

A DICARLO BRIDES NOVEL

A PERFECT FIT

*Heather Tullis*

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Published by Heather Justesen at Smashwords.

Published by Jelly Bean Press, 90 S Main St. Ste #2, Fillmore, UT 84631

Cover design by Bill J. Justesen

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## Cast of Characters

**Camellia DiCarlo (Cami)**—the oldest of George DiCarlo’s daughters, born to his wife, head of guest services.

**Sage Parker**—Second eldest, head of the resort Spa. Born to Darla Parker.

**Rosemary Keogh**—Third eldest of George DiCarlo’s daughters, born to Wanda Keogh, head of resort food services.

**Lantana DiCarlo (Lana)**—Fourth eldest, second daughter by George’s wife, hotel manager.

**Delphinium Gifford (Delphi)**—Fifth eldest daughter by Zelda Gifford, head of resort events.

**Jonquil Chestnut**—Sixth eldest daughter by Trudy Chestnut, head of the resort floral center.

**Vince Talmadge**—Landscape architect, best friend of Jeremy and Gage.

**Jeremy Litster**—local photographer, best friend of Vince and Gage.

**Gage Mathews**—head of Deer Mountain, the local ski resort. Best friend to Vince and Jeremy.

**Harrison Forest**—older half-brother to Sage by another father. Head of hotel HR.

**Blake Bahlmann**—regional manager of DiCarlo Resorts, stationed out of the Juniper Ridge resort.

**Joel Watts**—former Navy SEAL, head of hotel security.

# Chapter 1

Camellia gripped her sister's hand as they passed into the wood-paneled conference room at the attorney's office. Her eyes burned, but she felt Lantana's fingers squeeze hers so she sucked it up and continued on.

A quick sweep of the room showed a lot more faces than she'd expected, and though all of them were familiar, she wasn't certain how she knew the women. Three women—two blondes and a brunette—were seated in the row of six chairs facing the table at the front of the room. She'd noticed them all at the funeral, and they'd been vaguely familiar then, but she still had no idea why.

"Cami, who are all these people?" Lana asked, leaning closer to whisper.

"No idea." Her eyes sought out Alex—her cousin, her father's lawyer, and estate executor.

He walked toward them, leaned in to kiss each of their cheeks and squeeze their hands. "Please take a seat. We'll start soon." He guided them to a couple of chairs along the right side of the room. "We're waiting for one more person."

"But what about—"

He interrupted Cami with a gentle touch to her elbow. "I'll explain everything in a few minutes. Try to be patient."

Cami sat beside Lana and looked up as Alex put a hand on each of their shoulders. "Are you okay?" he asked. "Would you like something to drink? I have soda, water or juice." He waved to a nearby table.

"I'm fine." It was a lie, she wasn't fine. She couldn't be fine the day after burying her father, after finding out he'd had terminal cancer that would have killed him in a matter of weeks—if the pulmonary embolism hadn't done it first. She'd known he wasn't well, but he hadn't said it was cancer. The loss made the pain of her mother's death five years earlier come back again full force.

"Nothing for me," Lana murmured.

A tall blonde—thin, lithe, a little snooty in her three-inch heels and impeccable navy dress-suit—sauntered into the room, scanning it, before taking a chair. Her short-cropped hair framed her face and though a valiant effort had been made to cover it with makeup, her eyes were red and puffy from crying.

Cami studied all of the women again, four of them besides herself and Lana. All of whom had thrown flowers on her father's coffin, all acted as though they had reason to belong, but none had approached her or Lana with condolences—or spoken to each other as far as she'd noticed. Who were they?

The women were near her own age, and so familiar. How had they known her father?

Alex greeted the newcomer, his low voice making the words indistinguishable, even from eight feet away. He gestured to his assistant to close the door, and he returned to the front of the room. He shot Cami and Lana a glance, grimaced, then let his eyes

follow the line of women.

“I’m glad you could all make it, though I’m sorry for the reason you’re here. I’m Alexander Checketts, the executor of George Marlin DiCarlos’s estate. Because all of you were important to George, he remembered you in his will.” He glanced at Cami again and she lifted a finger. “As you’ll be able to tell when you hear the terms, this was a very recent revision.”

