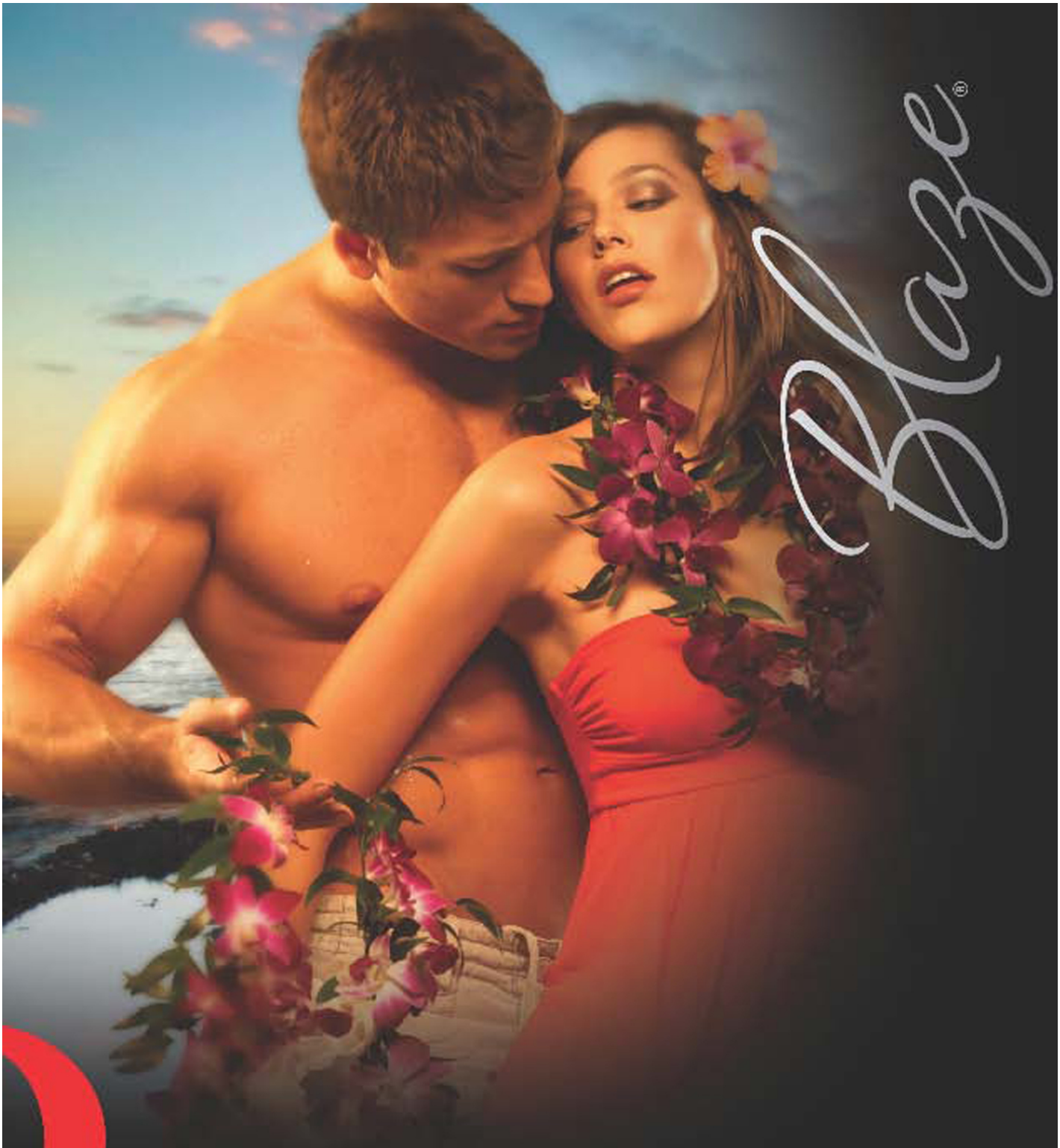

Blaze®

Second Time Lucky

Debbi Rawlins

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Second Time Lucky

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Mia Butterfield has just walked away from the lawyer life. No more late nights, no more dull contracts. And no more superhot-in-his-legal-briefs boss, David Pearson. But before she starts her new business with her friends, they decide to revisit Hawaii for a "Spring Break"…and all the sensual indulgences that come with it.Only Mia never dreams just how hot it'll get under the Hawaiian sun…David has followed her to the islands, and their serious lawyer sides appear to have gotten lost…along with most of their clothes! But even with a hot, delicious David at her side, Mia can't help wondering–how long will her lucky streak last?

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“Since when are you an expert on my personal life?” personal life?”

“Touché.” David took Mia’s hand, slowly rubbed her palm with his thumb.

She tensed, but in a good way. This was David touching her, his face so close that she could see the light flecks of amber in his brown eyes. Funny, she’d always thought they were much darker, more serious.

She straightened, tried to ignore the disturbing sensations his thumb caused. “In fact, Mr. Pearson, you really don’t know anything about me, do you?”

His gaze touched her mouth, lingered, and then leisurely moved up to her eyes. “Don’t I?”

He wrapped his fingers around her hand and tugged her closer. “My intentions must be fairly obvious now,” he said in a low voice. Then he put his mouth on hers, his lips soft and supple.

David knew how to kiss; he was even better than she’d imagined. When he retreated, lingering long enough to touch his lips to hers one last time, she nearly whimpered in protest.

“I’ve wanted to do that for three years…”

Blaze

Dear Reader,

Second Time Lucky is the first book in my Spring Break series. What a fun series this has been for me to write. The stories take place in Hawaii, where I was born, raised. I spent my childhood years on the windward side of Oahu—Kailua to be exact—and then moved to Maui shortly after I graduated from the University of Hawaii.

A few years later, I married a mainlander who transferred often with his job, and I moved away from the islands. Although I return often to visit family, I don’t get around Oahu much anymore. So when I sat down to write Mia and David’s story, I found myself revisiting places I hadn’t been in years. I had to imagine myself as a tourist, just like my hero and heroine, seeing the island’s natural beauty as if it were the first time. Writing these stories has been like a blast from the past, my own little Spring Break. And I hope these books inspire you to think about experiencing a little Hawaiian magic yourself.

Happy reading!

Debbi Rawlins

Second Time Lucky
Debbi Rawlins

www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debbi Rawlins lives in central Utah, out in the country, surrounded by woods and deer and wild turkeys. It's quite a change for a city girl, who didn't even know where the state of Utah was until four years ago. Of course, unfamiliarity has never stopped her. Between her junior and senior years of college she spontaneously left her home in Hawaii and bummed around Europe for five weeks by herself. And much to her parents' delight, returned home with only a quarter in her wallet.

This is for all the working moms who need a spring break more than anyone.

Women with dogs and cats totally count.

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Prologue

SHE WASN'T THERE. Disappointed, Mia Butterfield shaded her eyes against the bright sun and scanned the crowded park, her gaze quickly skipping over the noontime joggers and past the rows of nannies, whose concentration was split between children and gossip. With it being unseasonably warm for January, she'd felt certain Annabelle would be here walking her dog, or rather being walked by the oversize part St. Bernard and part Rottweiler she'd affectionately named Mr. Muffin.

Barely five feet tall and close to eighty, Mia's new friend should have had a nice little Yorkie or toy poodle as a companion, but no, not Annabelle. She preferred the big moose of a mutt that she'd found at the local shelter. Mia had only met Annabelle Albright six weeks ago when Mr. Muffin had spied a rabbit and pulled away from the older woman. Mia had been walking back from the courthouse to her office when she encountered the runaway dog. He'd literally run into her, costing her a pair of forty-dollar pantyhose and the three-inch heel of her new Jimmy Choos.

The upside was that Mia had made a new friend that day. A much-needed friend. Her two best buds lived thousands of miles away, but the truth was, Annabelle served a need neither of Mia's college friends could. The woman had an unbiased ear. She listened, her gaze clear, her smile knowing, her rare questions about clarity, not judgment. Sometimes the silence frustrated Mia. Here she was twenty-eight and all she wanted was someone to tell her what to do. She hated that streak of vulnerability.

