightly. “Probably as hard as when your father died. How did you and your mother handle it?”

His expression changed, his brows furrowed, his jaw tight. “Not very well. For a long time we just clung to each other. Tried to get through each day. I was trying to go to college and work but felt guilty for leaving Mom. She insisted that she was doing okay.

“One day, I had to stay late at school and apparently . . . she was having more trouble dealing than I thought. She took the car and sped down the Pacific Coast Highway. It was raining and she hydroplaned and crashed into a telephone pole.” He took a deep breath, obviously trying to calm himself.

She didn’t hesitate but got in the other side of the booth and wrapped her arms around him, his arm coming around her. “I suppose we could have used a grief counselor.”

Her head tilted so their eyes met. “That’s why I want to be a psychologist. I want to help people. There’s so much pain and sadness in the world. I want to do what I can to lessen it.”

His eyes twinkled at her and she was glad to see the sorrow gone. “You are an amazing woman, Sunny Whittaker. I can definitely tell you are your father’s child.”

“What do you mean?”

“Bill. He’s amazing on set. He takes those children, even Donovan, under his wings and does all he can to soothe and gently lead. It may seem all corny, what they do with lessons on the show. But when the camera’s off, we all know that Big Bill is as genuine as it gets. He’s there. For every one of us.”

Tears formed in her eyes at the description of her father. “Thanks for that. I’m not around him as much anymore so it’s nice to know he’s so revered.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “He is. It’s a real bonus for me to be working with him. I’ve learned a lot about the industry but more important about being a decent person.”

The waitress appeared with their orders a little confused as to the change in seating. “You can set her plate here,” Josh said. The waitress smiled and winked at him.

Sunny didn’t mind the change at all.

After eating and more talking, he drove her back to the theatre. He turned off his engine and stretched his hand over the back of her chair. “Well, this may not have been my standard date but I have to say I enjoyed it a great deal.”

She leaned her head back against his arm. “So did I. I like everyone in your theatre group. I really like your mother but I especially like the star of the play.”

“Oh, you do, huh?” He grinned, massaging her shoulder.

“Mmm. He was so talented. And would you believe he even bought me dinner. What a guy.”

“He has the good sense to know a quality woman when he sees her.” He slowly moved closer, his eyes on her lips.

“Thank you for sharing this with me, Josh. I’m going to buy front row tickets for me and my parents. They’ll love it.”

“Sunny?”

His lips a breath away from hers, he said, “Could we stop talking about parents for the evening?”

“I think so.” She smiled and breeched that last inch to kiss this amazing man. They sat in the parked car, kissing like teenagers for what seemed like hours. She didn’t want the night to end but soon he whispered, “As much as I hate to say it, we do have work tomorrow.”

She kissed him lightly. “Yeah. And my boss is a real slave driver.”

Pulling back he raised his brows. “You’ll concede that I’m your boss?”

“In theory. I believe it strokes your ego and in consequence helps things run at a better—”

He kissed her, bringing her closer. “A simple yes will do.”

She giggled and, giving him one more kiss, opened the door. “See you tomorrow. Boss.”

As she drove home, her mind was filled with Josh. She wasn’t sure exactly what she’d expected when she started work at the studio. A part of her had wondered if there would still be that spark between the two of them. And now that she knew, she wondered how she’d leave.

Or if she even wanted to.

Josh needed this—a whole day at the beach riding the waves. Thank God the surf was awesome this Saturday. In his wetsuit, he paddled back out from Santa Monica in search of the perfect wave.

“Woo! Man, did you see the last wave I caught?” Nick said as he and Samuel paddled next to him.

He smiled. It wasn’t his first choice to spend time with a couple of teenagers when surfing. Typically it was his veg time to clear his mind of every bit of stress he held. But he’d have to admit, the guys were fun. And not bad at keeping up with him.

“Sammy, I thought you were going to do a header on that last swell. You held it together good. Nice job.”

“Thanks. Nick dared me to hang five. Last time I listen to him.” Samuel splashed water at the other teenager.

“Hey, you don’t have to listen to me. You don’t have to be as awesome a surfer as I am.”

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.”

The boys began splashing each other so Josh paddled out away from them to catch the next wave.

It was a pleasurable morning and come noon, he was ready for a break. Sitting on the beach he laid down, his hands behind his head, enjoying the combination of salty air and bright sun. The sounds of the waves crashing, kids squealing, seagulls calling. He breathed deeply, glad he had this time to decompress after a hard workweek. And think about her.

He really didn't want to. They had a nice situation, seeing each other outside of work, knowing it was only for a season. They'd gone to a movie last night, holding hands over their popcorn like a couple of kids. It was nice.

But he couldn't let that overtake his life. Not when they were going in different directions in their lives. He had to make sure she didn't become too important to him.

The sound of two bodies plopping down next to him had him sighing. So much for a quiet moment.

"Great morning, right Josh?" Samuel said.

"Mmm. The best." He wasn't ready to open his eyes and destroy his peaceful moment.

It was quiet for a moment. A wonderful moment, until Nick said, "So, tell us what's going on with that smokin' babe."

He lifted one eyelid to stare at Nick. "What 'smokin' babe' are you referring to?"

"Big Bill's daughter." Nick turned to Samuel. "I think she just feels sorry for Josh. It's obvious she wants my body." Samuel chuckled.

Fully engaged now, Josh sat up, eyes opened. "Have a little respect, okay. She's not some toy merely put on this earth to bring you pleasure."

"Okay."

"She's an intelligent woman with a good heart. I know you may think of women as playthings at the moment but believe me when you grow up, you realize the importance of being with a quality woman."

"Wow," Samuel muttered. "You must really like her."

Josh wanted to scream. How did Bill talk to these two? “It doesn’t matter how I feel about her, that’s not the issue.” He sighed. “Girls, women should be treated with respect. You know that, don’t you?”

They looked at each other. “I respect my mom,” Samuel said.

“Yeah, I respect my mom.”

“Great. That’s a start. Now treat other girls like you would your mother.” Both boys expression showed their confusion.

“You want us to date our mothers?”

“No. I . . .” What would Bill say in this situation. “Be kind to girls. Don’t treat them in any way you wouldn’t want someone to treat your mothers. Just . . . think before you act. That’s all I’m saying.”

He stood and grabbed his things, hoping he’d said the right things. Boy, trying to help these guys was hard. His respect for Bill grew. “See you guys Monday.”

He didn’t hear Nick reply as he walked away, “Wow. He’s totally gone over the babe.”



Chapter Eight

SUNNY THOUGHT IT WAS nice spending a Saturday evening at a fancy restaurant with her parents. The older she got the less time she was able to spend with these special people so she cherished tonight.

Her father had ordered in French for them and now they were dining on an exquisite meal of . . . well, she didn't quite know what it was, but it was yummy. Usually the Whittaker mealtime rule was no shoptalk so she was surprised when her mother asked, "How are things at work, dear? Your father giving you a hard time?"

"Now Rosie, you know better than that. I only embarrass her twice a day." He winked at his daughter. "Actually, it's been nice having my little girl there. Makes me eager to go to work in the morning."

"Daddy." Sunny shook her head, taking another bite of . . . She probably should ask what exactly she was eating. On second thought, maybe not.

"As much as your dad loves those that he works with, I know he's telling the truth. It's so nice to have you near us. Especially as we know you'll be off earning your master's degree soon. Too soon."

Sunny studied her mother. "The Lovely Rose," as he father liked to call her. She was a sweet woman that had always been the anchor for their family. No matter where they lived, whatever problems they faced, Rose Whittaker was a rock. She'd always admired her.

"I'm enjoying it too, Mom." She set her plate away from her, full of whatever she'd been eating. Folding her hands on her lap, she said, "I've loved seeing Dad at work. He's pretty talented."

His eyebrows rose. "Really? High praise."

"And totally true. In fact, the whole cast and crew are incredibly talented."

Rose cleared her throat as she cut into her meat. "How has it been working with Josh?"

She wrinkled her brow thinking how to answer. "Actually, it's been wonderful. After the first week, anyway. Since then, he's been patient, considerate, and . . . nice." Both parents were busy with their food. In the silence she added, "He's in a play in Santa Monica. His mother, who I got to meet a few nights ago, is the director. She's awesome. As is Josh. I had no idea he was so talented."

"Hmm. How did you hear about this play? Josh hasn't said anything at work."

How to answer. "Oh, we were just talking and his mother called and . . ." She could feel her face flaming. She couldn't lie, or even omit the truth from her parents. She never could. "That's not actually the truth." Her parents set down their utensils to give her their undivided attention. Great.

"Josh and I . . . have gone out a couple of times. We had dinner after his play rehearsal and saw a movie last night." At the excited looks on their faces, she said, "Oh, no. Don't get your hopes up. We're just friends. And remember I'm only here until I start grad school."

"Of course, sweetheart." Bill took a sip of his water. "We know you two couldn't be anything more than friends. Which I am happy you are." He chuckled. "I remember when you two met and neither liked the other. It was a gamble to bring you on, knowing you two might not mesh. But just because you work well together, and you've shared a few evenings together, we don't in the least think you'd make a stable couple."

She frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

His expression innocent, Bill said, "No offense. It's just that you are so analytical, probing, a type A personality. Now, Josh is the opposite. He's laid back. A surfer."

"Well maybe opposites attract." She wasn't sure why she was determined to argue the point with her father.

“Yes, but some things are just too big to overcome. What would the two of you do if you wanted to be a counselor in Anchorage, Alaska? Do you think he’d just leave his beloved beach and follow you?”

“If he loved me.”

“Maybe. But would that be fair to him?”

She paused in her thinking. “Well, Mom moved everywhere you wanted to go.”

“Because she wanted to. Plus the fact that we agreed together she would take care of you and your brothers while I worked. We both got what we wanted.”

“And how do you know that Josh and I couldn’t do the same?”

Bill leaned back in his chair, looking at the ceiling. “I can’t see it.” As if the discussion didn’t really concern him, he went back to his meal. “Of course, I’ve been known to be wrong. Once in a blue moon.” Rose chuckled and he winked at her.

But Sunny wasn’t listening. Could they make it work between them? Hypothetically, that is. It was a perfect psychological question. Could two very different people make a marriage work? They were different, that was absolutely true, but weren’t they mature enough to get along? They’d proved that at work, hadn’t they? And why did it matter to her?

Her heart clenched in that moment because she realized why it was important. Because she was falling for the guy. As crazy as it seemed, the man that had once irritated her had somehow wormed his way into her heart.

The realization was too much for her. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to, ah, powder my nose.”

“Certainly, dear.”

She wiped her mouth, stood, and mechanically walked away from the table, hoping a splash of cold water on her face would bring her back to reality. Hers and Josh’s.

When she was away from the table, Rose grinned. “That really wasn’t very nice of you, Bill.”

“Why not? Those two need a little push. She’s been working with Josh for over six weeks and they’ve only been out two times?” Bill huffed out a laugh. “In the same amount of time I had you all but to the altar.”

Her eyes warmed with love. She reached over and cupped his cheek in her hand. “Yes, you did, my love. And I’ve never regretted a day of it.”

He took the hand and kissed it. “Neither have I. My special Rose.”

Josh was ready to get to work. He’d had a superb weekend surfing and relaxing. Sunny was doing stuff with her parents so they hadn’t seen each other. No big deal. Everything was good.