“Aren’t there a lot of other bequests in the will? Friends, employees?” She swept her eyes over the other women, doubting they fit either category. Wouldn’t she have known about them if they were important to her father?

Alex touched his fingertips to the tabletop in a gesture she had long recognized as a sign that he was uneasy. Most people wouldn’t have a clue he wasn’t perfectly comfortable, but she knew him too well to be fooled.

“They will all be contacted separately, but this portion of the will concerns each of you equally, and your father and I felt it best to present it to you as a private group.” He picked up the legal forms and began to read the stultifying legalese which always made Cami’s head ache, even under the best of circumstances—and these were far from that.

When he reached the bequests, he studied them. “I’m going to skip over the little things he wanted given to others, though I’d be happy to provide copies of the will to anyone who would like to check it. I’ll go straight to the part concerning all of you.”

All of you? What did that mean? Cami glanced at Lana and caught confusion on some of the other women’s faces as well.

“To my daughters, Camellia DiCarlo, Sage Parker, Rosemary Keogh, Lantana DiCarlo, Delphinium Gifford and Jonquil Chestnut, I leave my latest resort.”

Cami’s eyes flashed to Alex’s, but his gaze was riveted on the papers he held, though he paused for a moment. She stared at the other women. *His daughters?* It didn’t make sense, but Alex started reading again, so she focused on him.

“Yes, you are all my daughters, though none of you knew about everyone else. You will share equally in my legacy, but first I have a requirement. The newest hotel and spa will be ready to open in September and if you want to earn your part of the inheritance, you will all need to pull together to make it shine, as I know you will.

“All of you have areas of expertise that will be valuable in the launch of this latest enterprise—expertise most of you have refused to fully utilize. You have two weeks from tomorrow to show up in Juniper Ridge, Colorado, to put everything into motion. There is a house I have purchased and furnished for your use during the course of your stay in the area.

“The trial period will last for one year from the opening date of the resort and your work will be evaluated by the regional director and Alexander Checketts. If you prove your mettle as I know you all will, you will each inherit equal parts of my estate, and share ownership in the hotel chain.” Alex mentioned the estate value, which was in the upper reaches of the nine-figure range.

Cami closed her eyes as a murmur went up in the room, punctuated by gasps. Her

stomach dropped at the sum. She'd known her father was rich, it showed in everything he was, everything he did, but this was far more than she'd realized. Far more than public record showed.

Alex continued, "Those who stick it out will get their one-sixth split, the rest will lose everything. If any of you choose not to participate, your portion of the inheritance will be donated to an organization or charity I have specified." He paused in the reading, a tick in his jaw showing his feelings.

He met their gazes. "So you know, your father was very careful to choose a different organization for each of you for your portion of the inheritance. He made certain the charities were ones whose core values you'd despise, so you'd have added incentive to not want them to get the money. You can speak to me after this meeting if you want to know where your portion of the inheritance would go." His eyes skimmed over them again, then returned to the will to continue reading. "As I now own all of your places of employment, or the buildings in which they reside, my directions will ensure you are all out of work if you choose to defy me."

All of the air escaped Cami's lungs. Her head spun and she thought she might be sick. Would she have time to get to a bathroom if the nausea filling her decided to pour back out again?

"Who needs his money or his job? I can find a job on my own." The last arrival stood and headed for the door.

"Delphi, come back and listen to the rest. There will be time for dramatic gestures later," Alex said, his voice firm without being harsh.

She turned and glared at him. "I like my life the way it is. If it wasn't good enough for him, it was his problem." She stalked out, slamming the door behind her.

Alex's jaw tightened, but he addressed the remaining women. "I'll catch up with her later. If the rest of you can wait until I finish reading the will, I'll leave you each with a copy of your contract and give you time to consider the terms."

He bowed his head and returned to reading, "Cami, you'll be in charge of customer services, including front desk, concierge, valet, *etc.* The heads of engineering and housekeeping will run their own departments, but report to you. Your ideas for enhancing the guest experiences and attention to detail are sorely needed in this venture.