From the time she was a kid she'd always been a take-charge person, fully in control, absolutely clear on what she wanted. Her younger brother and sister had come to her for advice, as had her friends. When she'd graduated from law school with honors, no one had been surprised. Not even when she'd been recruited by one of the most prestigious law firms in Manhattan. She hadn't bothered explaining to her family what an incredible opportunity that was for a young lawyer.

In retrospect, it was a good thing she hadn't made a big deal of it because then for sure they wouldn't understand why she wanted to quit. All of it. Just walk away. Start fresh. No, they wouldn't get it. She barely did herself.

The mere thought of what she wanted to do twisted her stomach into knots. She stared down at the white paper bag in her hand and sighed. She didn't care about the apples and yogurt she'd bought at the corner bodega. The main reason she'd taken a lunch break was in the hope of seeing Annabelle.

"Mia!"

At the sound of the familiar voice, she turned around to see Annabelle being dragged toward her by the big dog. Prepared for an onslaught of large paws and sloppy kisses, Mia knew better than to crouch.

"Hey, Mr. Muffin." She held out a firm hand for him to sniff. His attention immediately switched to the paper bag. "Seriously, I don't think you'd be that interested."

"If it's food, he's interested," Annabelle said with a throaty laugh, her remarkably unlined face artfully made up. "Come on, Mr. Muffin, don't be a mooch." She tugged on the leash to get his attention, and with her other hand reached into the pocket of a smartly tailored burgundy jacket that had once been elegantly in style. "Here you go, you big lug." She produced a plastic bag of treats and made him sit before passing him a MilkBone.

"I was hoping I'd see you here today." Mia straightened, anxious to take advantage of the dog's temporary distraction.

"It's marvelous weather. Can you believe it's January?"

"I know. I can't afford the break but I couldn't help myself."

Annabelle waved a gloved hand. "You work too hard as it is." She saw that the dog had finished and quickly gave him another MilkBone. "He shouldn't have so many treats," she said absently, looking over her shoulder. "Where is that young man?"

"Young man?"

"Oh, there he is. Good." Annabelle signaled to a blond teenage boy on a skateboard near the fork in the sidewalk.

He zoomed toward them, skillfully avoiding a strolling couple before pulling to a stop in front of Annabelle. "Hey, Mrs. Albright. I'm not late, am I?"

"Right on time." She handed him the leash. "A half an hour should tire him out." She crouched to nuzzle the dog's bulky neck, her fluid movement that of a much younger woman, a tribute to her early Broadway days. "Isn't that right, Mr. Muffin? You be a good boy, you hear?"

With hopeful eyes, the dog watched her pass the treats to the teenager, and then happily trotted off alongside the boy. Annabelle continued to watch the pair disappear while Mia found a bench partially shaded by a bare but huge old elm.

"Who's the boy?" Mia asked, as she brushed off the bench seat.

"Kevin, my neighbor's son." Annabelle joined her. "But you'll walk Mr. Muffin while I'm away on my trip?"

"What trip? You didn't tell me you were going anywhere."

"Oh, it's this cruise." Annabelle waved a dismissive hand, looking less than thrilled. "I'd promised a friend a few months back."

"Good for you." Mia rubbed her friend's arm. "It'll be great to get out of the city. Where are you going?"

"I don't actually know. Hamilton—" She cleared her throat. "—my friend, is in charge of all that."

Mia hid a smile. So, Annabelle had a gentleman friend who wanted to sweep her away. Which was made all the sweeter since Mia doubted the woman could afford a vacation of any sort otherwise.

Mia opened her bag and gave Annabelle an apple.

"Thank you, dear." The woman smiled. "You never forget that Granny Smith is my favorite. But I already ate my lunch."

Mia shrugged. "Save it for later. I bought yogurt, too."

Annabelle searched Mia's face, making Mia avert her gaze in case her intentions were too obvious. She guessed the woman was struggling financially, but was too proud to accept charity. Her clothes and shoes were well made and had probably cost a few bucks new, but most of her wardrobe should have been donated years ago. Still, she was always impeccably groomed, her white hair and makeup tended with great care, even her short buffed fingernails were nicely maintained. She clearly took pride in her appearance and even greater pride in remaining self-sufficient. Mia had made the mistake of offering to help buy food and hiring a dog walker for Mr. Muffin, and was abruptly shot down.

"So, tell me what's on your mind," Annabelle said with her usual forthrightness.

Mia hesitated. "I hate my job." There, she'd said it out loud. "I do," she insisted when Annabelle twisted around to narrow her faded blue eyes on Mia.

"What brought this on?"

"The hours are long. I have no social life." She shrugged helplessly. "It's sort of a combination of things."

Annabelle's expression softened. "Are you thinking about changing firms?"

A sudden chill breeze made Mia pull the lapels of her suit jacket tighter. "I don't know that I want to practice law anymore," she said softly.

Annabelle settled back on the bench and stared off toward the children riding the swings. "That's a big decision." Her voice was calm, reasonable, but Mia had seen the alarm flash in her eyes.

She thought Mia was being impulsive. Crazy, really. Who went through three grueling years of law school, was lucky enough to work at a firm like Pearson and Stern, and then walked away from it

all? Certainly not a sane person. Her parents were going to have the same reaction. God, she dreaded telling them. This was good practice.

"You're right. It's a huge decision. Not one I'm taking lightly."

"I should hope not." Annabelle frowned thoughtfully. "What would you do?"

"You've heard me mention my friends Lindsey Shaw and Shelby Cain. In college we'd talked about starting a concierge and rental business. Our sorority participated in a fundraiser where we all rented ourselves out for a day to run errands, cook, babysit, host a dinner—whatever the client needed for a specific occasion." She shrugged. "Not only did we have a blast, but we also could see the potential for some sort of full-service business in Manhattan."

"Sounds rather dangerous."

Mia smiled. "We'd make sure our clients are properly vetted. Besides, I figure the larger part of our business will be about renting designer purses and bridal gowns, that sort of thing. If kids from the local colleges want to sign up, we'd hire them for the concierge side. Our motto will be 'You can rent anything at Anything Goes.' Hey, maybe you'll want to rent out Mr. Muffin."

Annabelle smiled, but her expression remained troubled. "Your friends, they're willing to quit their jobs and move here?"

Mia sighed. That was going to be tricky. "I haven't discussed any of this with them yet."

"Oh…" Annabelle seemed relieved. "So you truly haven't made up your mind yet."

The reaction shouldn't have bothered her, but Mia couldn't ignore the sense of betrayal she felt. For some reason, she'd thought Annabelle might understand. Here was a woman who'd shunned convention, turned her back on marriage and children in pursuit of her career when women simply didn't dream of forging their own path.

"No," she lied. "I haven't made up my mind."

"Good. This is a very big decision. You mustn't be hasty and do anything while I'm gone." Annabelle reached over and squeezed her hand. "Don't walk away because of David."

Mia jerked back and blinked. "David? Why would you—He has nothing to do with this. I don't understand why you'd bring him up."

Contradicting Annabelle's gentle smile, her eyes gleamed shrewdly. "Of course. Forgive a doddering old lady."

"David's my boss, nothing more."

The woman nodded.

"The only reason you ever heard about him was because we worked a few cases together." She paused, frustrated that she was feeling defensive. So, she talked about work sometimes. It was only natural that his name had come up. It wasn't as if the man noticed her. She was just one among the many, a useful tool, a worker bee. He hadn't even so much as shared a pizza with her when they'd been stuck late at the office. As if there could ever be something between her and David. The idea alone was laughable.

Annabelle lifted her face to the sun, her eyes closed, an annoying smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

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MIA WAITED UNTIL the waiter had poured the champagne into her friends' glasses before she raised her flute. "To us," she said, grinning at Lindsey and Shelby. "We did it."

"Yes, we did," Lindsey agreed, her mouth twisting wryly and her expression not looking quite as enthusiastic as Mia's or Shelby's. "We now owe more money than any three twenty-eight-year-old women should owe in their lifetimes."

Shelby laughed and downed her champagne.

"You're such a pessimist." Shaking her head, Mia elbowed her. "If we didn't think we could make a go of this, none of us would've signed on the dotted line, much less have quit our jobs."

"You did?" Lindsey's eyes widened. "Seriously? You've turned in your resignation already?"