Although, if he were honest, he’d admit he’d missed her. At times. Not very often. Just maybe a couple of times a day. Or hour.

Their seeing each other with the purpose of getting rid of the attraction between them was working well. Not that it was diminishing, but they were having fun. When Sunny had suggested it a few weeks ago, it sounded crazy, but now he was happy with the idea. And surely, that magnetic force between them would die out by the end of the television season.

The cast began arriving and he consulted his clipboard to check the morning schedule. Bill walked over to Donovan, slapping him good-naturedly on the back. “How’s everything going today?”

Giving a smirk, Donovan answered, “Just another day in La-La-Land.”

Bill chuckled. “Could be worse. We could be out-of-work actors in La-La-Land.”

“Amen to that.”

Josh knew a little about Donovan’s background. The talented actor had a father that was bad news. Substance abuse. Thankfully, Donovan

hadn't picked up his father's habits but he still dealt with the fallout, keeping much of it inside him.

The kids arrived, full of tales of their weekend. Matt had performed with his brothers in San Diego. Mandy had opened a new shopping center, singing, dancing, and signing autographs. And Nick and Samuel bragged about the humongous waves they caught in Santa Monica. Josh hid a laugh at their exaggerations. Joey B seemed quieter than usual, almost moody. He'd have to keep an eye on him.

Then she walked in. Hurrying over in her suit and . . . sneakers? "I'm sorry, I know I'm late. I had a video interview with Princeton. If you want to dock my pay, or give me all the grunt work I'll understand.

She was so cute. Her golden hair was piled on top of her hair, which she probably thought made her look smarter. With strands falling around her face, he thought it only made her more adorable.

Seeing she was waiting for a response, he said, "It's fine. I understand. Why don't you get the revised schedule from the office?"

"Okay."

He watched her leave and returned to his clipboard, ready to do his job and get the shots down before—

The phone in his pocket rang and when he pulled it out, he saw an unfamiliar number. "Hello?"

"Is this Joshua Butler?"

"Yes, it is."

"I'm calling for Barry Thompson. He'd like for me to schedule a meeting for the purpose of discussing your involvement in one of our properties."

He couldn't get his mouth or brain to work. The biggest producer in the city, Barry Thompson, wanted to talk to him?"

"Ah, sure." You didn't say no to a meeting with the man. They made an appointment and he put his phone back in his pocket.

"The kids are getting makeup done. I see you reversed the first two scenes for shooting today. Josh?"

Still dazed, he turned to Sunny. "Barry Thompson wants to see me."

A smile bloomed on her face. "He called? Oh, I'm so glad. I wasn't sure if my contact would come through." She smirked and added, "I said I'd get you a meeting with someone big."

"How?" He couldn't seem to say any more.

"I know a few people in town. Daddy knows a few people. I just networked. It was really nothing you probably couldn't have done on your own." She cocked her head to study him. "Which begs the question. Why haven't you?"

"Maybe because I was working. That doesn't leave a lot of time for searching for different positions."

"But apparently enough time to act in a community theatre."

He frowned. "Because I enjoy it. It relaxes me. Same as surfing."

"Well, if you're going to be a success, you need to concentrate on your work. I can't help you if you don't put in a little effort."

"Maybe I don't want help."

She sighed heavily. "Are we going to go through this again? Look, just go to the meeting. If you don't want to take the job, don't. But you're talented, so talented. At least try to see how high you can go."

He tried not to be aggravated with her. In her own way, she was trying to help him. She really believed he was talented, that was something. He swallowed his irritation and said, "Okay, I'll go."

"That's all I ask."

"Fine."

But in the pit of his stomach he didn't think it was fine. Again, he told himself not to make waves. She'd only be here for a little while. Better to just enjoy the time they had.



Chapter Nine

DURING AN AFTERNOON break, Josh rushed down the hall, heading toward the offices. The sounds of a guitar had him stopping and glancing in the boys' dressing room. A happy sponsor had brought in ice cream for the cast and crew so most everyone was on the set enjoying the treat. Who had declined?

He spotted Matthew Mackenzie sitting on the floor against one wall, working on an intricate guitar riff. "Matt?"

The teenager didn't look up but continued to strum his guitar. "Yeah?"

"Just wondering why you aren't getting in on that ice cream. Anything wrong?"

"No." He went back to his guitar and Josh walked over to him, crouching to be on level with him.

"How'd the concert with your brothers go this weekend?"

A smile curved his lips. "Excellent. We were awesome."

"I see." He really didn't.

Matt's eyes went to his and he sighed. "Everything's good really. I wasn't quite as sharp on a few of our songs. I thought I'd work on them."

Josh shook his head. "You kids amaze me. I've never seen people work so hard on their craft as you guys."

Shrugging, Matt continued to play. "It takes practice to be the very best. I'm close but not there yet. I'm gonna be."

"Okay. Just out of curiosity, why is that so important to you?"

Matt looked at him as if he were an idiot. "What else is there?" Josh started to answer but Matt continued. "I want to perform with my brothers. Then be a solo artist, work my way up to my own television

show, have my own record label, and eventually start a production company. Who knows how big I'll get. I've got it all planned out."

"Hmm. But don't you want to, I don't know, have a life? Do fun things that you like?"

"I like what I'm doing. Besides, I feel like I've got a lot of talent. Isn't it right to use my talent to the best of my ability?"

The boy's words had him thinking. Did Matthew Mackenzie have a point? Did he have a talent bigger than *Castle Clubhouse* that he should be using? It was something to think about.

He was still thinking about it the next day. The previous night he and Sunny had gone to a mall in Glendale, browsing, eating junk food, and laughing like loons. Her hand in his had felt so warm. Just right. His head still swam with thoughts of their goodnight kiss. She was becoming addictive. The thought of not seeing her everyday, not seeing her smile, not smelling her special perfume, it made his insides tense.

But now was not the time to think about it, he had a job to do. It was early, too early for cast and crew. Hopefully, he'd be able to get some work done before the insanity of the day started.

Before mounting the stairs, he heard the sound of Bill's laughter from his dressing room. Since there was a change for the afternoon schedule, he headed in that direction to make Bill aware of the change. The man's words had him freezing in place.

"So, Sunny wouldn't say a thing to you? Hmm. I certainly hope Josh feels the same for her but that man has the best poker face I've ever seen." Bill listened to the caller, obviously his wife. "Well, didn't I tell you it would work? Those two were made for each other. She's headstrong, he's laid back. She needs someone to loosen her up, help her enjoy life. He needs someone to give him a reason for living other than working and caring for his mother. I love them both and want to see them together.

Josh's feet somehow moved him forward, although his throat still couldn't work. Feeling no shame in eavesdropping, he stepped into

Bill's room, his irritation rising. He stood still watching Bill, who was clearly satisfied with his actions, chuckling.

When he swiveled his chair and saw Josh standing there, his laughter stopped. "Rosie? I'll have to call you back later. Yeah." He ended the call and smiled nervously. "Well, you're in early this morning. Anything I need to know about?"

Josh couldn't speak. Not yet. He closed the door, turned, and faced Bill. "You have something to explain to me?" He folded his arms, his face tense.

Bill's expression softened. "There's no need. I suspect you heard my conversation with Rose." He shrugged. "Yes, I'd like you and Sunny to get together. Sue me."

Shaking his head, he said, "That's not the point, is it? You engineered us together, didn't you? I suppose you arranged with Stan for her to come to work here, be under my authority. Can't imagine how much fun you've had at our expense."

"Now Josh, it's not like that."

"No?" He paced the small room, not concerned that Bill was one of the stars of the show or that he could probably get him fired. "I resent having anyone interfere with my life. I can find my own dates, I don't need anyone manipulating me to be with anyone. It's my decision, my life, and no one is going to push me into anything!"

"You're right."

The man's quiet agreement had him pausing to stare at him. "What?"

"You're absolutely right. No one can or will push you into anything." He stood and walked to stand in front of Josh. "Let's get a few things straight. The only thing I did was get Sunny hired on and working with you. My hope was that the two of you being together every day would ignite the special attraction you have for each other. Past getting her hired, I haven't done anything. And I might add, I didn't need to." Josh frowned, not wanting to agree with him.

“I haven’t been having fun at your expense. To be honest, I’ve had to hold myself back from asking you or Sunny what’s going on between you. Knowing me as you do, that’s a pretty big ask.”

Josh’s lips curved just a bit.

Bill took the chance and put a hand on his shoulder. “One day, Josh, you’ll have a child. If it’s a girl, you’ll understand the way I feel. My children mean more to me than my life. I love my daughter with all my heart and I want her to find a good man to share her life with. I hope you’ll take that as the hugest compliment I could give anyone.”

He hadn’t thought of it that way. Blowing out a breath, he said, “You really know how to take the wind out of a guy’s sails.”

“Just the truth. I hope you won’t hold it against me.”

Josh looked into the blue eyes of one of the few men he respected. “No, Bill. I guess I should be flattered.” He walked away, running a hand through his hair. “But I’m afraid you’re setting yourself up for a big disappointment. Okay, we’re seeing each other. But she’s going to grad school next semester and I’m staying in Hollywood working. She’s got a lot of work ahead of her and I’m afraid an assistant director isn’t in her plans. Nor is a psychologist in mine, for that matter.”

“Is that what you want?”

The question caught him off guard. He shook it off, not wanting to get into it. “It is what it is, Bill. Even if I wanted to change things, I can’t.”

Bill sat on the small couch in the room and motioned for him to join him. “Let me tell you a few things about my Sunny.” He obeyed, ready to get the scoop on the woman.

“Sunny is my only girl and I’m afraid, as such, I’ve spoiled her at times. But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t have a soft, generous heart.”

“I know that, Bill.”

“She feels a huge obligation to . . . save the world, so to speak. It all comes from . . .”

Josh watched Bill's face change. His face tightened, his brows knit, and his eyes showed a sadness so deep, he wondered how the man could handle it. "Bill? You okay?"

Bill said nothing for a moment, staring straight ahead. "You know I lost one of my boys just before I started on *Castle Clubhouse*. Military. Terrible accident."

Josh could feel his throat getting heavy. "Yeah."

"We all dealt with it in different ways. Thankfully, in the end it brought us closer. The counselor we saw so affected Sunny I'm not surprised she's decided that's what she wants to do—help people. That's what she does, helps people. I've tried to caution her, some people don't want help. But as the same time, I don't want to diminish her enthusiasm."

"So what are you telling me?"

Bill's eyes met his. "Just this. She may not show it, but she has a very tender heart. I understand if you don't want to be involved with anyone, don't want to think of anything serious. But if it ends between you and Sunny, don't break her heart."

Sunny loved Saturdays in Southern California. Currently, it was a lovely 72 degrees in Long Beach as she leaned back on her towel, sunglasses in place, watching Josh ride the waves.

He was so athletic, so confident. So yummy. She could watch him surf all day. Not a bad plan. What would she do when she went back to school? She'd already received acceptance letters from Princeton and Stanford, her top two choices but she hadn't made her mind up yet. She'd wait and see.

It surprised her how well she and Josh got along. They could talk for hours about a variety of subjects. They had a lot of similar interests. She'd never dated a man that she enjoyed as much.