"Sage, it's time you put those skills to use setting up and running the spa. You're wasting your talent working where you are when you have so much more to give back to an organization. Rosemary, studying abroad with various master chefs has prepared you well. You will head up the restaurant and catering services, and have a supervisory role over the bar."

Sage didn't appear surprised or upset by the decision while Rosemary growled something unintelligible and scowled.

"Lana, you'll take over as hotel manager, working under the regional rep's guidance. I think you've been on track for this position since you were six. Considering the less-



than-ideal situation I'm thrusting you all into, your level head and outside-the-box thinking will be necessary." Cami couldn't help but agree, and was glad to see the smile of pleasure on her sister's pale face. Though Lana had known about the decision for a while now, it was the realization of her dream.

"Delphi, you've been hiding your light under a bushel for too long. As hotel events planner, you'll bring a creative push and wide array of expertise to bear. Jonquil, your tutelage under my hand and throughout your adult life has put you in good stead to open the flower shop in the hotel. You'll be responsible for providing blooms for the suites, restaurant, public areas, events, and a selection for purchase in the gift shop.

"Combined, you six ladies, my daughters all, will make this venture the most incredible, innovative, successful resort anywhere." Alex paused and took time to make eye contact with all of them. "I know this is a lot for you all to take in, you've had a big shock, and I'm sure none of you are any happier about this than Delphi was. I'm sorry." Sincerity shone from him.

Jonquil's brows drew together in confusion as she studied her sisters' faces. Annoyance filled Rosemary's face, but she didn't stand to leave the room like Delphi. Cami couldn't help but wonder what was going through their heads. She felt as though she couldn't breathe properly—the betrayal to her mother, and the secrets he'd been keeping from her, from them all, nearly bowled her over.

Alex lifted the page and returned to reading. "Until your trial at the hotel is over, you'll live together in a home I have purchased for you unless you live with your husbands." Gasps and curses filled the air, causing Alex to pause in his reading. Lana squeezed Cami's hand, crushing her fingers, even as the thought of having to live with her father's other offspring made Cami's anger roil. Alex continued, "You must appear at the house and hotel for initial meetings on the specified day and get the ball rolling. Once things have been put into place, you may return to your homes to settle things and arrange for your absences from your current lives. One year after the hotel opens, your inheritances will revert to you to do with as you please. I love you all."

Cami wrapped her arms around herself, shivering despite the fact that the room had been plenty warm when she'd entered it a few minutes earlier. His daughters. He said they were all his daughters, and a glance around the room, the recognition of pieces of her father in each of the faces, told her it wasn't a figure of speech.

She glanced at Lana, seeing her pale face, the shock in her eyes. Cami squeezed her hand, but wasn't much relieved by the wan smile and half-hearted returning squeeze.

Alex set down the papers and met Cami's gaze again. "I suppose I ought to introduce you all to each other, though I've only recently met several of you. I'll start over here and work my way down the row." He gestured to Cami. "Camellia, who prefers to go by Cami is the oldest daughter, born to George's wife. Beside her is Lantana, or Lana, who will be the hotel's general manager, though if I hadn't seen her in action at work, I'd never believe she could be so bossy because she comes across so sweet in public. Don't let it fool you." He winked at her. "She was also born to George's wife and is fourth in line

according to age.”

This was an additional blow for Cami. Fourth? He'd had two other daughters between her and Lana? Somehow she'd thought he and her mother had gone through a rocky spot after Lana and that's when the women were conceived, but no, it had gone on for longer than that. Their whole marriage? Had her mother known? These thoughts rushed through her head in only a couple of seconds and she made herself focus back on Alex's words.

“Jonquil is next,” he pointed to a woman with blonde spirals cascading down her back and blue eyes the size of moon pies. “She's sixth in age and the one who picked up George's love for plants.

“Delphinium, who prefers Delphi, and rushed out of here so abruptly, is fifth in age. She's a brilliant events planner and will be a great help in coordinating weddings or conferences, a few of which have already been booked.”

The name brought realization to Cami. Delphi had lived on another floor in Cami's dorm during her last year of college. She and Delphi had spoken a few times, though they were no more than passing acquaintances. Had she known they were half-sisters?