"It's typed up and will be on my boss's desk tomorrow morning." Mia swallowed around the lump in her throat, the one that seemed to swell every time she thought about pulling out all of her savings and having no income until their new venture turned a profit. She glanced at Shelby. "What about you?"

"I was just waiting to sign the loan documents. I'll turn in mine on Monday as soon as I get back to Houston." Shelby snatched the pricey bottle of Cristal out of the ice bucket and refilled her glass. "We might as well enjoy this. After tonight, it's gonna be the cheap stuff for us until we make some dough."

Lindsey made a small whimpering sound, her blue eyes clouding. "Don't remind me."

Mia set down her flute, prepared to give the pep talk she'd been rehearsing for the past few weeks. Once she'd made up her mind that she wanted to leave her firm and take a chance on starting the new business, she'd leaned hard on Lindsey and Shelby, so to some degree she felt responsible for the other two taking the plunge with her. Plus she already lived in Manhattan. Her friends had to make the move, but they missed one another, and wanted to live in New York together.

"Oh, it won't be that bad," Shelby said, urging her to take another sip. "We'll eat and drink well when we go out on dates."

Mia cleared her throat. "About that…"

Both women looked expectantly at her.

"Unlike the glory days of college, Manhattan isn't exactly teeming with eligible men."

"Well, neither is Chicago." Lindsey sighed. "I haven't had a real date in seven months." She lifted her brows accusingly at Shelby, who never seemed to lack company of the male persuasion. "Maybe we should've moved to Houston, Mia. If things got too bad, at least we could count on leftovers."

Shelby waved dismissively. "Oh, sweetie, you're delusional if you think I've had any better luck there."

Lindsey snorted. "Right."

Mia eyed her friend. "Really, Shelby?"

"Really," she answered defensively, and then shrugged. "I can't remember the last time I went out a second or third time with the same guy and those are the dates that count." She sniffed. "And no, it's not because I'm too picky."

"You have every reason to be damn picky. We all do," Mia said and meant it, even though she was in the middle of a particularly long dry spell. It was mainly her fault. All those ungodly hours spent in the office hadn't helped. And if she were totally honest with herself, she'd spent too much time hoping David would finally man up, ask her out, share one lousy dinner with her. Despite what she'd told Annabelle, despite what she'd told herself, she'd honestly thought he'd been attracted to her, at least in the beginning. Sadly, she'd clearly been fooling herself. No use thinking about him now.

"Amen." Lindsey downed a healthy sip. "Still would be nice to have an assortment to be picky over." She narrowed her eyes at Mia. "What ever happened to that guy you worked with? David, right?"

Mia nearly choked on her champagne. "There was never anything there."

"Yeah, I remember him," Shelby chimed in. "When you first started with the firm you thought he was hot."

"He is hot. Unfortunately, he's taken."

"Married?" Lindsey observed sympathetically.

"To the job. His father and uncle founded the firm, and the guy still puts in more hours than anyone else." Mia shook her head. "Anyway, there's a rule about fraternization. God knows David Pearson would rather be strung up by his thumbs than step one toe over the line."

Lindsey giggled a bit, which told Mia the bubbly was getting to her friend, then grabbed the champagne and topped up everyone's glasses. "This is what I don't get…when we were in school there were all kinds of guys around. If we didn't have a date, it was because we didn't want to go out."

"I know, right?" Shelby frowned thoughtfully. "Even when we went out in groups, guys always outnumbered us. So what the hell happened to them? They can't all be married and living in the burbs."

"You have a point." Mia sipped slowly, worried that the alcohol was getting to her, too. Usually she wasn't such a lightweight, but she hadn't eaten anything all day. "Even during spring break, I swear, there were two guys to every girl."

"I'm the accountant," Lindsey said. "I'd say more like three to one."

"Junior year. Fort Lauderdale." Shelby slumped back in her chair, her expression one of total bliss. "Oh, my God."

"Are you kidding?" Mia stared at her in disbelief. "Come on. Senior year, Waikiki Beach, hands down winner."

Shelby's sigh said it all.

Lindsey smiled broadly. "Yep."

Along with the other two, Mia lapsed into silence, enjoying the heady memories of that magical week. She sipped her champagne as a notion popped into her head. "Hey, guys," she said, her pulse picking up speed as the thoughts tumbled. "I have an idea."

"Oh, no." The ever cautious Lindsey glanced dramatically at Shelby. "I don't know if I can take another one."

"No, this is good." Mia grinned. "There's no law that says spring break is just for college kids."

"Okay." Shelby drew out the word.

Lindsey just frowned.

"We're going to be working our asses off until we get Anything Goes off the ground, right? If we want to take a vacation, this is the time. Probably the last time for years. Who knows, maybe we'll even get laid." Mia saw the interest mount in Shelby's face.

Not Lindsey. Her frown deepened. "Hawaii?"

"Why not?" Mia noticed the empty champagne bottle and signaled the waiter.

"Because it's too expensive, for one thing. Are you forgetting we've just signed our lives away?"

"I don't know." Mia sighed, not quite willing to give up the idea. "Maybe we can go on the cheap, pick up one of those last-minute deals. And none of us has officially put in our resignations. I'd be willing to work another two weeks at the firm if it meant enough money for Hawaii."

"It wouldn't hurt to see what's available," Shelby said.

"I suppose not." Lindsey set down her glass, not looking at all convinced. In fact, she stared at Mia as if she were a traitor. "But we'd have to set a budget first. A firm budget."

Mia nodded in agreement. The whole thing was ridiculous, and even if they did stay at their current jobs a bit longer, a Hawaiian vacation was pretty extravagant for three women who were

about to give up their incomes and live on hope and dreams until they got their feet planted again. It shocked her that she'd even thought of it, let alone was actually considering such a crazy thing. She was normally far more sensible, for God's sake.

But damn it, she'd worked hard for the past six years, first in law school and then at Pearson and Stern. She deserved the break, and right now, with the cold March air whipping around outside, Hawaii sounded like a slice of heaven.

"You know what would be really cool?" Shelby's eyes lit up as she leaned forward. "Remember those three guys we met at that party on our last day on Waikiki beach?"

"Uh, yeah," Mia said. "Smokin' hot."

Lindsey stiffened. "What about them?"

"What if we could get them to meet us?" Grinning, Shelby darted a mischievous look between them. "In Hawaii."

"How would we do that? We don't even know their last names." Mia snorted. "Not to mention they're probably married or in prison."

Shelby gave Mia a look, then ignored her completely. "We know what university they went to, so we use Facebook."

"Huh." Mia thought for a moment. "We could send a message to the alumni group. It couldn't hurt."

"But they'll have to have signed up as alumni to get the message." Lindsey didn't seem thrilled.

Shelby shrugged. "Lots of people do. I have, haven't you?"

Mia shook her head. "Look, they answer, they don't, so what? It's Waikiki. We're bound to meet some gorgeous surfers who'll be ready to party," she said, warming to the idea.

"I like it." Shelby dug in her purse and produced a pen. "Anybody have a piece of paper or a dry napkin?"

Mia pulled her day planner out of her leather tote and tore off a used page. "Here."

"Oh, my God, they still have those things around. Why don't you use your BlackBerry?" Shelby found a clean spot on the table and started writing.

"I do both," Mia said, and glanced at Lindsey, who understood about being careful. She did not look happy.

"Okay, how about something like this…" Shelby squinted as if she were having trouble reading her own writing, which was awful. No one could ever read it but her. "Here we go—'Remember spring break? Mia, Lindsey and Shelby will be at the Seabreeze Hotel during the week of whatever. Come if you dare. You know who you are.'"

"Not bad, but we'll have to be more specific." Mia did a quick mental calculation. 'Remember Spring Break 2004.'"

"Right." Shelby scribbled in the correction. "Lindsey, what do you think?"

She shoved a hand through her blond hair and exhaled a shaky breath. It was dim in the bar, but Mia could see she was blushing. "I think you'll have to change Lindsey to Jill."

Shelby blinked. "You didn't give him your real name?"

With a guilty smile, Lindsey shook her head.

Mia and Shelby exchanged glances, and burst out laughing.

DAVID PEARSON PASSED Mia's empty office on his way to the conference room where he'd been summoned by his father and uncle.