He rode a four-footer in and she couldn't help applaud for him. After bowing, he brought his board in and plopped down beside her, his wet suit getting her damp. "Hey!"

“Sorry. Not sorry.” With a grin, he leaned over and kissed her. His kiss was chilly, but it made her so warm.

“Nice riding. You going to take a break with me?”

“If you don’t mind. I feel kinda bad that you’re sitting up here all alone.”

“Emphasis on the word ‘kinda.’ Actually, I’ve enjoyed watching you. You seem to be good at anything you do.”

“Why, thank you. Please tell me the future psychologist doesn’t see that as a flaw, that it indicates a red flag signifying something’s wrong with me?”

She studied the man she was crazy about. A hand on each side of his face, she said, “Nothing. Nothing at all.” She kissed him tenderly.

The kissing went on until they unfortunately heard a familiar voice. “Hey Josh! Way to go, man. You’re my hero.” Glancing up revealed Nick standing before them.

Josh sighed. “What are you doing here?”

“Heard surf’s up in Long Beach. Guess you heard the same thing.”

“Yeah.” He put his arm around Sunny. “Listen, you don’t need to blab all over the set that you saw Sunny and me here together. I’m not sure how that might affect the atmosphere at work.”

“Ahh. Daddy doesn’t know you’re kissing his little girl, huh?”

Sunny watched the conversation thinking she should step in since this was about her. She didn’t have any trouble after Josh’s next comment.

“Actually, he’s all in favor of it.”

“What?”

Nick grinned widely, clearly sensing that Josh had some explaining to do. “I’ll just let you two talk about it. See you Monday.” He chuckled as he walked away.

“What did you mean my father is all in favor of us dating?”

“I heard him talking on the phone to your mother. They actually want us to get together. Your father made sure you were working with me. Not that I knew that earlier, I didn’t.”

Things were starting to make sense to her—her father constantly asking how work was, her mother’s quizzing her on her day.

“Gee, I’m not sure how I feel about this.”

“Join the club. Although I was livid when I found out. Ranted on and on to your father.” She couldn’t help feeling a little offended. “But thinking it over, I suppose I should be complimented that he thinks that highly of me.”

Why did she feel so removed from this, as though she were an inanimate object? “Yes, you really should.”

He grinned and they both leaned back on their elbows, glancing at the ocean in front of them. “It shouldn’t make a difference. We’ll just keep to our plan—see each other until you go off to grad school.”

Her heart clenched. It was so clear to her now. She didn’t want to go away. She wanted to stay in Los Angeles and see where this relationship with Josh led. But she couldn’t say that, he had no desire for anything more. If only he asked her to stay, there would be no question. She’d go to UCLA and they’d . . .

Suddenly her eyes filled. The impossible had happened. The fall was now complete. She was totally and completely in love with him.

How could she have been so stupid? This wasn’t what was supposed to happen. Now she was thinking of Josh and orange blossoms and a house with children and a big dog.

When she gasped, Josh sat up straight and grabbed her arm. “Sunny? You okay?”

“Yes. I . . . was just thinking of something. No worries.”

“Wow. Must have really scared you.”

You have no idea.

Sunny clicked off her phone, astonished. It had happened, just like she said it would. It was a major accomplishment, anyone would agree. But why was she so conflicted?

How should she tell him he was going to be offered the position as director for a major motion picture? It was too good to be true. She'd read the book the movie was being based on and the heartbreaking drama would surely be Oscar material. It was rumored that several A-list celebrities were vying for roles. How could any director pass up the opportunity to be in charge of such a project?

Her eyes surveyed the small room, the office of the assistant director of *Castle Clubhouse*, the number one rated children's show. This was a nice stepping-stone for Josh, but he was destined to do bigger, better things.

But how would he react to the news? Her heart raced in her chest as she heard him approaching.

"Tell Dan the spotlight needs to be more grounded. I saw a small wobble during that last rehearsal." The man he was speaking with responded. When Josh walked in and addressed her, he was all business. "Can you get me the list of subs? We need another grip for tomorrow."

"Sure." Absently, she reached into a file cabinet and pulled out the list he'd requested. He sat to make the call while she nervously paced, waiting for a moment of his time.

Once he hung up, she pulled up a chair to sit next to him. "I have news."

His eyes flickered for just a second before he leaned back. "Okay."

"I heard back from a friend at Fox. They're going to offer you the position of director for *Forever Is All I Ask*. You got the position."

He didn't speak right away. His eyes widened, his mouth opened. Then he chuckled. "You almost had me. Good one." He returned to making notes.

"No, really. You got it. My friend was positive. She said they'd call before the end of the week."

“For real? This isn’t a joke?”

“For real. What do you think?”

“Um, wow. That’s incredible.” He stared into space for a moment and went back to his notes.

“That’s it? No, thank you? No ‘You’re the most incredible woman I’ve ever met? I’ll love you forever’?” She hadn’t meant to say the last part.

Thankfully, he didn’t notice. He reached for a pencil, writing on the pages in front of him. “It’s a lot to process. I’ve got a few things to do here. You’d better go get some lunch before we have to be back at it.”

She tried not to be hurt. “Sure. No problem.” She released a breath and stepped out of the office, wondering if she’d really helped him at all.

Or just caused a huge rift in their relationship.



Chapter Ten

“HEY, JOSH,” JAMIE CALLED out as he worked at his desk at the end of the day, before he met with Bill about next week’s script. Everyone else, he thought, had cleared out, including Sunny, citing an appointment she had to make.

“Jamie, what are you still doing here?”

She strolled into the office, and casually sat in a chair near his desk. His brow rose at this. Jamie Brogan never strolled or did anything casually. The girl was ambitious, industrious, always in perpetual motion. Something was definitely up with her.

“I heard you got some news today.”

“Did you?” He wasn’t going to say anything about anything. This girl was a consummate journalist. He’d already learned to be careful in what he said in front of her.

“Word is that you got a call from Barry Thompson offering you the job as head director for *Forever Is All I Ask*, a favorite book of mine I might add. Just wanted to get your comment. And as an aside, would you please not cut the Mickey character? It’s rumored he’s going to get cut.” She had a pad and pen in front of her, ready to take notes.

Josh couldn’t hold back a chuckle. He set his pen down and folded his hands on his desk. “Okay. I have a lot to ask you about what you just said. Where did you get your Intel that Thompson offered me a job? Why are you reading *Forever Is All I Ask*? And, just for thrills, why not cut the Mickey character?”

She studied him and he could see the wheels turning in her sixteen-year-old mind. “Let’s start with the incidental first. My mother was reading the book so I read it when she was finished.”

“Not the normal reading material for teenagers. Why aren’t you reading something sweet, normal, uplifting even?”

Her expression told him she thought he was ridiculous and made him think she was really a thirty-year-old, hardened news reporter. “Please. As to your question about Mickey. The simple answer is because he was dreamy and the perfect man.”

Hmm. “Dreamy” and “perfect man.” Now that sounded more like a sixteen-year-old.

He leaned back, arms crossed, and asked, “Where did you hear I’d been offered a job with Thompson?”

“A good reporter never reveals her source. Besides,” she said smiling. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“I have not received an offer from Barry Thompson to direct anything. Satisfied?” It was the truth. He’d not received any calls yet, from Thompson’s company or Fox Studios.

This didn’t sit well with Jamie. Frowning, she said, “You sure? My source is a good one. I vetted her carefully.”

“Jamie, why are you so interested?” He knew it was useless to ask her why she wasn’t doing the normal teenage things. How many of those on the show were normal teenagers?

“It’s breaking news, Josh. How cool if I broke it to the set first, before the trade papers.”

“Don’t you think if there was any news to tell, I’d tell everyone on the set first?”

She blew out a breath. “Well, if you want to take away my thunder.” He chuckled. “I’m just trying to hone my craft. When *Castle Clubhouse* ends, I’m going to study journalism and then intern at a major newspaper. Competition is fierce. I’ve got to work on standing out.”

“I see.” Even though at times Jamie could be a handful with her endless questions, she was a good kid. Despite the fact that her parents were more interested in the perks of her stardom. Her innocent face,

freckles on her nose, and shiny red hair always softened him. And made him want to help her.

“Honestly, Jamie. I haven’t heard back.”

“So you have talked to them.”

He smiled. “I spoke with them. I haven’t heard back and even if I do and they are interested, I haven’t decided anything.” His smile widened. “But when there is news, you’ll be the first to know.”

Her green eyes got big. “Really?”

“Really. Now can I finish my work so I might make it home before midnight?”

“Sure, Josh. Thanks.” She stood and turned, her pad and pen at her side. Before she left the office, she looked back. “We’d all really miss you if you go. Just so you know,” she said quietly.

His heart warmed at the sweetness of the young girl. “I’d miss all of you, too.”

Josh was meeting with Bill in his dressing room when they heard footsteps in the hall.

“Hey, boy, what kept you so long? I need a ride home.” The deep growl had Bill and Josh looking out in the hall. They watched as Donovan Baxter, successful actor, rising celebrity stopped in his tracks.

He walked over to where his father leaned against the wall. “I guess booze is your drug of choice for the day. Go wait in the car. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“S locked,” the man slurred. Donovan looked around quickly and Bill and Josh ducked back in the office.

They heard the jiggling of keys. “Here. Go get in. And don’t even think of starting the engine or I swear I’ll break your hands. You understand?”

His father’s tone turned hard, mean. “I’m your father, mister high and mighty star. You’re my son and don’t you ever forget it.” Next, they heard the sound of the side door opening and closing.

And Donovan's heavy sigh. "You'll never let me forget, will you, Dad?"

Bill stepped into the hall, Josh watching from the door. When Donovan turned, the quick flicker of horror in his eyes demonstrated his embarrassment at knowing anyone had witnessed the scene.

Clearly not wanting any pity, Donovan hurried past him. "Not a word, Bill. Please."

"Donovan." The sound of his name spoken with affection and respect had Donovan freezing. "You're not him. You've got a bright future in front of you. You know that we love you. We're all family. And one day, you'll find someone to love and a family to share that love."

Without looking at Bill, he walked away, muttering, "Not really looking."

Once Donovan had left, Bill said, "My heart goes out to that man." His voice was thick. "I wish I could . . . show him what family and love can be."

Again, Josh was moved by the man's compassion. "I'm sure he's seen it with you and Rose. That's all you can do."

"Maybe." Bill sighed loudly. "I hate to see a man reject love even before it can start."

The words somehow cut Josh, like a sharp knife. But Bill was speaking about Donovan, not him.

Was he rejecting love before it started? No, he vehemently told himself, he was not. He wasn't rejecting love before it started because . . . he was already in love. He mentally cursed his stupidity. Brilliant, falling for a woman that was poised to leave town soon. And save the world. For a moment he wallowed in the thought that he'd rather she saved him.

"Josh, did you hear me?"

"Sorry. What?"

"Just said I'm heading out now. You coming?"

The call came the next morning before shooting started. Sunny, Josh, Stanley, and a few of the tech crew were working on the set when Josh's phone buzzed. She knew by the anxious expression on his face that it was from Fox.

"Excuse me, I need to take this." She watched him answer the phone as he left the room. It took all the restraint she had not to run after him. Stanley continued his discussion with the others and she tried to listen. And did well. For about two minutes.

"Stanley, could I get you a cup of coffee?"

He obviously was taken aback by her offer. "Ah, yes, thank you. Black with one sugar."