“After her is Rosemary.” She had wide-set, blue eyes, a long fall of straight blonde hair, and a voluptuous figure which no doubt kept the men's attention riveted.

“I'm not sure I want anything to do with this.” Rosemary crossed her arms over her chest.

Cami realized Rosemary had gone to summer camp with her for a couple of years when they were kids. They hadn't gotten along at all.

“I can't blame you,” Alex said to Rosemary. “But I'd appreciate it if you gave it serious consideration,” He continued the introduction, “Rosemary attended culinary school and studied under masters in France and Italy. She's tops in the restaurant business, though she's been happy to let someone else run the show.” He held up a hand to stave off Rosemary's rebuttal. “She's third in age.”

He smiled at the last woman, who had curly brown hair brushing her shoulder blades, and wore little makeup. “Sage is the second eldest. She's been working in salons and spas since her teens and has traveled extensively throughout Europe learning their techniques in addition to more formal training.” Their father had sent Cami to work in the San Diego office one summer to ‘broaden her horizons.’ Sage had been working there at the same time, though they'd only shared greetings as they passed each other.

He slid the legal papers into the manila folder. “Now, I'm going to be in my office to work for the afternoon. I'll be available to any of you if you have questions or are in want of clarification. I'll be stepping out to speak with Delphi later, but feel free to discuss things together or to come and go. I'd like your answers by morning, if possible.”

Alex began passing out individual folders to them. “Here are contracts for each of your positions. I've spoken to the regional manager and he agrees you don't need to move to Colorado permanently yet, but you do need to make the trip in two weeks. Your father expected to live at least another month, so if you are not needed in Juniper Ridge

yet, you're welcome to return home for some time after the meeting. The estate will cover plane fare, rental cars and any other expenses you incur as a result of this move."

Cami's stomach churned, her head ached and her heart felt as though it was going to break as she took the file folder from Alex. How could her father have done this—any of it? He'd cheated on her sweet, devoted mother not once, but many times, and after dropping this bombshell on his daughters, he thought he could dictate their lives?

"One last thing. He left a letter for each of you. It's in your folder with the contract." He threaded his fingers together in front of him. "You have every right to be upset about several issues, but please read his final words to you and take them into account while you make your decisions. I may not have agreed with, well, almost any of this when he brought it to me, but I know he loved you all a great deal and thought he was doing what was best for you." He exited the room with an apologetic expression.

## Chapter 2

Cami held the folder and ran her fingers along the edges, trying to make her mind think.

The women stood, some turned to speak with their neighbors, though none of the words were overly friendly. Cami released Lana's hand. "I need a moment and I may speak with Alex after. You go on, I'll take a cab." They had ridden in together, but Cami couldn't discuss this until she'd had a few minutes to center herself. "I'll swing by your place later."

"No, I'll wait. I need a few minutes to take it all in, too." Lana looked almost sick.

Cami found a powder room and, deciding she wasn't going to vomit, sat on a bench in front of the counter and pulled out her cosmetics. She added color to her pale cheeks, freshened her lipstick, then stared at herself, trying to bring order to the chaos of emotions zinging through her. When she felt steady again, she stood and headed for Alex's office.

She marveled that her father had managed to keep it all so secret, these other families of his, or had he never seen his other daughters? Is that why Delphi had run out so angry? It would have been difficult to keep up with them all, between running his empire and jumping into every available bed at the drop of a hat. She'd thought him a wonderful father, a devoted husband, but what kind of father had he been to these other women? She wasn't going to think of them as her sisters. Shared genetics meant nothing compared to the bond she shared with Lana. And how dare he order them to run the new resort, disrupting their lives even further than this news would do when it got out. And it would get out.

On the other hand, he had manipulated every one of them into her path at some point in their lives, so he couldn't have ignored them completely. Would they resent the fact she had him around more just as much as she now resented their existences?

Alex's assistant showed Cami into his office.

He sat at his desk, watching her approach. He stood, circling the desk to her.

She held his gaze, stopping a foot away. Questions crowded her mind, but "How long have you known?" was the first to pop out.

"About your sisters?"