He still couldn't believe she was gone. The day she'd handed him her letter of resignation had been a shock. Now, two weeks and three days later, he still couldn't come to grips with Mia no longer being with the firm. That she wouldn't be stepping off the elevator each morning, early, before anyone but himself had arrived at the office, her green eyes still sleepy, her shoulder-length dark hair still down and damp. By eight, she'd have drunk three cups of coffee—no cream, a little sugar—and

pulled her now dry hair back into a tidy French twist. He'd known her routine and habits almost as well as he knew his own.

"Good morning, Mr. Pearson."

He looked blankly at the receptionist. Only then did he realize he'd stopped and had been staring at the plant Mia had left behind that was sitting near her office door. He silently cleared his throat. "Good morning, Laura."

Smiling, the pretty young blonde continued toward the break room with a mug in her hand.

"Laura."

"Yes?" she said, turning back to him.

"Will Mia be picking up this plant?"

She blinked. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"Well, something has to be done with it," he said more gruffly than he intended. He never got involved in such petty matters. Even more annoying was the unexpected hope that he'd see her again. "Either have it sent to her or if she doesn't want it, let someone take it."

"Mia's going to Hawaii. I'll keep it watered for now."

"Hawaii?" His chest tightened. "She's moving?"

"I bet she wishes." Laura grinned. "According to Lily, she'll be gone for a week."

"When is she leaving?"

The curiosity gleaming in the young woman's eyes brought him to his senses.

"Never mind." He shifted the file folders he'd been holding and started again toward the conference room. "Just do something with the plant."

"In a couple of days," Laura called after him. "She's leaving in a couple of days…I think."

David didn't respond, but kept walking. What the hell was wrong with him? It was none of his business what Mia did. She'd quit. Thanked him for the opportunity to have been part of the firm, told him she would be pursuing other endeavors, and that was it. He hadn't tried to talk her into staying. She was a damn good attorney, and he should have. But mostly he'd been too stunned.

The conference-room door was closed, and he knocked briefly before letting himself in. At one end of the long polished mahogany table sat his father, his uncle Harrison and Peter, one of the equity partners. Odd enough that his father would be in the office instead of on the golf course on a Friday, but all three men looked grim.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

"David." Peter nodded.

"Have a seat, David" was all his father said.

His uncle poured some water from a carafe on the table and pushed the glass toward David. "You'll want to add a shot of Scotch to that in a minute."

"What's going on?" As he slowly lowered himself into one of the sleek leather chairs, he looked from one bleak face to the next.

"We've lost the Decker account," his father said, his complexion unnaturally pale.

David felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him. Thurston Decker was their second biggest client. "How?"

"That's not all," his uncle added, his features pinched. "It looks as if Cromwell may jump ship, as well."

Bewildered, David looked to Peter, who was staring at his clenched hands. "I don't understand." David shook his head. "They've both been with us for two generations without a single complaint. We've done an excellent job for them."

"They don't dispute that." His father removed his glasses and carefully began cleaning the lenses. "They're citing the economy."

"That's bull." Harrison angrily ran a hand through his graying hair. "It's Thurston's grandkids who're responsible. Those greedy little bastards. They're edging the old man out of the company and making a bunch of jackass changes."

"No point in getting steamed," David's father said wearily. He rarely got angry or displayed much emotion. David was much like him in that way. "We need to focus on bringing them back around."

"I doubt that's a possibility," Peter opined. He was a quiet, studious man, who'd joined Pearson and Stern a year before David, and arguably knew more about what was going on in the firm than either of the two senior partners. "I heard that Fritz Decker, the oldest grandson, has already hired one of his former prep school buddies who bought in to Flanders and Sheen. And for a much smaller retainer."

"How reliable is that information?" David asked.

Peter's mouth twisted wryly. "We can forget about Decker's business."

"Jesus Christ, what the hell happened to loyalty?" Harrison exhaled sharply and eyed David. "You might not know this, but your grandfather had just started this firm when Thurston Decker got into the booze business. He started out with one store and a bar. When he got tangled up with a moonshiner, your granddad took him on as a client for next to nothing."

David had heard the story and just nodded. "What about Cromwell? Did we screw up, or is he playing the economy card, too?"

Peter shrugged. "We didn't do anything wrong."

"Do we have a chance of wooing him back?"

"Good question." His father put on his glasses. "We've lost a few smaller clients in the past couple of months, legitimately as a result of the economy, and nothing that would ordinarily concern us, but at this juncture, throw Decker and Cromwell into the pot and we're in trouble."

David sank back in his chair, his head feeling as if it weighed a ton. He never thought he'd see this day. Pearson and Stern had been a reputable, prestigious firm his entire life. "What happens now?"

"We cut back," his father said. "No more weekly fresh flower deliveries, and the daily catering for the break room and conference rooms are to stop. You'd be as shocked as I was at how much those two items alone will save us."

"What about layoffs?" Peter asked.

The question startled David, especially when neither his father nor his uncle balked. He hadn't dared allow his imagination to go that far. Naturally he understood this was serious, but there had been other lows in Pearson and Stern's history and they'd always taken pride in keeping every one of their employees. "Layoffs? Surely we're not at that crossroad. We haven't tried to drum up more business yet."

"Not quite true. Your uncle and I have made some calls, but we've come up empty."

David stared at the defeated look on his father's tired face, and the heaviness in his chest grew. It wasn't just his reasoned approach to business that made David admire the hell out of his dad. He'd always been a fair employer, a dignified member of the bar association, and David was glad that he'd recently been able to pull back from the office to spend some much deserved time on the golf course. "I can make some calls, too," he said, withdrawing his BlackBerry from his pocket. "A couple of my old law professors from Harvard should be able—"

"David. Wait."

He glanced up.

"There is something you can do. That sharp young attorney, Mia."

"Mia Butterfield," Peter clarified.

"Right." Lloyd Pearson leaned forward. "There is a potential new client considering our firm. A very big client, who requires the administration of a rather large charitable foundation. That means a hefty retainer and billable hours for two to three full-time attorneys."

"What does this have to do with Mia?" David asked, confused. "You do know she no longer works here."

"Sadly, yes, because the new client has stipulated that Ms. Butterfield be in charge of the account."

"That makes no sense. Mia never did estate planning." David exhaled. "We have a stable of extremely talented tax and estate-planning attorneys. Or I could take on this new account myself."

His father shook his head. "I'm afraid not having Mia Butterfield handle the account is a deal-breaker, and no, there was no further explanation. You worked most closely with her. You'll have to convince her to come back."

"I doubt that's possible." He vividly remembered the day she'd delivered her letter of resignation. She'd stayed while he read it, then without hesitation on her part or even a trace of regret she was out the door.

"Offer her a bonus, a promotion, certainly a raise. Whatever it takes. We need this business, David, or we bring out the chopping block."

David loosened his tie and sank back. It was no use denying he wanted to see her again. For an instant he had wondered if her leaving would end up being the best thing that could've happened.

Damn it. Yeah, he wanted to see her again all right. But not like this.

2

THE HOTEL HADN'T CHANGED much in six years. Which was a very good thing because why mess with perfection? The lobby was airy and open, the fragrant scent of exotic flowers and salt water carried on the breeze that never failed to cool Mia off no matter how warm and humid the air.

She and Lindsey were headed to the Plantation Bar—by way of the sundry store to pick up a pair of sunglasses Lindsey had forgotten to pack—when they spotted Shelby walking through the lobby, alongside a bellman who carried her two designer bags.

"Look at her. She's already tanned," Lindsey said, shaking her head. The short pink sundress bared her shoulders and most of her legs, and a few more highlights had been added to her tawny-colored hair. She looked relaxed and happy, as if she'd already been here a week. So Shelby.

"Tanning salon," Mia murmured and lifted a hand to get their friend's attention. Mia had planned on using a tanning bed, too, but there had been no time. Up until her final day at Pearson and Stern she'd worked feverishly to make sure all loose ends were tied up and her one open case had been seamlessly turned over to one of the other junior associates. Then there had been some advance orders to place for the new business. Life had been hectic.

"Shoot, I worked up until the last minute," Lindsey said. "I didn't even have time to pick up some bronzing lotion."