"Sure. No problem." She hurried past the breakroom and up the stairs to the offices in time to hear Josh end his call.

"Yes, thank you so much. I'll look forward to seeing you tomorrow at six. Yes, sir." He clicked off and let out a huge breath.

A smile broke across her face and she ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck. "You did it! I knew you could, I had no doubts!" She kissed him hard and hugged him, not noticing that he wasn't really participating in the celebration.

"So, you're going tomorrow? How about we plan a late celebration? I'll treat you to dinner, anywhere you want. Just let me know and I'll make reservations."

"Sunny." He took her arms from around his neck. His face was thoughtful, not like a man that had just been offered the job of his dreams.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong. It's an incredible opportunity. Something I want to think over."

Total confusion filled her. "What's there to think over? It's the perfect position. The perfect stepping stone to everything you've ever wanted."

"How do you know what I want?" His biting tone puzzled her.

She took a step back. "I suppose I assumed that you wanted to be successful in your work. That's a common factor in the male ego. It's instinctive that—"

"Please." He held up a hand. "Please, no psychology lessons."

"Okay. Okay." She took a breath. "Think about it. Don't rush into anything you don't want." Surely when he had time to think, he'd jump at the opportunity. They didn't come along too often in Hollywood.

"Hey, you two are needed on set," Bill said, sticking his head in the office. "Oh, and Stanley's whining something about coffee?"

"Ah! I forgot. Coming, Dad."

They descended the stairs, turning toward the set when they heard weeping.

Bill frowned and held up his hand for them to stop. "You two hear that?" Sunny and Josh nodded. Quietly, Bill stepped to the door leading to a back alley. He pushed it open and sighed. "Oh, honey."

When he disappeared from view, the others followed him and looked out. On the hard ground leaning against the building sat Bill holding a crying Mandy. The girl was shaking, sobbing uncontrollably. Bill rocked her, whispering words of comfort.

"What's happened?" Sunny asked.

"Not sure. Let's stay close in case Bill needs us."

Mandy looked up into Bill's blue eyes. "I tried, Bill. As hard as I could. Everyone was expecting me to get that part but they gave it to someone else." She let out a sob. "What am I going to do? We were going to go to Australia on vacation with that money."

Sunny was incensed. "How dare someone put the expense of a vacation on the shoulders of a twelve-year old. That's terrible." She glanced at Josh and was taken aback at his fierce expression. "Josh?"

"This is the part of the business I hate the most. The destroying of peoples' lives. Especially kids. If I could, I'd whisk every one of them away, give them a happy life, surrounded by people that really loved them."

“Dad says something like that constantly.”

“Sometimes I wonder why I’m in it. Maybe I should just sit on the beach and weave baskets.”

She touched his arm. “That’s why there’s such a need for good people like you in the industry.”

Mandy’s cries brought their attention back to her. “But what if I don’t get the next part?”

Bill’s voice was low, comforting, loving. “Honey, there will always be other parts. Take it from an old experienced actor, there’s always someone somewhere that’ll hire you.”

“But I’m Mandy Summers. I’m on a highly rated television show. I don’t want to be playing dinner theatres in Tupelo.”

“Boy, would I like to get her to my couch for some intensive counseling.” Josh glanced at her. “You know, when I get my degree.”

Bill didn’t seem to be at loose ends but chuckled. “Don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it.” He rubbed her back as she continued to sob. “I know it’s hard right now, honey. But Hollywood, the entertainment business, it’s not all there is to life.”

The girl sniffed loudly, rubbing her finger under her nose. “I need to get a tissue and get ready for shooting.” She stood but before she left, leaned down and gave Bill a hug. And a watery smile. She turned and briskly walked past Josh and Sunny back into the building.

Bill stood, wiping the dirt from the seat of his pants. “I’m not sure she heard anything I said.”

“You were there for her. That counts for a lot,” Sunny said. “I’ll go make sure she gets back to the set okay.” But added, “After I get Stanley his coffee.”



Chapter Eleven

JOSH WAS MORE EXHAUSTED than he ever remembered being. Too tired to go surfing, which was saying something. After parking, he shuffled to his garage apartment, not taking the time to check on his mother. He'd call her after he took a quick nap. See if she needed him to run any errands for her.

The briefcase dropped on the floor. He pushed off his sneakers on his way to his couch. Without the energy or desire to open the sofa bed, he fell face first on the cushions, anticipating that glorious oblivion of sleep.

He drifted, his subconscious playing with scenes from his day—Sunny, the call, the kids, Jamie, working, Sunny, Bill, Mandy, and . . . something about Stanley's coffee. It was all mixed together in bright, senseless pictures. He felt a poke on his shoulder and turned, seeking softer surfaces.

"Joshua!" He jerked and blinked his eyes. "Joshua, are you okay?"

His mother. He blinked a few more times to get his head around the present and sat up, smiling into her worried eyes. "Fine, Mom. Just had a busy day, that's all." He ran a hand through his hair. "You need something?"

"Yes. I need to find out what's troubling my son. You were moaning and tossing and turning. I was concerned you'd fall off that couch and hurt yourself." She turned her wheelchair and went to the kitchenette. "I've got hot chicken soup ready for you. Come eat it while it's hot. Do you have crackers?" She went to the small pantry closet and glanced inside.

"Yeah, I do." He stood and stretched out the kinks. "You going to join me?"

"I've already had my soup. But I will have a few crackers. And water if you don't mind."

He grabbed the box of crackers on the shelf and set it on the table, kissing his mom's head. "Of course I don't mind. You're my best girl, you know that, don't you?" He pulled out two bottles of water from the mini-fridge.

"I certainly hope not. Especially when you have such a sweet girl like Sunny to spend time with."

He really had no energy for discussing his love life so instead of responding, he sat and started in on the fragrant soup. It did more to revive him than the nap he'd tried to take.

"So what's got you upset?"

"I told you, rough day. Dealing with the kids, the crew, making sure everything runs smooth."

"Are you sure?" His mother's soft, compassionate voice had him wanting to confide in her.

He sighed. "I got a phone call this morning. Fox Studios is offering me a job directing a movie they're making."

"Is that right?" She just sat there staring at him, her expression bland.

"Did you hear what I said? A major motion picture studio wants me to direct for them."

"Yes, I heard you. Is that what you want?"

"I'm not sure." He crumbled a few crackers into his soup and ate a big spoonful.

"When do you have to give them an answer?"

"Tomorrow after work."

"Hmm." She munched on her crackers, looking calm, as if it was the most normal thing in the world for a major studio to call him.

He frowned and dropped his spoon. "You don't have an opinion? You're not going to tell me what I should do?"

"Of course not. It's your life. I'm not a factor in your decision."

Not a factor? Was she kidding? “Yes you are. I can’t make any decisions without considering how it affects you, if it will make things harder for you, cause you grief.” His voice had risen, not that he wanted it to. He really was tired.

“Joshua Butler, will you stop worrying about me so.” His mother was unaffected by his tone, as hers beat his in strength. “Now, I do appreciate all you’ve done for me through the years. Especially after your father died and then after the accident. I don’t know how . . .” He heard the sorrow in her voice, saw her eyes fill. “But I’ve made it through. I have a good life, plenty of good friends, a job I adore. And a son that I’m extremely proud of. I will not have you ruining it by using me as an excuse to avoid living your life.”

She cleared her throat and took a sip. “Now, tell me about this job offer.”

He was never so proud of his mother than at that moment and gave her a quick kiss before running through the offer for her, laying out the pros and the cons.

“I didn’t know you were looking for another position.”

“I’m not. Ah, Sunny actually found it for me.”

“Really.” She leaned back with her bottle of water, smiling. “That’s interesting. Why do you think she did that?”

“She has this crazy idea that I’m wasting my time being assistant director so she called a few friends and contacts and . . . well, I got the offer.”

“I hardly think a call from a friend would get anyone a job as director on a movie. You must have impressed them when you went in to talk to them.” She laid a hand on his arm. “You can be proud of that achievement, whatever you decide.”

“Yeah,” he said without enthusiasm and ate more soup.

“Very nice of her to be so concerned with your future.”

Josh shook his head. “She likes to help people. It’s what she does.”

"I don't doubt you. I'm not all that knowledgeable with the movie industry. Only what I know from when your father acted. But I do know it must have taken considerable time and effort to get you an appointment. Unless Sunny had an inside track." He shook his head. "Seems to me she went far and above for a friend."

He caught the gleam in his mother's eyes. Setting his spoon down, he sighed and sat back. "I know you're fishing for information so let me save you the time. Sunny and I have been out. More than once. But it's just temporary. At the end of the season, she's going to grad school. Maybe Northern California, maybe the East Coast. Anyway, far away from Los Angeles."

"I see." Her eyes stared off in the distance.

"You know, you were a lot more understandable when I was young and you just told me what was what."

She chuckled. "I suppose so. Unfortunately, adulthood is not so simple." After a pause, she said, "Josh. Why haven't you thought of settling down with a woman? It isn't because of my disability, is it?"

He went back to stirring his soup. "Not . . . exactly. You're right that I do worry about you. You weren't well for a long time."

"I know and I'll never be able to thank you enough for taking care of me. But there's something else involved here."

Her gaze was on him as he ate. He wasn't sure what to say.

"Is it that you hadn't met the right woman yet?" It didn't go unnoticed by him the use of "hadn't" instead of "haven't." He'd let that slide by and just shrugged.

"Your father and I had a loving relationship, one I think about everyday and treasure, so it can't be that you never saw a healthy relationship."

"It's nothing, Mom. It's probably just like you said. I haven't met the right woman yet."

"Hmm." He never liked his mother's "hmm's."

She reached over and took his hand and softly said, “We were a hot mess after your father died, weren’t we?” His throat suddenly got thick and he nodded. “I couldn’t seem to get rid of the overwhelming grief. I wish . . . well, looking back now, I should have gotten help.”

Her other hand joined theirs and she held tightly. “But Josh, hear me. I wouldn’t trade one day, one hour with Jefferson Butler. It was the adventure of a lifetime. Something I pray everyday for you to have.”

The love in her voice almost had him bawling. Clearing his throat, he said, “I know, Mom.”

She patted his hand and took a breath. “As far as the job goes. Do what makes you happy. Only you know what you really want in life. And whatever it is, know that it’s all right with me.”

He and Sunny didn’t speak of the job position the next morning. Thankfully they were busy shooting, the only real problem of the morning being Joey B’s attitude.

He still didn’t know what he was going to do about the directing position. Maybe he could ask them if he could give an answer by Friday. Of course, they’d probably think him a nut for needing more time and rescind the offer.

Sunny didn’t seem to have much to say. Not that she was avoiding him, but clearly giving him room. He had to give her props for that. She’d make an incredible psychologist someday.

In the meantime, he had to believe that he’d make the right decision about the job when the time came.

They broke for lunch a little early since Stanley had a meeting with the suits at the studio. Sunny was busy helping the girls with their costumes so he decided to do a little work in the office.

As he went down the hall, passing the dressing rooms, he heard Bill speaking with someone. He peeked into the room to see him on his couch, his arm around Joey B. Thank goodness. Whatever was going on with the kid, Bill could get to the heart of it and hopefully get a smile back on his face.