She wasn't going to use the word *sisters*. "About the other women—both the ones he fathered and their mothers? How long have you known my father—" Her voice cracked and tears pricked her eyes. It was like losing him all over again, only worse this time because she realized now that he wasn't the man she *thought* she'd known. When she spoke again, her voice was rough. "That my father had children he kept secret, and he'd gone out of his way to make sure we all met."

The last part was what killed her. It was almost as though he'd wanted to be caught. She doubted the encounters had only been between her and the others, which meant he had probably maneuvered them all into each other's lives at some point. Despite her mother's death five years earlier, he hadn't mentioned the existence of other offspring.

Why hadn't he told them, knowing he would force them all into this position anyway?

"I found out about them when his previous attorney retired and passed the account to me," Alex admitted. "The will has undergone several revisions in the past six months, but since he got cancer, they were all basically the same idea. He wanted you ladies to meet officially as sisters, not as mere strangers. And he wanted you to get to know each other, certain you'd become good friends. Though in my opinion, if he wanted you to be friends, he should have handled it differently."

"You think?"

Alex pulled her into a brotherly hug. "I was so angry with him, furious he had done that to your mother—that he planned to spring this on all of you. And yet, he loved all of you so much; it was obvious any time he talked about his daughters."

She buried her face in her cousin's chest and formed a fist, then pushed away and hit him in the shoulder. "Why didn't you tell me? How could you keep his secret when you had to know what it would do to me? To all of us."

He rubbed his shoulder, looking sorry. "Lawyer-client privilege."

Feeling almost regretful about hurting him—almost—she poked him in the chest this time. "To hell with lawyer-client privilege—this goes way beyond that. I trusted you. I never thought you would keep something so huge from me." Her voice broke as she spoke, the pain and loss building every minute.

"I couldn't tell you. You know I couldn't." He pulled her in again as she started to cry. "I'm sorry, Cami. I'm so sorry."

They stood like that for a long time before Cami glanced up and saw Jonquil standing in the doorway. She shot a pointed stare at Cami and Alex hugging, then turned away. Cami told herself she didn't care what the woman thought of her. Odds were the woman had been aware her father had been married, had daughters with his wife. This couldn't have come as a total surprise to rest of them.

Embarrassed anyway, Cami pulled back and gratefully took the facial tissue Alex offered her. She wiped her eyes, sure her mascara had smeared. "I don't suppose you left us any loopholes."

"That would have been extremely sloppy of me, and you know he wouldn't have allowed it." He wiped at a tear on her cheek. "I tried to talk him out of these stipulations—several times. He'd humor me for a few minutes before overriding my points, and went on with things the way he wanted them. He could be very stubborn."

"I know. I just can't believe he would spring this on me, on all of us."

"While I disagree with his choices, I know he loved you, and he hoped all six of you could become friends, or he wouldn't have done this. He wanted to give you the rest of your family." He picked up the folder she'd set on the table, flipped it open and removed the sealed letter from her father. "You haven't read it yet."

"No. I think I might be afraid to." It was stupid, and she was embarrassed to admit it, even to Alex, but there it was.

"Afraid of what?"

She smiled, though it was half-hearted at best. “Partly afraid he’ll say something that will make it hard to stay mad at him, and partly that he won’t find a way to explain himself.”

“I haven’t read the letters, so I have no idea what they say.” Alex took the tissue from her hand and wiped at her cheek, a brotherly gesture. “You have a smudge.”

“I’ve probably turned into a raccoon,” Cami said.

“Yes, but a beautiful raccoon. How could you help it with your killer genes?” He smiled, squeezing her hand. “Read your letter, and if you need to talk about it more, you have my number.”

“Thanks, Alex.” She didn’t think she was ready to face anyone else, but she wasn’t a coward, so she had to at least pretend she could handle this.

~\*~

That night Cami sat in her quiet condo, staring at the unopened letter. She’d already reviewed the contract, been more than happy with the terms—if you ignored the fact she didn’t want to move to ski-country, middle-of-nowhere, Colorado. He’d repeatedly asked her to take the job, and she’d refused. Why couldn’t he accept her wishes? Why did he have to bowl everyone over and force them to do his will? What was next, a return to arranged marriages?