"I'm just glad we got some sleep on the plane." They'd met up in Chicago and flown together directly to Honolulu. Since Shelby left from Houston, she'd come on her own. Having company, though, hadn't mattered much to Mia or Lindsey. After chatting for half an hour, they'd both crashed for most of the flight.

"Aloha." Shelby greeted them with a grin, her teeth particularly white against her tan face.

Mia noticed that she'd gotten a manicure, pedicure—the works—while Mia had been lucky to squeeze in a hair trim. "I hate you," she said, eying Shelby's strappy gold sandals and pretty pink toenails. "I really do."

"Thank you." Shelby glanced down at her tanned legs and feet. "I found the sandals yesterday. On sale, too."

"We've already checked in," Lindsey said, exchanging a glance with Mia. They both still wore their travel clothes, jeans and light sweaters, because Chicago had been nippy when they'd left that morning. "We scored adjoining rooms but they won't be ready for another hour or two."

"A whole hour? Bummer." Shelby made a face, and then smiled prettily at the bellman. "Kimo, do you think we'll really have to wait that long?"

His brown face split into a grin, and then he winked. "The assistant manager is my cousin. Let me see what I can do." He put down the bags and set off on his mission.

His uniform included white shorts, and the three of them ogled his fine ass and muscled calves as he walked unhurriedly toward the front desk.

"I forgot how disgustingly healthy everyone looks around here, even in winter," Mia idly observed.

"And how everyone seems to be related," Lindsey said, and then turned to Shelby. "What a shameless flirt you are. Not that I'm not totally jealous."

A smug smile curved Shelby's lips. "Do you know if any of the guys showed up yet?"

Mia shrugged. "We were headed to the bar. If they're here, they might be hanging out there or at the pool."

"Oh, God." Alarm widened Shelby's hazel eyes. "You can't go on the prowl dressed like that."

"The prowl?" Mia laughed.

Lindsey rolled her eyes.

"Too bad we don't know their last names," Shelby said, "so we could see if they checked in." Her gaze drifted past her friends. "Although if they don't show, I see a couple of damn fine consolation prizes coming this way. No, don't turn—"

Lindsey whipped her head around, and then abruptly turned back to Mia, her cheeks red when the two buff dudes wearing only swim trunks smiled at them.

"Subtle, sweetie. Real subtle," Shelby whispered, her gaze averted, her lips barely moving.

"I'm going to get sunglasses," Lindsey muttered.

Mia elbowed her. "Wait, here comes Kimo."

The bellman approached, holding up three key cards.

"You're a doll, baby," Shelby told him, taking the cards from him and flashing one of her trademark smiles, before passing two cards to Mia and Lindsey. "Um, Linds?" Shelby whispered, leaning close to her friend, "you might want to get some bronzing lotion along with those sunglasses."

FRESHLY SHOWERED and feeling rested from her nap on the plane, Mia left the other two to unpack and stake their territories while she went in search of an umbrella drink. The pool bar was packed with half-dressed people, lots of couples, but the Plantation Bar, which featured a view of the ocean, was shady, breezy and perfect. She slid onto a stool and studied the tented menu of exotic drinks.

The three of them sharing two adjoining rooms with a small parlor had sounded great in theory. It meant they had only two bathrooms, and while that setup had been fine in college, she was so not used to sharing anymore. But it was only for a week, and she wasn't planning on spending much time in the room. Especially if spring-break Jeff showed up.

And if he didn't…oh, well. She'd promised herself she wouldn't be bummed if their Facebook shout-out went unanswered. Even if Jeff did show up, he might not be as tall as she remembered, or broad and hunky with thick sun-kissed hair. She couldn't recall if he'd told her what his major had been, or if he'd shared his interests or much of anything else. They'd both been tipsy that night they met at the pool party—him more than her—and there had been a lot more kissing than conversation.

The swarthy, smiling bartender approached to take her order, and she settled on a blue fruity concoction, based solely on the pretty picture, and then swiveled around to gaze toward the beach. Aside from more couples stretched out on beach towels, there were a few groups of guys, but they looked young. One dude wearing a pair of red floral swim trunks and no shirt caught her attention. He was standing at an outside table where the bar met the sand. He had the same build as Jeff, except this guy's hair was a bit darker and shorter.

"Here you go," the bartender said, and she twisted around to find the tall, frothy drink garnished with a cherry, pineapple wedge and yellow paper umbrella. "Do you want to sign this to your room or keep a tab open?"

"I'll sign for it now." She grinned at the fancy cocktail. She wouldn't be caught dead ordering something this froufrou in Manhattan.

She plucked the cherry first and popped it into her mouth before using both hands to pick up the odd-shaped glass. The only other people sitting at the bar was a couple huddled at the far end who'd been talking to the bartender. As she struggled with her first sip, determined to leave the pineapple wedge undisturbed, she noticed a man pulling out a stool at the other end of the bar close to the wall. Tall, short dark hair, cream-colored shirt.

Frowning, she set the glass back down. Even though she hadn't actually gotten a good look at him, there was something oddly familiar about the way he moved, the way he…

Her heart somersaulted.

David.

Ridiculous, of course. It wasn't him. Couldn't possibly be. Not in this universe. Damn it. She had promised herself she wouldn't think of him once on this vacation, and she'd blown it in the first two hours.

For peace of mind she had to take another look. Trying to be inconspicuous, she used her cocktail napkin to wipe up an imaginary spill and slid a sidelong look at him.

It couldn't be. Except…it was.

Holy crap.

David smiled, and lifted his hand in a wave.

She blinked. Hard. He was still there. She'd never seen him in anything but a suit before. Certainly never seen him smile like that. David Pearson actually looked a little nervous. But that was impossible. In fact, this was nuts. What could he possibly be doing here?

"Mia?"

She blinked again, felt the heat of someone close behind her. A hand touched her shoulder, and she slowly turned.

"Mia, right?" It was red-swim-trunks guy.

She stared blankly at him, her mind still on David.

"It's Jeff."

"Jeff. Right. Of course." She looked into his familiar blue eyes and forced a smile.

He gave her a lopsided grin, ducked and zeroed in for a kiss on the mouth.

She turned her head just in time. The wet sloppy smooch landed on her cheek. His beer-saturated breath nearly knocked her over.

"Sorry," he mumbled, taking a second to right himself. "I wasn't sure you'd show up. I couldn't believe it when I read your post on Facebook. That was wild."

Mortified that David had seen what had happened, she leaned back, trying to put some distance between her and Jeff, who took the hint and sat on the stool beside her, fortunately not too close and blocking her view of David.

"When did you get here?" she asked, scrambling to concentrate.

"Yesterday morning. Me and two of my buddies. We got too much sun yesterday and spent more time than we should have at the bar today." He smiled sheepishly. "You just get in?"

"A couple of hours ago. My friends are still unpacking."

The bartender came for Jeff's order, and she was relieved when he asked for a soft drink. Though she was disappointed that mentioning her friends hadn't prompted him to volunteer whether his two buddies were the ones Lindsey and Shelby were expecting. She glanced at his friends and pretty much figured it out on her own. They didn't look the least bit familiar, and boy, were they not the right type.

Her gaze went back to Jeff and she found his bloodshot eyes fixed intently on her. "You look the same," he said, sounding relieved. "Your hair is shorter."

"Yours, too."

"Yeah." He self-consciously rubbed the back of his neck. "Good ol' corporate America."

"Jeff."

His friends hollered from across the bar, and when he turned to acknowledge them, she shot a look toward David. His seat was vacant, his glass half-empty. Her gaze shifted in time to catch a glimpse of his back as he left the bar.

"Look, we've rented surfboards," Jeff said, signaling for his check. "You wanna come?"

"Maybe another day."

"How about dinner?" Jeff lightly touched her hand and gave her the boyishly charming smile that had gotten to her six years ago. "You have plans yet?"

Her wistful gaze drifted helplessly toward the stool where David had been sitting only seconds ago. What was he doing here? It made no sense. Whatever the reason, it couldn't have anything to do with her. He probably hadn't given her a moment's thought since she'd left. As soon as it was announced that she'd given her notice, nearly everyone had tried to talk her into staying with the firm.

But not David. He hadn't said a single damn word. This was simply a coincidence. A bizarre crazy coincidence. "No," she said finally. "No, I don't have plans."

"I'll make reservations someplace nice, and call your room when I get back. Okay?"