His merciless thoughts stopped when he observed the scene. The young boy had his head down as Bill spoke softly to him. Josh tried not to disturb but curious, leaned against the hallway wall, watching.

“I know it’s hard, son. Growing up without a dad is terrible and no one can take away the ache in your heart.”

Joey B’s tiny voice was heartbreaking. “It hurts, Bill. Sometimes it hurts so bad.” He sniffed, rubbing his hand under his nose. “I can’t talk to Mom. It’ll only make her cry.”

“I know, son.” He rubbed Joey B’s arm. “I wish I had some magic words to make everything better, but I don’t. I can only tell you that any time you want to talk, I’ll listen.”

“Thanks, Bill.” He sighed heavily. “Sometimes I feel so stupid, laughing and singing on this show when all I want to do is go home. What good is *Castle Clubhouse* anyway? I’m going to be a fireman like my dad, not act. Why can’t I just hang out at the fire station?”

Josh watched Bill thinking over the boy’s questions. They were good questions, honest questions. He was curious to see what the man would say.

“I understand your sentiment and I’m sure that when the time comes, you’ll make an awesome firefighter. But for now, I want you to think about this. *Castle Clubhouse* may only be a television show but in our own way we touch thousands of people, kids especially, and some of those kids may be going through a rough time. We give them encouragement, fun, and I hope a little wisdom to carry into their lives.”

Bill’s voice grew softer. “And I want you to think that somewhere out there, watching our show is a kid like you that’s lost a parent and needs something to look forward to each day. You can help him, Joey B. The songs and dances and lessons can be a bright spot in that person’s life and get them through the day. In my book, that’s an extremely important job. And one that I think we do quite well. Especially you.”

Josh swallowed a lump in his throat. Bill had said the perfect thing to the boy, evidenced by Joey B’s big bright eyes as he looked up at Bill

and smiled. Genuinely, smiled, something he and Stan worked hard at to get on camera.

He thought about losing his own father and knew that he'd always miss him. But, as Bill had said, going on, doing a job he felt important helped to ease the grief. And honored the lost parent.

The admiration he had for Bill tripled. Working on the set may have been a great opportunity for advancement, but the best part was in learning from this wise man. Bill taught all the character qualities that he sought—kindness, forgiveness, integrity, and love.

The answer to his job situation came immediately. He couldn't leave *Castle Clubhouse*, nor did he want to. He still had so much to learn from Bill and as long as the show ran, he wanted to be a part of it. He wanted to watch these youngsters learn and grow, and he wanted to be a part of their training.

Her heart was thumping and she couldn't suppress the wide smile she wore as she drove to Venice. It was going to be a wonderful night.

She'd not said anything about the job to Josh all day, which hadn't been easy. Just before they finished at work, he'd taken her aside and asked her to meet him at his place at eight. They'd eat dinner and talk. She couldn't wait to hear what he had to say. Probably that she was the most wonderful woman in the world for helping him get the position and how could he ever live without her and why didn't she just go to school nearby so they could . . .

Could it be that he was going to speak to her about a more committed relationship? He'd never asked her to his place, that was something. They'd been getting along so well, their feelings for each other growing every day. He'd been quiet today, maybe he'd been thinking it over. Of course, he was also thinking about the job. Was he thinking of how the job would fit into their lives?

She could see it now, he'd take her hand and tell her he couldn't live without her, she was the only woman for him and he wanted desperately to marry her. They'd kiss and begin planning their lives together.

Okay, so she was getting a little ahead of herself. For tonight she'd settle for a "thank you for finding the job" and a kiss. And maybe a confession of love. She was light and giddy with the thought.

She listened to the instructions on her GPS. Should be getting close.

Pulling up to a small but charming house, she drove into the driveway, behind Josh's Jeep Cherokee. He'd said to come through the gate to the garage. She wasn't sure what that was about but she did just that.

Once through the gate, she saw the garage had been converted. She stepped to the door and knocked.

He opened the door, a tentative smile on his face. "Hi."

"Hi." She walked into the building, taking in her surroundings. It looked like an apartment, living area, kitchen area, doors that probably went to a bathroom and bedroom. "What is this, an office? Studio?"

"No. It's my home."

While small, the room was neat, decorated in shades of blue. Like the ocean. Soft music played. There were candles on the coffee table. Her pulse quickened. Had she been right about his intentions for the evening? "It's cozy. Nice. I like it."

"I'm glad," he said, smiling slightly. He motioned to the couch. "Sit down, I'll bring out food."

She sat, taking deep breaths to still her racing heart. With anticipation, she watched him fill a tray, grab a silver bucket, and return to the couch.

"I made us finger food. There's cheese and crackers, chicken nuggets, raw vegetables, and wine. Unless you'd rather have water or soda."

She smiled at his thoughtfulness. "This is nice. Thank you."

He seemed to breathe easier as he sat with her. But didn't say anything more. Maybe he was nervous, that could be it. So she'd ease him into talking by casual conversation.

"How did you come to live in a garage apartment?"

He seemed grateful for the easy question. “I wanted to be near my mom after her accident. But at the same time, allow her independence. Along with myself.”

She thought this through. He wasn’t a “mama’s boy” by any means. But his mother was important enough for him to live nearby. It was another aspect of him that impressed her. “I think that’s very commendable.”

“Yes, well as she informed me just yesterday, she doesn’t need me as much anymore. I think she broke up with me.”

Sunny giggled. “I like your mother very much.” Then hesitated. “But maybe it’s time to get your own place. Especially since you’re going to be a famous director. How would it seem if *People Magazine* wanted to do an article on you and found out you were living in a converted garage.

Now he hesitated. “About that. We need to talk.” It was not the tone of celebration or excitement or . . . love.

Anxiety began to pool in her stomach.



Chapter Twelve

DECIDING IT WOULD BE better to just come out with it, he took a breath and said, “I decided not to accept the position. I feel I’m better suited and needed on *Castle Clubhouse* and intend to stay with the show for its entire run. Keep my life just the way it is.” There he’d said it.

He watched her eyes, waiting for her response. At first the lovely orbs held confusion, as if he’d spoken in a foreign language. Slowly, they cleared. He thought he saw a flash of sadness before stunned disbelief. “You . . . you refused the position?”

“Yes. I—”

“The opportunity of a lifetime? The chance to obtain a level of success others would kill for? That position?”

“Yes.” Knowing she’d want to rant, he chose to keep his explanation to yes for the moment.

“I can’t believe it.” She stood and paced the small space of the room. “I worked really hard to get you that initial meeting, knowing in my heart that you were talented enough to get their interest. And now you just blow it all away because you want to stay with a children’s television show? Help me, I don’t understand.”

He went to her and took her hands. “Sunny. I appreciate all you’ve done, really. But—”

“Oh, he appreciates what I’ve done, but.” She took her hands back and stepping away, put her hands on her hips. “Okay. Please explain.”

“I like working on *Castle Clubhouse*. I like the challenge of my job. I like working with Stanley and Donovan, even the kids.” He smiled and said, “Working with your dad is unlike anything I could have imagined. I learn from him, about the industry and about life in general. I

don't want to go to a place where I'm in charge of everything, not now, maybe not ever." He stopped to take a breath. "I like my life. I like living near my mom. I like surfing on my time off and acting in our playhouse. I don't want to change anything."

There it was again, that flash of sadness, of disappointment in her eyes. It was quickly gone as she said, "I see. You mean you don't want to, I don't know, grow up?"

"I think that might be an exaggeration, Sunny."

"No? You tell me, what would you call a man that lives in his mother's garage and only wants to surf and play at acting?"

He shrugged. "Happy."

Her eyes were filling with tears. What was going on? He knew she'd be disappointed, possibly perturbed about his decision, but why the tears?

"Well, I guess I was wrong about you. I assumed you wanted to succeed. You don't need to show me the way out. I can find it myself."

He grabbed her arm before she could reach the door. "What is this really about, Sunny? I've never lied to you about who I was. From the beginning I said I might not want the job. Why are you so upset?" A tear escaped her eye, tearing at his heart. "Please, tell me."

Shaking her head, she said, "It doesn't matter. You don't want the job. You told me from the start I was wasting my time. You don't want anything more in your life."

"Speaking of, why is it so important for you to help me further my career? I mean, like I said, I appreciate the support but . . . why are you trying to change me?"

Her eyes glared at him. "Change you? Why would you say that?"

His mind was churning with images of their time together. "From the start you've wanted me to take this job, as if it was your mission in life. To make me into something else, something I didn't want to be. Well, sweetheart, you failed your mission. How does that make you

feel?" A small, cruel part of him was glad to turn the psychological questions back on her.

Tears streamed down her face. She swallowed once and said, "You are a real jerk."

He crowded her. "Maybe. But you're still holding something back. Perhaps you need to see a psychologist."

She pushed his chest and he was gratified that he only moved an inch or so. "I probably do need mental help since I actually thought you were a nice guy." She turned letting her purse swing into him. The hit was surprisingly hard. She must have packed bricks in the thing. She jerked open the door, stopping just to say over her shoulder, "I can't believe how stupid I was. That I thought you might . . ." She didn't finish the sentence but rushed away.

Leaving him standing there wondering exactly how she would have finished the sentence.

"The big jerk." That would be her mantra to get her through the last two months of working with him. Maybe she should just give her notice and cut out early. But she wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Besides, she loved watching her father work. And she'd come to love and appreciate the kids, with their various personalities and talents. And a tiny part of her admitted it would be hard to leave Josh when the time came.

She straightened her shoulders as she entered the sound stage. No. It wouldn't. *The big jerk*. A fat tear threatened to make an appearance, so she sniffed quickly before facing anyone.

There was a production meeting first thing and she was glad to have others as a buffer between her and Josh. She concentrated on Stanley as he spoke and occasionally sipped the coffee she'd purchased for him before work. He smiled at her and took another sip. Nice to have at least one fan at the meeting.

When the kids were out of makeup and ready for filming, her phone signaled a text. She glanced down to see that she'd been accepted

to the psychology program at Cambridge in the United Kingdom. Wow. She'd thought that had been a long shot.

Josh and Stanley got the kids ready for the first scene and she watched, surveying the production area looking for anything amiss.

England would be nice, but to be honest, she didn't want to go that far. Even with Josh, the big jerk, in this continent, she'd rather stay on this side of the ocean. It seemed to come back to Princeton or Stanford. She'd also received acceptance from UCLA but being in the same town as him might be too hard.

When Josh walked back for filming to begin, she said, "Matt's collar is half up and down." Her eyes stayed on the kids.

"Yeah, thanks." He hurried back to the group and fixed the offending collar, surveying the group one more time.

Filming started with Josh standing next to her. She tried hard not to smell the alluring aftershave that he wore. Or feel the heat of his body. Her attention was straight ahead, doing the job she was there to do.

"You've really gotten good at this job."

Darn him. Why didn't he just do his job and leave her alone. Her throat thick, she said, "Thank you."

"No, I mean it. You're a fast learner." She heard him sigh. "Look, I want to apologize for being so rough on you last night. You were only trying to help me. I'm sorry for being a jerk."

She almost smiled at that. Okay, so he wasn't really a jerk. He was a nice guy, an incredible guy. The one that had won her heart. But he didn't want her. Last night would have been perfect for him to express his feelings, to ask her to stay, tell her he loved her. But none of that had happened.