She hadn’t signed the contract, hoping wherever her father was, he watched in agony, wondering if she would do as he asked. She’d never been able to deny him anything, unless you counted the way he wanted her to step out of the concierge position she’d filled in the Chicago motel for the past five years and take over a department elsewhere. She didn’t want to be the boss, preferring to provide excellent personalized service to hotel guests herself.

And it wasn’t like she needed the inheritance money, but having it go to an organization like Freegan Nation burned her—if they wanted to go digging through dumpsters for people’s scraps instead of getting real jobs and being productive, that was their prerogative, but no way she was going to encourage the lifestyle. Since that had been the point of her father choosing them, she had to at least admit he’d chosen well.

Her fingers trembled as she opened the heavy cotton bond paper.

*Dear Camellia, my sweet Cami,*

*I think of all of my girls, learning about the others is going to be hardest on you, and I’m sorry for that. I know I’m probably not leaving you much time to get things moving in Colorado, but your refusal to take the job without having your arm twisted didn’t leave me a choice. I suppose I can’t complain about your stubbornness, since several of you girls received that quality from me. I hope whatever you’re feeling now, you didn’t find out about the others early enough to sour our last days together. I’ve wanted to tell you about them for years, but couldn’t figure out a way that wouldn’t completely destroy the relationship we had.*

*You are my oldest, the first tiny baby I ever held and I fell in love with you on sight. I loved being a father so much. You all light up my life. I know you probably think I didn't love your mother, couldn't have loved her considering my lifestyle, but I did. She was my good friend, a sweetheart who was always there for me, and I tried to be there for her when she needed it, but though I adored her, we were always better suited as friends than as lovers.*

“Really, Dad? If you didn't really love her, why did you marry?” Cami set down the letter and walked away, staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the Chicago skyline. Anger tore through her and she embraced it. “How could you do this, Dad? How could you do this to Mom, to the rest of us?”

She spoke the words into the night, as if she expected answers. She hadn't thought much about her parents' relationship. It had seemed solid, and her mother had always acted happy. If that was a good marriage, Cami wanted no part of the institution. She couldn't accept infidelity, brush off the betrayal—not from her father, not for herself. It was as well, she supposed, that her relationship with Trent had ended. Would these extra emotional burdens, have made her so weak she would have given into his proposals if she hadn't kicked him to the curb already? Or would this have been the last straw?

After several minutes, she crossed the thick-piled carpeting again and picked up the letter, resolved to finish it.

*Your sisters are going to need you, and you'll need them. If you work together I know you can make this the greatest resort in the chain. If you don't, it will still succeed while you all fulfill your contracts. But don't settle for mediocrity, Cami. I've always been proud of you, of what you do and who you've become. Live up to your potential, and when you find something—someone, somewhere you belong—grab on and hold tight. Your tenacity, your love of people and ability to work with anyone will smooth your way in life, no matter what it throws you. Take time to stare at the stars, to enjoy the landscape, and to live life to its fullest.*

*All my love, Dad.*

Tears burned down her cheeks as she reread the last paragraph. This was his last wish for her and she knew she could do it. She sighed, grabbing a pen to sign the contract. It was only a year. What could happen in such a short time?

## Chapter 3

The house in Colorado was enormous, two full stories and sprawling in the pine forest. Windows glinted in the sunlight; rock and stucco created textures, colors, and tones indigenous to the area. Cami pulled into the ridiculously huge six-car garage and steeled herself to meet the others again. She hadn't spoken to any of the others at Alex's office, but she wouldn't have that option here.

Alex told her everyone signed their contracts, including Delphi and Rosemary, despite their clear opposition. The trip to Colorado brought the situation into focus for Cami, made it far more real.

Every inch of the property was perfectly cared for from the well-swept balconies and patios to the landscaping, which blended beautifully into the surroundings, if you ignored the fact it was a little too perfect to be natural.

Even the garage was spotless without a bit of dirt in the corners. Someone was seriously OCD—not that Cami minded. Having staff around to keep things clean would make her life easier and cut back on bickering over whose turn it was to do the dishes. She didn't miss those college dorm days at all.