"Sure. I'm looking forward to it." She didn't even mind when he kissed her cheek.

DAVID HOPED HE WASN'T hanging around the lobby like an idiot for nothing. He checked his watch, then for the second time in five minutes, looked at his BlackBerry for messages, while mentally cursing his own stupidity. For God's sake, he knew why she was here. He'd overheard the ladies talking in the break room about Mia and her friends' plan to organize a reunion or some such thing relating to their senior year spring break.

Frankly it had sounded odd to him, not at all like something Mia would be involved in. He thought back to his own spring break, the last one before going to law school, and smiled. He and three friends had gone to Barbados for the week, where there had been a lot of women, too much drinking and not a shred of common sense among them. Twice they'd had to buy their way out of sticky situations with the local authorities.

Though nothing to be proud of, he wouldn't have traded that wonderful, reckless carefree week for anything. Everyone needed that rite of passage. A few months later, he'd been firmly embedded in law school, studying his ass off, and doing the Pearson name proud. He hadn't veered off course since, and he certainly wouldn't pull an adolescent stunt like trying to recreate the week.

Hard to believe Mia was part of this at all. She was a damn fine lawyer, a sensible, focused woman. He admired that about her, and so much more. She was poised and sexy and had the most incredible green eyes that had the damning effect of turning his insides to butter. Which made him twice the fool for having followed her here.

No one at the firm knew he was here, except his father and uncle, and neither had said a word about him taking off in search of Mia. In fact, they had breathed a sigh of relief that he was on the case. Only David had known that he wasn't in Hawaii to gain a client, no matter how desperately the company needed the influx of cash. He had come to see Mia for himself.

In the short time since she'd given her notice, too many of his thoughts had been regrets. He'd hidden his feelings for her for so long, he'd almost convinced himself that she didn't fill him with want. He'd cursed the fact that she worked for his firm, which made her off-limits. Now, when his opportunity was finally here, when there would be no negative repercussions if he asked her out, he couldn't. Not if he wanted to save a lot of jobs.

He didn't even know if it mattered. She might have no interest in him. He was boring, serious, a drill sergeant. He'd heard the nicknames too often when his employees had thought they were alone. David had no reason to think Mia would want to see him now.

But he needed to know. Once and for all. If she laughed in his face, it would be a good thing. He'd be able to stop thinking about her, fantasizing about that beautiful body. That quick wit. What might have been. Sure it would hurt, but not forever.

He needed to know before he asked her to come back to the firm. Before it became a moot point. Again.

He checked his watch. If she didn't show up within the next three minutes, it meant she was still hanging out at the bar with her new friend, and David would be wise to think about taking the next flight back to New York.

AS SOON AS JEFF LEFT, Mia drained her drink, and headed through the lobby toward the elevators. The first thing she was going to do was find out if David was registered at the hotel. If not, she'd call Suzie, an admin assistant who'd started with Pearson and Stern about the same time as Mia, and find out what the woman knew about why David was here. She was older and married with two children, and unlike most of the associates and admin staff at the firm, she had a life. Mia could trust Suzie to be discreet.

She didn't make it to the elevators.

"Mia." Suddenly David was right in front of her, a couple of feet away. If she'd turned left instead of right…

"David." Her breath caught at the wedge of exposed chest hair where his tennis shirt came to a V. She'd never seen him without a tie. Not once. He was always impeccably dressed in his tailored suits, with his black hair perfect, his eyes so serious. "What are you doing here?"

"Vacation."

"You never take vacations."

"Not true."

"Four-day weekends occasionally."

He shrugged. "I needed some time off."

"You're right. This is good." She cleared her throat as she looked away. Of course she felt discombobulated. That didn't mean she had to show it. "Are you here with someone?"

"No, alone." He smiled, faint lines fanning out at the corners of his brown eyes. "Not counting you."

She tried to hide her unsteady hands in her pockets, fumbling with the folds of material until she remembered she had no pockets, not in the short halter dress she wore. So instead of disguising her nervousness, she'd drawn his attention to her legs. Her very pale legs.

"How about you?" he asked, lifting his gaze to hers. "Are you here with that guy in the bar?"

"Him? No." She laughed dismissively. "With Lindsey and Shelby. I don't think you know them."

His mouth curved into another smile, and it stunned her how much it changed his face. The man had incredible dimples. His eyebrows lifted along with his grin, and he looked ten years younger.

"No, I don't think you ever mentioned them," he said.

She didn't roll her eyes, although she wanted to. Of course he didn't know them. Had they ever once discussed anything personal? Not for one hot second.

"Have you ever been here before?" he asked.

"A long time ago. For spring break."

"Ah." His slight frown confused her. "So you'd know some of the good restaurants? Hot spots?"

Mia pressed her lips together, wondering what strait-laced David Pearson considered a hot spot.

He was still smiling, and she was still trying to get used to it. "Assuming you were in any condition to remember."

At that, she laughed. "Me?"

"Come on. Anyone who took off on spring break wasn't there to crack the books."

"Not even you?"

"Let's say I have a few stories I won't be telling my grandchildren."

"Well, well, Mr. Pearson, I see you in a whole new light."

He paused. "Good." The slow sensual curve of his lips made her heart trip. And his eyes, good God, the way he looked at her, as if she were the only person in the lobby. She couldn't speak. Could barely think. He was here alone…could that mean…this wasn't real…she was making stuff up…

"Hey! I thought I'd find you in the bar."

Coming from behind, Mia barely registered Shelby's voice.

"Mia? Oh, I'm interrupting. Sorry."

Mia blinked, glanced blearily at her friend. "Shelby. Hi."

Shelby smiled. "Hi." She swung a look at David, her eyes full of amused curiosity as she sized him up. "I'm Shelby."

"David." He politely offered his hand as if he were meeting a new client for the first time.

The moment was gone. What was left was the same David she had known for three years.

"You're not interrupting. I was on my way up to the room," Mia said with a small shrug.

"Yeah, um…" Her gaze skittered briefly toward David then back to Mia. "Someone left you a message."

"Who?"

"It's about dinner."

"Already?" The word slipped out as she was unable to contain her surprise. Refusing to look at David, Mia's eyes met Shelby's. "This couldn't have waited?"

"Lindsey's out shopping and just texted." Shelby's mouth lifted in a sly smile. "She may be having company."

"Oh." Mia frowned, paused. "Oh," she repeated with enthusiasm. Lindsey had been certain her guy wouldn't show up. "Good." She sent an apologetic glance at David, and then a more probing one at Shelby, who gave a small sad shake of her head.

"Look, I'm the one who's interrupting," David said, taking a step back. "Maybe I'll see you around."

"No, wait." Great. Now what? They both faced Mia, waiting expectantly. "Let's all have dinner," she said, shocked at what had just come out of her mouth. Yet she'd feel awful deserting Shelby on their first night here. "David, Shelby, join Jeff and me. I'm sure he won't mind."

3

"ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?" Shelby asked when she and Mia approached the designated restaurant two minutes early and saw that David was waiting outside. "He's absolutely gorgeous."

"If you ask me one more time, I swear I'll…" Mia finished with an exasperated grunt. The closer they got, the yummier he looked in crisp khakis and a white button-down shirt open at the neck. She hoped tonight wasn't a mistake, but she couldn't stand to think of Shelby being left alone, especially knowing that her guy wasn't coming, and that he was married with his first child on the way.

Shelby hadn't seemed particularly disappointed; of course, the girl always landed on her feet. She'd undoubtedly have men lining up in no time. Besides, David wasn't her type. But Mia had opened her big mouth, so too late. End of story.

"Still, I know you used to have a thing for him."

"Used to. Now shut up," Mia murmured as they got within hearing distance.

They both pasted on smiles, and the moment he spotted them his smile came so easily that Mia had trouble believing this was the same guy she'd worked with for three years.

She'd always considered him attractive, with his dark hair and intense brown eyes. The first day they'd met he'd sent her pulse skittering, but his rare smiles and overall serious nature had bothered her. She'd understood to some degree why he'd kept up the barrier. He was a supersmart guy and one hell of a lawyer, but his high-ranking position with the firm at only thirty could have easily been interpreted as nepotism. He was thirty-three now. Time to relax. He'd proven himself many times over.