Of course she'd given him little chance after he told her he'd decided against the job, but he'd made it clear, hadn't he, that he liked his life the way it was, with no girlfriend, no relationship.

"I'm sorry, too," she whispered. Very sorry he didn't love her.

The kids continued with the scene and she and Josh watched. Again, she was amazed by the talented of the whole cast.

“I know you’re going to do well at whatever university you choose. Made a decision yet?”

“Not definite. I’ll have a final decision soon.”

“That’s good.”

The current scene ended and Josh and Sunny quickly moved to reposition the kids for the next scene. At one point, their arms bumped and she felt a shiver go through her. She ached for more contact, a casual hand squeeze or hug, or even a simple hand to the shoulder. It was torture being this close to him but yet so far. If this kept up, she would quickly go insane.

Just that quick, she made her decision. The other side of the country would probably be far enough away to get over Josh. Princeton, New Jersey would be . . . fun. She’d make the call on Monday. Knowing it was a big decision, she wanted the weekend to make sure.

She’d go somewhere for the weekend where she could think it through, maybe the beach. No, not the beach. It would make her think about Josh and that was the last thing she wanted.

After filming that day, she walked down the hall and spied Matt and Jennifer outside the dressing rooms. Matt held her hand, playing with her fingers as they spoke quietly.

With his straight, longish black hair and deep blue eyes Sunny could see how Matthew Mackenzie would be the epitome of a young girl’s fantasies. Along with appearing as an actor on the children’s show, he was the middle son of five talented brothers that formed the singing group “Mackenzie.” Surely, all he had to do was flash that grin of his and the girls would go crazy. She gave points to Jennifer who didn’t exactly fall down at his feet in adoration.

He glanced at his watch and said, “I gotta go now.” Looking into her eyes, he slid his hand over the side of her head and kissed her gently on the lips. Sunny could see Jennifer fighting tears.

Just before he left, Matt said, "I'll always love you, Jen." He walked past Sunny and grinned.

Jennifer stayed rooted to the spot. Ah, young love. Matt was probably her first love. Sunny remembered Gavin Cook, the sleepy-eyed, sixteen-year-old usher that worked at the theatre where her father was appearing. She'd been sure it was forever love, that they were destined to have a grand and glorious romance. They'd even shared a kiss—her first at the age of fifteen. It was true love. Until he'd thrown her over for an older woman, all of eighteen.

She'd always think of him fondly because he was her first love. Just as Jennifer would always, in some way, love Matthew Mackenzie.

Jennifer saw her watching and sighed, smiling. "He's really wonderful, isn't he?"

"He's a nice guy," was all she said.

"We're in love." Jennifer hugged herself, her eyes sparkling.

"That's . . . great, honey. But be careful, okay?"

"What do you mean?"

She walked over and leaned back against the wall next to her. "Guys . . . sometimes have a different agenda than girls." She would not mention how young Jennifer and Matt were. No teenager wanted to hear that. "Love is wonderful. Absolutely. Just . . . remember what you want in life and don't compromise on what's important to you. Okay, honey?"

The girl smiled and nodded. "I will. It sure has been nice having you here, Sunny. We think you and Josh are the cutest couple. Let us know when it gets serious."

She felt her face burn. "We"? Did everyone know she and Josh had been seeing each other? "Oh, we're not . . . not exactly what you'd call an item."

Jennifer's knowing smile bothered her. "Okay. Whatever you say. But love is hard to hide from another person who's in love." Glancing down the hall, she said, "My mom's here. See you later."

The girl's words had her thinking. Obviously everyone knew she was in love with Josh. But they weren't furthering their relationship. In fact, it was pretty much over between them.

One fact was crystal clear now. She couldn't work here a day longer, standing all day next to Josh, feeling what she did, knowing he didn't return the feeling. There was only one thing to do. She was tendering her resignation immediately.

She walked slowly to the stairs that led to the offices, planning her next few months. Should she take off this time to prepare for college? Could she get another job with even more interesting interactions for a budding psychologist?

Maybe she could get a job at McDonald's.

By the end of the next week, Josh had never been so eager for the weekend. It wasn't that the workweek had been hard. In fact, the kids had been amazingly cooperative. Bill had been wonderful as usual. Donovan had been pleasant, even helpful with the kids. He'd let Josh know that the movie offer had come in and a few days ago, the whole cast and crew had celebrated together with a small party. But even that hadn't help lift him out of his funk.

It was obvious to him what the problem was. Sunny was gone. He'd come in Monday morning to see her resignation sitting on his desk and read it twice before believing it. He'd wanted to throw things. Why would she do such a thing? He, along with the whole cast and crew, had come to rely on her presence, depend on her help. Why would she leave them like she had?

She couldn't still be mad that he hadn't taken that job. They'd been all through that and both vented their feelings. He was sure they'd moved on.

Asking Bill what was going on didn't help although he did tell him she'd gone away for the weekend to make her college decision. And that decision was Princeton University. Across the country.

Well, he wished her the best. She was going to make an amazing psychologist, of that he had no doubt.

But he still missed her. He missed her following him around. Missed their sharing lunch together, discussing the nuances of the show, the various personalities. He just missed her.

After they shot the final scene for the week, he saw Jamie and remembered his promise to the girl. “Hey, Jamie, could I see you for a moment in my office?”

Jamie glanced around at her co-stars and said, “Yeah. Sure. But for just a minute.”

Josh wondered what that was about. Usually Jamie didn’t give a fig what the other kids thought of her.

In his office, he motioned for her to sit down. After he took his chair, he said, “I told you if there was any news about my directing a movie I’d let you know first.” The interest in her eyes at the news story almost made him laugh. She glanced around, clearly for a pad and pencil, and he chuckled. “You’re not going to need to jot anything down. I just wanted to let you know, I decided not to take the position. I’m staying here.”

She took a moment to absorb the news and, to his surprise, a huge smile blossomed over her face. “You’re staying? Yay!”

Josh frowned. “Yay? Why do you say that?”

She shook her head at him as if he were the most idiotic man on the planet. “Josh, don’t you know how much we care about you? I know, most of the time we’re a bunch of spoiled, egotistical kids that you have to deal with. My condolences to you. But you’re not just a typical, ignoring grown-up. You seem to actually like us. You listen to our problems and help us with solutions. We love you.”

He had a hard time swallowing with the emotion he was feeling. In his mind, the decision to stay had absolutely been the right one. “Thank you, Jamie,” he choked out.

“Now before you get all comfortable and chummy I think you need to go to the set. We’ve got a big problem.”

The good feelings evaporated. “Ah, come on! It’s Friday night and I have an important meeting scheduled with my surfboard.” He stood and marched out of the office. “Honestly, can’t you guys go for a day without testing the limits of my patience? If I have to—”

“Surprise!”



Chapter Thirteen

JOSH STOPPED MIDSTEP, trying to process what he saw before him. The whole cast and crew were huddled behind a large cake that read, “We love you Josh.”

“Um . . . what’s this?”

Bill laughed loudly. “What do you think? We all know you rejected the movie offer to stay with us band of ragamuffins.” He glanced at Jamie who just smiled. She’d known all along. “We just wanted to show our love for you. We’re very glad you’re staying with us.”

Matt started the group singing, “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow.” It was a good thing since Josh couldn’t speak.

When the song and the following applause ended, he said, “Thanks everyone. Really.” The girls surrounded him, giving hugs. The males shook hands or high-fived him. He couldn’t put into words how much this show of affection meant to him.

“We going to eat this cake or what?” Stanley asked.

“Let’s eat,” Josh said.

A few of the kids ran for plates, napkins, and plastic forks and a smiling Donovan set himself behind the cake with a knife to cut pieces. “I’ve got your piece here, Stan, as large as your yell.” Everyone laughed.

Josh settled himself down for the next hour to share cake, chatter, and laugh with the group he’d come to love.

The surfing was mediocre at best. Or maybe his skill was off today.

The surprise party had been nice. It had calmed his aching heart a bit. But then he’d gone home to spend Friday night alone. He’d checked on his mother but she informed him she was going out on a date with Roger Banning. A date? His mother? It was still a little hard to imagine.

He didn't sleep much, anticipating the morning when he'd let the heat of the sun and the chill of the water slap some sense into him.

Thinking over the last week, he couldn't remember a time when he'd been so lackluster in his job. He'd functioned, just barely. It was like he'd lost all enthusiasm for his job and it was all because of Sunny. She wasn't there with him.

The past few months with her filtered through his mind. He remembered being irritated at her being there, assigned to work with him. How she had taken to the job, making the lives of the cast and crew of *Castle Clubhouse* easier and . . . softer? It was that woman's touch that added so much to the day.

Then he'd kissed her and been a goner ever since.

They'd worked well together, spent time together, had fun. It had all been wonderful, but they always knew it would come to an end. So why did she decide to end it early? Because he didn't take her stupid movie offer?

No. He knew Sunny. Yes, she wanted to help people, but deep in his heart he knew there was something more. He thought about that night in his apartment. He could still hear her voice saying with pain, "You don't want anything more in your life." A moment later adding, "I thought you might . . ." She'd never finished the sentence. What did she want from him?

A wave swamped him sending him deep in the ocean. His heart squeezed, not from the plunge but from the fact that he missed Sunny so much. Yes, he loved her, sure, but he couldn't pursue her because . . .

His subconscious mind asked, "Why?" and he thought long and hard about it.

He heard Bill saying to him, "I hate to see a man reject love even before it can start." Was he rejecting love?

His mother had looked him in the eyes and said, "I wouldn't trade one day, one hour with Jefferson Butler. It was the adventure of a lifetime. Something I pray everyday for you to have."

Like a huge slap of the water, he knew what his problem was. He was afraid. He'd seen the all-consuming grief that his mother had experienced when the love of her life had died. He'd vowed to himself he would never go through that. Never to be so devastated by love lost that he would wither away into nothingness. Become so distraught that you hurt yourself. Like his mother had.

But look at her now. He smiled as he paddled out. She was director for a community theatre and dating. She'd come back to the woman he remembered.

So the question was could he take the chance to love with his whole heart like his parents had? Fear curled in his belly at the thought. What if . . . he could spend his days in "what ifs." What mattered was that he loved Sunny Whittaker.

But maybe she didn't feel the same way about him. She'd left. Of course, he hadn't given her a reason to stay.

He sat up straight on his board. Was that what she'd been upset about the night at his apartment? Not that he didn't want to make room in his life for a director position but that he didn't want to make room in his life for her?

He slapped his forehead. "Oh my gosh, you are an idiot!" You serve the woman food and wine, have candles on the table and wine chilling and all you want to talk about is declining a job promotion?

It was clear as a bell now. She loved him. But with his idiotic behavior had he lost her? No, he'd find a way to get her back and convince her to stay in Los Angeles. They had psychology programs here, didn't they? Of course they did. Surely. Hopefully.

One thing he knew, he wasn't letting her go.

When the next wave came, he rode it all the way to shore with a smile on his face.

"Any luck finding a job, sweetie?"

"No, dad. Nobody's hiring. Especially for a few months. I picked a rotten time to look."

Bill sat next to her on the swing in their back patio and put his arm around her. "You can always come back to the set. You know everyone would love to have you."

"Not everyone." She sighed.

"Yes, everyone," he said, squeezing her shoulder. Josh misses you too, you've got to know that. Why, you should have seen the poor boy walking around this past week, miserable as can be."