Three cars were already here—all rentals, like hers. Lana was making the long drive from Chicago, planning to stay to oversee the last stage of the resort preparations. It was perhaps a bit outside the normal scope for a hotel manager, but she was, as always, an overachiever.

Cami snatched her purse, carryon, and a medium suitcase from the car to haul in. There would be time to go back for the largest bag. Before she reached the door to the house, however, a man with dark hair kissing his jaw and few days of beard scruff opened the outside door to the garage. "You need a hand?" he asked. He pulled off work gloves and set them aside, rubbing his palms on his blue jeans.

Cami couldn't help but take a second to run her eyes over his tall figure—and it was easy to see all the muscles through his sleeveless white shirt. He had a smear of dirt on his face, and his brown eyes flashed over her with a similar quick perusal.

"I'm Vince Talmadge, by the way. I'm taking care of your landscaping, both here and at the hotel." He extended a hand to her.

She found his palm hard, his fingers strong, but gentle. She met his gaze and felt a zing of interest flash between them, confusing her. He was completely unlike her usual type. "Nice to meet you. I do have another bag in the trunk, since you're offering." She clicked the remote, popping the trunk. "I'm Camellia."

She glimpsed back over her shoulder as he reached into the trunk, so she caught his frown. "I thought you were only staying a few days," he said. "How many clothes do you need?"

Guys just didn't understand. "I'm not sure how long I'm staying. It depends on what I learn at the meeting tomorrow." She held the door into the kitchen for him as he hefted the suitcase as if it weighed mere ounces instead of being so heavy, she'd barely managed to lift it into the trunk.



As he passed her, he snatched the medium-sized bag from her. “I’ll take this for you, too. Mrs. Grady should be around here somewhere. She’s been working like crazy for the past few weeks getting everything ready for you ladies. Sisters, right?”

“Something like that,” she murmured as she took in the gleam of glass, soaring ceilings and hardwood floors, the shine of chrome and calm presence of the dark marble countertops of the kitchen. Cooking in this place would be heaven. Not that she had much time for the activity. Or much skill at it—but in a room like this, she thought it would be a joy to learn more. Maybe it was time she learned more than the basics.

He caught her studying the room. “Some place, isn’t it? You won’t go knocking into each other here if you don’t want to, even if there are six of you. Hey, Mrs. Grady.” He looked toward the open stairwell, raising his voice. “You’ve got another arrival.”

A trim brunette in her sixties appeared at the top of the stairs in a pair of faded blue jeans and an oversized, men’s button-up shirt. “Wonderful. You’re Camellia, right?”

“Please, call me Cami. Which room is mine?”

“Up here.”

Cami followed Vince up the free-standing stairs to the landing overlooking the great room and kitchen, and headed to the last room on the left. Vince left the bags outside the door.

“Thanks for your help,” she told him.

“No problem. If I hadn’t, Mrs. Grady would have insisted on going back for the big one herself.”

The woman laughed heartily. “I’m not exactly on my last leg, but thanks for helping out.”

He gave her a cheeky grin and turned to the stairs, calling over his shoulder. “I’ll be mulching the beds if anyone else needs a hand. And nice to meet you, Camellia.”

“Same here.” Cami watched him descend the stairs with the speed and grace of a gazelle before she turned back to Mrs. Grady. “Known him long?” She was curious to learn more about the man, despite her warning radar telling her to stand back. He wasn’t like the guys she normally dated, and right now, with her life being dictated to her, she was finding the difference a little too enticing.

“Forever. I used to keep house for one of his friends’ families.” She opened the bedroom door. “Now, check it out. Your father approved the redecorating himself.”

The walls were a vibrant peach with pale green trim and cream wooden blinds. The colors shouldn’t have worked, but they did. They were repeated in the bedding, the desk snugged up against one wall, and the bathroom on the other side of the room. The vase in the center of the long counter was flanked with double sinks and filled with peach and white camellias—fake so they wouldn’t wilt, but so realistic—if camellias had come in peach—as to trick the eye. Plenty of cupboard and shelf space was available, all in cream with a long wall of mirrors behind the sinks and two on hinges so they could be positioned to give her three angles while she did her hair and makeup.

A stereo system was set up with a stack of CDs by musicians Bobby Darin, Perry

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