"You ladies look lovely," he said, giving them equal attention as he took in their new sundresses. "Would you like to be seated at our table, or wait out here for Jeff?"

"Let's sit down," Mia said, never having had trouble being decisive. "We should be able to see him when he gets here."

"Good." David gave the host a slight nod, and the man gathered menus and indicated they should follow him.

Shelby went first, and then David lightly touched the small of Mia's back for her to proceed. A triangular cutout at her waist exposed bare skin, allowing his fingertips to graze the sensitive area. Her entire body reacted. The tingling started at her nape and slithered down her spine. Goose bumps surfaced on her arms and back.

She picked up the pace so that contact was quickly broken, but he'd have to be blind not to see what his touch had done. The restaurant was outdoors, and even though it was twilight, strings of white lights were woven through the surrounding palm trees to illuminate the walkway—and reactions Mia preferred weren't so obvious.

They arrived at the table, an excellent one, private yet affording a breathtaking view of the water. She'd bet an expensive bottle of wine that David had greased the host's palm to get this baby.

The host pulled out a chair, and so did David. Shelby and Mia exchanged secret smiles as they settled in. David's manners didn't surprise Mia. Not once had she seen him sit or enter an elevator before a woman. He probably opened car doors, too, but she'd never had the opportunity to see him in action.

"Your server will be Cole. He'll be here shortly to offer you cocktails." The host passed out the menus, leaving the wine list with David. "In the meantime, is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked as he shook out Shelby's white linen napkin and draped it across her lap.

Shelby smiled and shook her head. Mia didn't bother. She knew the question was mainly addressed to David, who said, "I think we're fine for now. Thank you, Ryan."

"Oh." Mia stopped the man. "If you could be on the lookout for the fourth person who's joining us—"

"Of course." The glance at David told her he'd already taken care of that, too.

The situation was kind of weird for her. When she and her friends were out, she was usually the one in charge, or at least they automatically deferred to her.

"I could get used to this," Shelby said, surveying the other diners, mostly dressed in subdued aloha shirts and lightweight floral dresses. "Houston can be casual, especially in the summer when it's so hot, but this rocks."

David followed her gaze. "I'm practically over-dressed."

Shelby grinned. "Feel free to take your shirt off."

Mia chuckled when David blinked, his normally expressionless face slightly startled. Nothing that came out of Shelby's mouth surprised her, but she doubted David was used to being teased. That's why she didn't feel threatened by Shelby, who looked too damn cute in her strapless yellow dress. She simply wasn't his type.

There. She'd acknowledged the evil little thought that had consoled her after she'd foolishly suggested David and Shelby come to dinner.

"Think I could get away with it?" David asked, his eyes filling with warm amusement.

Shelby laughed. "What's the worst that can happen?" She shrugged her bare bronzed shoulders. "They'll ask you to put it back on."

"I think I'll let a braver soul than me test the boundaries of their dress code." His gaze met Mia's.

She forced a smile. How could she have underestimated Shelby? It wasn't that she blamed her for being so charming and irresistible.

"So, Shelby—" David set the wine list aside "—I understand you went to school with Mia. Are you also an attorney?"

"No," she said with a startled laugh, as if that was a joke. "No offense. Nothing wrong with being a lawyer. I'm in PR. As soon as we get the business off the ground I'll be handling the publicity, advertising, networking, that sort of thing."

His brows went up, and Mia cringed inside. She hadn't told him about Anything Goes. It wasn't as if it were a big secret. But David would never understand how she could walk away from the law to start a business like that.

He didn't ask the expected question, but rather stared past Mia. "I believe your date is here."

She swung a gaze toward the entrance, and there was Jeff headed toward them. He'd cleaned up nicely, having changed into white jeans and a blue Hawaiian shirt. He waved, acknowledging them, and then stopped to talk to a waitress carrying a full tray of food. With her chin, she gestured to a passing waiter, and after Jeff had a word with the guy, he finally joined them at the table.

"I'm not late, am I?" he asked, kissing Mia on the cheek before taking his seat beside her.

She immediately smelled the booze on his breath. Great. "We've only been here a few minutes."

Frowning and totally ignoring David, who'd gotten to his feet, Jeff's gaze skimmed the table. "They haven't served drinks yet."

"Our server is coming," Mia said tightly. "I don't know if you remember Shelby, and this is David."

"Jeff." David extended his hand. "Thanks for allowing us to join you."

Jeff half rose and accepted the handshake. "No problem. I should've brought my friends, too."

Mia tried not to shudder. She tried even harder not to look at David, who'd reclaimed his seat. Though maybe she was the only one who knew Jeff was slightly off.

"How did the surfing go?" she asked.

"Shit. I nearly broke my neck. Check this out." He yanked up the hem of his shirt to show where the skin across his ribs was beginning to bruise. "I banged up my back, too."

Oh, God. They didn't need to see that. "Bummer," Mia said, and picked up the leather-bound menu. "We should look at the menus."

Jeff dropped his shirt in place and craned his neck. "Where's our waiter? I gave him my drink order."

Mia glanced at Shelby and David. They both had taken her suggestion and were studying their menus. Neither of them seemed put off by Jeff, but they were probably just being polite.

The waiter arrived with Jeff's Scotch and an apologetic look for the rest of them, then he took everyone else's drink order. While they waited, Mia quickly decided on an entrée and urged Shelby with a pointed look to do the same. David diplomatically handled the selection of the wine, something Mia gladly would have skipped altogether.

Other than Jeff reaching under the table to squeeze her thigh, an attempt that was immediately rejected, the rest of the meal went smoothly enough. David and Shelby got along fabulously, chatting away as if they'd known each other for ages. Mia should've been grateful they were distracted, but their rapport only helped to darken her mood. She was jealous, and she had no one to blame but herself. And Jeff. Rational or not, she totally blamed him. Why did he have to turn out to be such an ass?

When the bill came, there was a brief struggle between David and Jeff. No surprise to her, David won. Any other time, Mia might have offered to pick it up herself since she'd invited Shelby and David, but all she wanted was to get back to her room. No way was she spending another minute with Jeff, who'd had a glass in his hand throughout dinner. Only one thing could make the night worse —if Shelby stayed out with David.

"Well," Mia said, after giving Jeff a firm send-off, and he'd started weaving his way toward the lobby. Or more likely, the next bar. "I'm beat."

Neither Shelby or David responded, and a lump swelled in Mia's throat. They'd gotten along much better than she'd anticipated. Who knew David could be that social and charming, damn him. She wouldn't be surprised if they wanted to spend more time together.

She swallowed hard. "Guess I'll catch up with you two tomorrow." Mia's gaze involuntarily flicked to David. He'd been watching her intently. She blinked at the sudden awkwardness. "Thanks for dinner. I should've foot the bill. I owe you one."

His warm chocolate-brown eyes stayed level with hers. "I'll remind you," he said, his voice a seductive murmur in the semidarkness.

Shivering with awareness, she rubbed her bare arm. She couldn't seem to look away. With a jolt of regret, she remembered Shelby was standing there watching.

Mia stepped back, avoiding a glance at her friend. And David. "Okay. I'm off to bed. See ya," she said breezily, knowing she wasn't going to sleep one lousy wink.

"Wait for me," Shelby said, and Mia stopped and cautiously turned. "I'm pretty jet-lagged myself. David, it was so nice meeting you. You're staying here, too, yes?" He nodded, and she added, "Then we'll see you around."

David's gaze briefly shifted in the direction that Jeff had disappeared. "I wouldn't mind walking you to your rooms."

"We're fine, really." Shelby looped an arm through Mia's. Not a Shelby-like thing to do. "We're staying in rooms seven-twenty and seven-twenty-two. Give us a call tomorrow."

He nodded. "I just might do that. Good night, ladies."

Shelby gave Mia's arm a small tug, and they headed toward the elevators. "Do not turn around," Shelby whispered sternly. "I promise you he's watching."

"What?" Mia jerked her arm away. "Why would I turn around?" Any remorse she'd felt for stepping on her friend's toes disappeared in a flash. "You could've stayed out with him. I don't need an escort to my room, for God's sake."

Shelby only grinned.

"I should warn you. He's not always that charming. Frankly, I didn't know he had any personality. He's usually stuck in Neutral."