That was news. "He was miserable?"

"Completely. So much so, we had to give him a surprise party yesterday to try and cheer him up."

"That was nice of you." She stood and walked over to the rail, fingering the flowers in the flowerboxes in front of her.

"Sunny. Do you love the boy?" Her father's quiet question was like a punch to the gut. Her heart was breaking. Each time she thought of Josh, a little piece broke away. "Yes," she whispered.

"Does he know?"

Shaking her head, she said, "I couldn't tell him, Dad. He's determined not to change anything in his life. I'm afraid that includes adding me."

She sighed. "I think I'm going to see if I can get a jump on my psych classes and do some online things."

Bill stood and walked to her. "So you're just going to quit? Just like that?" His eyes speared her. "Never took you to be a quitter."

"But he doesn't want me."

"Honey. Men are . . . well, sometimes obtuse, to be polite. We can't see past the end of our own nose. How do you know he doesn't love you if you haven't told him how you feel?"

She shook her head. "It's useless. I'm not going to make a fool of myself, chasing a man that doesn't want me."

"Interesting." He walked back and sat on the swing, putting it in motion.

Her curiosity piqued, she said, "What do you mean interesting?"

“Oh, that my daughter who has always been the most brave, the most assertive of all of us would be scared away by feelings.”

She raised her brows. “Are you trying psychology on me?”

“Now why would I tangle with the master,” he said, smiling. “It’s just that you’ve never had any trouble going for what you want. Unless it involves feelings of love. Why do you think that’s so?”

She frowned as she walked to join her father on the swing. “That’s an interesting assessment. Do I really do that?”

“Mm-hm. It’s almost as if you stop yourself because you don’t want to . . . I don’t know, experience the grief of loss? In case the relationship dies.”

The psychologist in her couldn’t let this go. Her mind worked on warp speed thinking through the cause, effect, and ramifications. “So you’re saying that I purposely don’t fight for relationships because I’m protecting myself from the possibility of grief?”

Suddenly her clinical mind switched to mush as she realized. Her brother. She thought she’d worked through all the grief, all the emotions accompanied with his death. Apparently, she was wrong.

Her eyes filled and overflowed. A sob bubbled up from her throat. “Oh, Daddy,” she whispered.

He took her in his arms and let her weep, kissing her head and holding her. “I guess we work through grief in different ways.”

“I thought I was past it.”

“Can one ever get past losing a loved one?” He gently shook his head. “I don’t think so and in some ways it’s okay. It helps us to remember the person we love. Helps us remember him fondly and go on, hoping we’re making him proud.”

She squeezed her father’s middle, loving him more. “Yes.”

Bill let out a huge sigh. “I think that’s why I work so hard on *Castle Clubhouse*. Sometimes . . .” His voice choked. “Sometimes I feel so close to the kids and Donovan, because I want to help them, to . . . save them. Like I couldn’t do for Dave.”

The mention of her brother had her sobbing again. “Oh, Daddy.” She felt his tears drop into her hair.

They stayed like that for a long time, each thinking their own thoughts, feeling their own sorrow. Finally, Sunny sat up. “What do you think I should do?”

“If you really love the boy—”

“I do. I love him so much it hurts.”

Bill smiled. “If you really love him, let him know. If he’s not interested, you move on. But I can hardly think the miserable Josh Butler that we endured this week doesn’t love you just as much.”

“You really think so?” She felt a smile starting and hope dawning in her heart.

“I do.”

“But how do I tell him, I can’t just blurt it out. I’ve got to set the stage, I’ve got to—”

“Hold on, there,” he said, chuckling. “Let’s take it one step at a time. Why don’t you come back to work? Test the waters there?”

She sniffed. “That’s a good idea. I can gauge his reaction to me. Then I can . . . Daddy, what am I going to do about Princeton?”

“You don’t have a solution to that?” His eyes twinkled at her.

She giggled and said, “I believe I do. I think I’m going to put that solution into motion right now.” She leaned over and kissed her father soundly on the cheek. “I love you, Daddy. You’ll always be my knight in shining armor.”

“That’s my job.” He winked at her.

After jumping off the swing, she ran to her room. She had work to do.

Once she was gone, Bill pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and looking up his contacts, punched in a number. His eyes went to the door, making sure no one was listening.

“Hello, Josh? We need to have a talk, son. I wanted to prepare you that someone is coming back to work on Monday.”



Chapter Fourteen

MONDAY MORNING COULDN'T come soon enough. Sunny had spent extra time on her hair and makeup, wanting to look her best. She wore a frilly silk blouse, pretty flowing skirt, along with pretty but comfy wedge pumps. She hoped he'd approve.

When she entered the sound stage it was quiet, which was strange. Usually the crew was setting up, a few of the kids milling around. Donovan would usually be sitting at the makeup table reading the newspaper while waiting. Come to think of it, the studio looked a little dark. Did everyone have the day off?

That can't be. Her father had left a half hour before her to get here, saying he had some appointment to keep. She'd walk to his dressing room to check on things.

Her footsteps were loud across the floor of the quiet room. The silence was eerie but she reminded herself she had no time or patience for silly fear. The walls of the set seemed to move and she thought she heard whispers. Ridiculous.

When she'd gotten to the middle of the large room, the lights flicked on. Before she could call out, the kids came from behind the set carrying a variety of items—small table, two chairs, tablecloth, candle, bucket of ice, bottle of wine, two wine glasses. They set everything up in the middle of the set.

What the heck was going on here? "Um, hi kids. Did I interrupt something you had planned?"

Nick lit the candle and pulled out a chair. "Mi'lady?"

Shaking her head in confusion, she walked toward the table, but a familiar voice stopped her. "That's my line, Nick."

She glanced over to see Josh walking onto the set. He was dressed in dark suit and a green tie to match his eyes. Trying hard to keep her composure, she said, "What's going on?"

He took her hand and led her to the table, seating her. "It occurred to me that we never had our wine when you came to my apartment. Such a pity, it's a good vintage."

Her heart sprinting, she giggled. "I didn't know you knew so much about wine."

He sat and opened the bottle with a pop, pouring two glasses. "I don't. But champagne hardly ever disappoints." He handed her a glass, took his in hand, and tapped hers. "Cheers." She supposed the champagne was good, but the excitement of being with Josh overrode anything she could have gotten from a bottle.

The kids returned from behind the sets and stood together in an organized group. Matt had his guitar and began strumming. Their voices mixed together to softly sing to her and Josh. Her eyes filled with tears. It was such a sweet moment as Josh held her hand while they serenaded them. Her eyes moved over each child, so special in their own way.

They continued to enjoy their wine and the concert. It was wonderful, although her tense body sensed something more was going on.

After the song was over, she and Josh applauded. The kids bowed and left again. All but Matt.

"I thought of something else we haven't done yet."

"Oh?" Her heart was almost pounding out of her chest. "What?"

He just smiled. "Matt?" The young boy started playing again, a sultry, jazz number. "Shall we?" He offered his hand and she found herself giggling again.

She let him help her up and he took her into his arms, swaying with her to the music. He was a confident dancer, which made her want to ask how he'd gotten so good. Later. For now she'd enjoy the atmosphere, the music, the man.

When the song ended, they applauded. Matt bowed and winked at Josh. Okay, she was overly curious now. After the boy had left, she said, “Josh, this is wonderful but would you tell me what’s going on? How did you get all this set up? You didn’t even know I was coming today.”

He looked sheepish and stuck his hands in his pockets. “Actually, I did. I talked to your father.”

“My father?” A sudden attack of fear and embarrassment flooded her. If he’d gone and mentioned her feelings to him before she’d had a chance to tell him, she was going to kill Bill Whittaker.

Josh took her hands in his and took a step closer. “He said you’d had a change of heart and would be coming back to work.”

“Is that all he said?”

“No. He said this was my chance. And I’d better not blow it.”

“Blow what?”

She watched as the edges of his lips curved. His eyes seemed to glow. Her knees grew weak and her pulse pushed past all normal limits. She didn’t know how much more of this she could take.

Still holding her hands, he softly said, “I love you, Sunny. With all my heart.” She froze at the words. He loved her? He really loved her?

He went down on one knee pulling out a ring box from his coat pocket. With the box opened, he held it up. “Marry me. Be my wife, my world, my joy.”

Her heart felt like it would take wings and fly away. She was laughing and crying not knowing what to say. What she did know was that she wanted to be in this man’s arms kissing him right now.

She dropped to her knees and threw her arms around his neck, taking his lips in a kiss to show her own love.

Finally coming up for air, they parted. “Does that mean yes?” Josh said, panting.

Her hands framed his face, the precious face of the man she loved. “I love you, Josh. Yes, to all of it.”

His smile beamed and he pulled her in for another kiss.

Loud cheers were heard behind them and when she opened her eyes, the kids of *Castle Clubhouse* descended on them. Everyone hugged and kissed, shook hands and high-fived.

Donovan and Stanley joined them adding their good wishes. Bill and Rose, both shedding tears, came in. Her mother kissed her cheek, sniffing the whole time. Her father's hug was so hard she thought her bones would break.

It was a wonderful time of happiness as Josh slipped the ring on her finger and gave her a dreamy kiss. The girls all said, "Awww" while the boys only made rude comments. She didn't care. She was going to marry the man of her dreams.

"Sunny, sweetheart. We need to talk about Princeton."

Her smile, the one she couldn't stop, beamed at him. "All ready taken care of. You're looking at the newest psychology graduate student of UCLA."

"That's my girl." And he kissed her again."

Another cake was brought in, this one saying, "Congratulations."

"Wow, I'm speechless, guys," Josh said. "Two cakes in four days."

"Ah, it was nothing," Joey B said. "We had the congratulations cake ordered in case you took that movie job." Everyone laughed.

After everyone had eaten cake, Stanley slapped Josh's back. "This is wonderful, just great. Almost shed a tear myself. Now everybody, back to work!" His yell caused everyone to smile. And comply.

Sunny didn't mind. Glancing at her ring, she delighted in the fact that she was going to work today beside Josh Butler, talented assistant director. The man she loved, her fiancé.

She quickly helped Stanley and Josh get the kids ready, her heart warm and happy. Stanley gave last minute instructions and they got out of the way for filming.

"Matthew Mackenzie, stop looking at Jennifer. Sammy, you're hogging Ashley's light. And Joey B. Uncross those eyes immediately!"

She laughed and took her place next to Josh. Knowing that no matter how well the filming went today, Josh had already directed the best scene ever to appear on the *Castle Clubhouse* set.



Epilogue

THE AUDIENCE CHEERED and applauded as each member of the cast took his or her turn walking out to take a bow. Josh took a breath and blew it out, waiting for his turn. As “Grandpa” in the play, he’d be the last to come out.

Their first performance of *You Can’t Take It With You* had been a huge success. The theatre was nearly sold out and their presentation had gone without a hitch. He’d never seen his mother’s smile so bright. It warmed his heart.

He couldn’t wait to see Sunny and talk to her, get her take on the play. Sunny. The nickname her father had given her at birth really fit her. She was a bright light in his world, filling all the cold places with a warmth and comfort he craved.

And she was all his. Maybe he could talk her into moving up the wedding date.

He walked onto the stage to take his bow to the thunderous applause of the house. It gratified him that the audience would appreciate all their hard work. With a deep bow, he remembered his father, accomplished actor, faithful husband, and loving father. He would have gotten a big kick out of the theatre and seeing his son and wife involved. Maybe he was watching.

Josh looked into the crowd to thank them and received a big surprise. There on the first and second rows, along with Sunny, were the cast and crew of *Castle Clubhouse*. All the kids, Stanley, the Whittakers, even Donovan, were on their feet cheering for him. He was taken aback at the tremendous support.

He blew a kiss to Sunny and waved to the kids. Then as was tradition, he joined hands with the other actors and took a final bow, his heart filled with love for all the people in his life.

Standing, he studied the faces of all the kids from the show. And silently prayed for their future. Seeing Bill hugging Ashley and joking with Nick, he knew that somehow, someday, everyone from *Castle Clubhouse* would be all right. And if they had problems? They'd always have Bill to help them. He was thankful he still had time to learn from this incredible man.

His eyes went to fiancée. The love he had for her welled inside of him so that he didn't think he could hold anymore. When she mouthed "I love you" he found he could and gave the words back to her.

Yes, he was marrying a psychologist, which meant that his daily actions would probably be analyzed and reported. But that was okay because love was worth the pain, the struggle, the challenge.

And he was ready to start. To begin the adventure of their lives.



THE END

THANK YOU FOR READING *The Course Of True Love*, the first book in the Castle Clubhouse Romance Series.



It's twelve years later and the cast from the iconic show need help! FIRST UP IS MOVIE STAR Donovan Baxter who needs help finding out there's more to life than fame. Get your copy of *All's Fair In Love And Fame* here.¹

For an excerpt, turn the page.

1. <http://malindamartin.com/books>



From All's Fair In Love And Fame

IT ALL STARTED WITH a paper napkin.

Who'd have thought? Cassandra Brown had used the napkins for years to wipe faces, noses, and other various body parts of her children. Now because of a little commercial for the product, she was sitting in a hotel suite in Hollywood, California, waiting for the "Hottest Man Alive," Hollywood's most elusive bachelor, Donovan Baxter, to knock on her door.

It had to be a dream. Or a really bad joke: What happens when you cross a Hollywood hottie with a stay-at-home mother? The answer would probably be: You get number one on a top-ten list of most ridiculous meetings.

Cassie paced the floor in anticipation of meeting the movie star as her four children and one sister ignored her. Her breathing was heavy, her palms were sweaty, and her heart was convinced she was running a race.

What would she say? What would she do? Would she make a complete fool of herself?

Cassie stopped to take a deep breath and rub her palms down her black slacks. Hopefully her perspiration wouldn't stain the material.

"Mom, I can't find my CD."

"Mom, Peter's not getting off the X-Box and he's been on forever!"

Cassie could feel the butterflies in her stomach now speeding in formation as her mind tried to catch up to what her children were saying. She looked over at her kids and let her perspective adjust. A gush of unconditional love washed over her as she smiled at them.

It had been a little over a year since her husband had passed away and Cassie was determined to build a new life for her and her kids.

Not a better one—how could she? Jim had been the center of their lives—but one that was stable, happy, and loving. Always loving.

Seeing her children staring back, Cassie murmured, “Ah, what?”

Her sister Tracy, who’d been reading a *People* magazine, stepped in to help. “Boys, take turns. Thirty minutes each. And Sarah, I’ll help you look for that CD in just a minute.”

Tracy walked up to Cassie and rubbed her back. “Sis, you need to calm down. Your face is drawn so tight I think you’re going to break. Now just relax, will you? Everything’s going to work out, I just know it.”

Sweet Tracy. Cassie didn’t know what she would have done without her. When Jim died of a short-term battle with cancer, Cassie wasn’t able to breathe, let alone care for their children. Tracy left her job as an elementary teacher to help, and Cassie would forever be thankful.

She hugged her sister. “What if I’m completely terrible at this?”

“You won’t be. You were great on that commercial. Donovan Baxter must have thought so or you wouldn’t be here.” Tracy pulled back and said, “And if you don’t get this part, it’s no big deal. We’ll just go home and get on with our lives.”

Cassie tried to smile as she thought again of living her life without Jim, raising their children without him.

She took a big breath and nodded to Tracy. She had to be strong, had to do what she could to take care of her family.

“Mom, could we get a dog?”

Cassie glanced over at seven-year-old Spencer and saw his shining brown eyes. The love swelled again as she went to him and, wrapping her arms around him, kissed his head before he squirmed away.

“We’ll talk about it . . .” When? When could they discuss normal things like getting a pet? “We’ll talk about it later.”

“You know what that means,” her daughter, Sarah, said, sighing.

“No, really, guys,” Cassie quickly replied. “We just have to figure out . . . things.”

She studied her children. Sarah, her pretty little ten-year-old daughter with golden blonde hair like hers. Spencer, her baby who kept asking questions about why Daddy had to go away. Peter, her thirteen-year-old, who felt the responsibility of being the man of the family. But still wanted to be a child.

And nine-year-old Cooper. He looked at her with his big eyes a little dazed, as if he wasn't sure of what was going on. He rarely spoke since Jim's death and she really couldn't blame him. What was there to say?

She smiled and said, "We'll get a dog. One day, I promise."

That seemed to satisfy everyone as they went back to their activities and Cassie returned to pacing. She spied the huge fruit basket that had been waiting for them upon arrival, from the Bosworth Baxter Production Company. It looked as if it had been ravaged by starving cannibals. A banana was left dangling over the side, and Cassie decided a small snack before dinner might help settle her nerves.

"Hey, Mom. Could I get out a soda?" Apparently, Peter had been talked out of the X-Box and was rummaging around in the suite's kitchen.

Spencer stood up and said, "We've got sodas?"

"Yeah. Lots of 'em here in the refrigerator," Peter answered.

"We've got a refrigerator?"

Cassie chuckled. The most extravagant hotel room they'd ever had was the family suite at the Best Western in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

The knock on the door sounded like a clap of thunder, causing her to drop the banana. Cassie's legs froze in place. Her heart was thumping madly as she watched the stampede of people charging the door.

Her legs loosened and with a speed she didn't know she possessed, she ran to stop them. Reaching the door first, she called out in a strained whisper, "Back away. All of you."

Once they were behind her, she looked through the peephole and saw him—a man she had seen in magazines, on television, in movies.

She somehow felt removed from the moment, as if she were still viewing him in a video downloaded on her cell phone instead of looking at the real thing. He was so handsome that her heart couldn't help but skip a beat.

"Mom, you gonna open the door or what?"

Cassie nodded. After one last, long breath, she unlocked the door and opened it.

And for the life of her could not remember how to speak.

He smiled politely and said, "Cassandra Brown? I'm Donovan Baxter. Nice to meet you."

On automatic pilot, Cassie stretched out her hand to shake. She couldn't help comparing her image of him with the real man. He was shorter than she expected, probably just shy of six feet. His eyes were deep blue and more expressive than film could capture. His hair was dark blonde, long enough to curl at the edges around the lapel of his sport coat.

He smiled slightly. "Is it all right if I come in?"

Cassie dropped her hand. "Of course. I'm sorry. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Baxter."

"Call me Donovan, please." Donovan entered the suite. "So, do you go by Cassandra?"

"Cassie's fine." She could feel her family behind her whispering and moving, no doubt in order to get a better look at the celebrity. Perhaps she should introduce them but for the life of her, she couldn't seem to get her tongue to work.

Donovan chuckled. "I take it this is your family." When Cassie nodded, he said, "Could I meet them?"

"Oh, ah, sure." She gave them all the "mother's eye" before turning back to Donovan.

After introductions were made, Sarah said, "Do you really know Matthew Mackenzie?" Young Sarah had a huge crush on the singer that

had been on the popular children's show *Castle Clubhouse* with Donovan Baxter years ago.

Cassie noticed the sigh before Donovan replied, "Yes, I do. We worked together for a while."

Sarah jumped up and down, stifling a squeal.

"Know any superheroes?" Spencer asked.

Donovan chuckled and said, "Only actors who think they are."

The group walked toward the couches and Donovan nodded toward Cooper, who sat alone. "How's it going?"

The boy just looked at him with blank eyes. To Cassie's horror, Cooper stood and kicked Donovan in the shin and ran to one of the bedrooms.

Cassie hurried over. "Mr. Ba—ah, Donovan. I'm so sorry. Please forgive Cooper. He's . . . a little intimidated by all that's happening."

"I understand," Donovan groaned, rubbing his leg. "No harm done."

Cassie hoped he was right.

"Listen, before we go to dinner, I'd like to chat about the project," he said.

Cassie turned to Tracy who ushered the children out of the room, giving Cassie a wink before closing the door.

"That's quite a family you have there." Donovan sat on the couch.

"Yes, they are. My entourage." Cassie's voice shook slightly as she took a seat.

The woman was uneasy. Nervous. And attractive. Not in an obvious, Hollywood way. Just what he needed for this movie.

Maybe auditioning an unknown, fresh from her success in an award-winning commercial wasn't the smartest move Donovan had ever made. But he could trust his instincts, and the moment he'd seen the commercial, he knew Cassie was right for this role. He needed to put her at ease. "Tell me about yourself."

"Sure. But before I do, could you answer a question?"

“If I can.” Donovan leaned back on the couch.

Cassie sat up straight and asked, “Why me? Why am I here?”

Donovan lifted his eyebrows. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m a mother from central Florida. I only took a few acting classes with a friend. It really was a fluke that I got the part on the napkin commercial to begin with and then when it went national you could have knocked me over with a feather. All of a sudden I’m getting offers for other commercials, I’m being interviewed by the media and . . .” She took a breath. “I get a call from your company. Why am I in Hollywood auditioning for a major motion picture?”

Donovan smiled. No huge actor’s ego here. He could definitely work with someone like that. “I received a very funny script that interested me. That doesn’t happen too often. The part was different. Another plus for it. Not my usual action-packed or intellectual film with the busty actress thrown in for distraction. For *Family Reunion* to be a success, I need the woman who plays my wife to be convincing, well liked. I saw the commercial you made for Lecour’s Napkins and you had me. The emotion on your face was as real as it gets.”

Her green eyes grew wide.

“I almost cried,” he said dead panned. Then frowning added, “Even now I can’t watch that commercial when I’m with others. It’s too embarrassing.”

Cassie laughed. The sound caused Donovan to smile. He took another moment to study her. She seemed so different from the women he knew—there was a simple beauty about her that he wasn’t used to. She seemed genuine. And those eyes. If the situation had been different, and he was a different man, maybe he’d see what other emotions hid behind those eyes.

He mentally shook himself and came back to the job at hand. “Regardless, once I saw the commercial I thought you might be the one that could carry this part.”

“But I—”

“I know. You don’t have a lot of experience. But you have a natural talent. And a likeable image. It came across in the commercial; it’ll come across in the movie. Plus, I know next to nothing about being a family man. I’m concerned I’ll come off looking like . . . Homer Simpson.”

Cassie laughed again. It made Donovan feel warm all over.

“I need a co-star that I feel can balance out my ignorance. Maybe help me appear believable.”

Acting in the movies was the only way he would ever be a family man.

Get your copy of *All's Fair In Love And Fame* here¹.

1. <http://malindamartin.com/viewproduct/20>

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