"Uh-huh." They'd arrived at the elevators and, still smiling, Shelby pressed the Up button.

"I'm not trying to discourage you. I'm not," Mia muttered. "I say go for it. I can see why you might be attracted. I was once."

Shelby laughed. "For being a brainy chick, you're such a dope."

Mia scowled at her, but kept her mouth shut when the elevator doors opened, and two couples exited.

"Get in there." Shelby pulled her into the car, and then waited for the doors to close. "Sweetie, he is so into you, it's pathetic."

"You're crazy. He was all Mr. Charming with you."

"He is charming. But you didn't see the way he was looking at you."

"No, he wasn't."

Shelby rolled her eyes. "You were too busy being embarrassed by Jeff. David wasn't obvious, he's too gentlemanly. But he didn't miss a single eyelash flutter. Trust me." She sighed. "Seriously, if he'd been eyeing me like I was a juicy steak, I'd be all over him."

Mia thought about it for a minute. "Then why wait and come all the way to Hawaii?"

"Yeah, Mia," Shelby said with a hand on her hip. "Why would someone, who never takes vacations, suddenly come all the way to Hawaii for a week? Tell me."

Excitement fluttered in her chest. "It is odd," she admitted. "All he had to do was pick up the phone while I was still in New York."

"Hey, hopping a plane at the last minute is a pretty grand gesture, don't knock it." The doors opened, and Shelby walked out first, her key already in hand. "And for God's sake, don't blow it."

DAVID PACED THE PARLOR of his suite. His body recognized East Coast time, where it was three in the morning and not 10:00 p.m. Hawaiian time. Add to that the twelve hours he'd spent in the air, he should've been exhausted. But he was too keyed up to sleep.

Even dinner had been draining. Shelby had been great company—witty, refreshingly open and quite beautiful. But it was Mia's attention he'd wanted, when her green eyes had locked with his. Instead he'd watched her helplessly act as buffer for that idiot Jeff. He'd pitied them both. Jeff, because he was too drunk to realize what he'd screwed up, and Mia, well, her evening had virtually been ruined.

David smiled ruefully. The upside for him was that he'd come out the victor. Or so he hoped. He still didn't know where he stood, whether he was a fool for showing up. Damn it, he should've stopped her from going to her room, asked her to have a drink alone with him.

He wasn't worried about hurting Shelby's feelings—it wasn't as if they'd been on a date. She was clearly a bright woman and knew what was what.

He slid open the glass door, walked to the balcony railing and stared at the city lights. Getting this last minute suite had been lucky. The corner unit provided both a view of the ocean and the Waikiki skyline. It also came with a well-stocked bar, or he could've ordered drinks from room service. Either way, Mia should've been enjoying this view with him right now.

Rooms 720 and 722. Weren't there three of them? Which room was Mia's? He could call the front desk, but they wouldn't give him her room number, only connect him. He had no desire to talk to her on the phone, he decided as he closed the balcony door behind him. He'd done enough talking. Enough dodging and evading for the past three years. Enough denying himself.

He grabbed his key card off the bamboo console table, and let himself out.

Enough was damn well enough.

TIRED OF PACING, Mia lay back on the queen-size bed closest to the bathroom, locked her hands behind her head and stared up at the ceiling. Occasionally she could hear Shelby rattling around

in the next room. Mia knew she wanted to stay up chatting, and Mia felt only slightly guilty for not indulging her. The need for privacy won out.

Lindsey hadn't been in the room when they'd returned, and they suspected she might not show up again until morning. Good for her. Mia was dying to meet the guy Lindsey had been so tight-lipped about, but this was the first moment's peace she'd gotten since arriving, and she had a lot to think about.

David.

Good Lord, it still didn't seem real. Him. Here. Thousands of miles away from New York. To some degree it pissed her off that for three years he'd given her not one itty-bitty hint that he was attracted to her. Talk about cool, dispassionate, stoic. Great qualities if you're in the courtroom, but damn it, they'd spent far too many nights working late for him not to have cracked just a little.

So there was a "no fraternization" policy at the firm? So what that he was the heir apparent? He could've been human, showed a trace of emotion toward her. Then she could have decided what was more important, staying with the firm or seeing him. Who knew what could have developed by now?

What a coward. She had a good mind to go knock on his door and make him spell out why he'd come to Hawaii. Had he come for her or not? If not, fine. There was plenty of trouble she could get into all by herself. But if he had come for her…

She had to know, she decided, swinging her feet to the floor, even if it meant they had only this one week. In fact, if they reverted to their former relationship once they returned to New York, that would be perfect. All her focus and energy would be invested in the new company. She'd have no time for a relationship. All the more reason not to waste a minute now.

Her key wasn't where she'd thought she left it. Impatient, she dumped the contents of her purse onto the bed, then found the key card tucked safely in the side pocket, where she now recalled putting it. She checked her reflection in the mirror, applied some lip gloss, drew a brush through her hair and adjusted the bodice of her coral-colored dress. When she twisted around to inspect the back, her gaze snagged on the skin exposed by the triangular cutout. Where David's warm palm had been, had lingered until she'd pulled away.

Reliving the few seconds in her mind, she shivered. His hand hadn't been as soft as she expected. She knew he was an avid tennis player in his spare time, and that his mother was fond of arranging dates to accompany him to company dinners. Mia knew nothing more about his personal life. Among the paralegals and clerical help, there was some gossip and the occasional rumor, but she made a point to stay clear of the whispers.

Smoothing down her dress, satisfied that it wasn't too wrinkled, she palmed the key card and opened the door. And stopped cold.

David stood in the hall, staring at her. He seemed as surprised to see her as she was to see him. He wore the same clothes he'd worn at dinner, only his sleeves were rolled back, exposing his muscled forearms. Definitely a tennis player.

"I was about to knock," he said. "If you're on your way out—"

No way she'd let him weasel out of this. She opened her mouth to tell him just that, but he hadn't finished.

"I'll keep it brief." Without hesitation, he took a step toward her, his lips twitching into what could only be described as a predatory smile.

"Okay," she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

Then he crossed the threshold and closed the door behind him, sending her scurrying backward with the inelegant grace of a beached whale.

4

"I HOPE YOU WEREN'T on your way to meet Jeff," David said. "If you are, it's a complete mistake."

Mia backed up another step, stopped, gave him a good long look, then laughed. "You came here to tell me that?"

"I did."

"For an overpaid attorney, you're not every observant."

He lifted his brows.

She hid a smile. "I meant high-priced."

"I know you were embarrassed at dinner, but that doesn't mean you wouldn't give him another chance." Again he advanced on her, and her pulse skittered. "The guy's a drunken lout. He's not good enough for you. Even if only for a week."

Heat crawled up her neck. He was right, of course, and she had no intention of doing more than exchanging a greeting with Jeff should she see him in the lobby. But David had no business butting in. "Since when are you an expert on my personal life?"

"Touché." He took her hand, slowly rubbed her palm with his thumb.

She tensed, but in a good way. Jesus, this was David touching her, his face so close that she could see the light flecks of amber in his brown eyes. Funny, she'd always thought they were much darker, more serious.

She straightened, tried to ignore the disturbing sensations his thumb caused. "In fact, Mr. Pearson, you really don't know anything about me, do you?"

His gaze touched her mouth, lingered and then leisurely moved up. "Don't I?"

"In the three years since we met, you haven't said anything more personal than 'Have a nice weekend.' And that was on a Saturday afternoon, after we'd worked most of the day together."

"You exaggerate."

"Not by much."

"You think it was easy, keeping my distance?"

"I honestly have no idea." Her breath caught at the flicker of amusement in his eyes. "You should've been a poker player, instead of a lawyer. You could've made a killing."

He wrapped his fingers around her hand and tugged her closer. "My intentions must be fairly obvious now," he said in a low, gravelly voice.

She tilted her head back, refusing to be the first to break eye contact as he slid an arm around her waist and pulled her against him. He was hard behind the fly of his khakis, the knowledge shattering a bit of her control. His hand splayed across the exposed skin of her lower back, and his palm felt hotter than it had before.

The tingling began there, traveled all the way up her spine and settled in her braless breasts, tightening her nipples, making them so sensitive that she could hardly stand to have them touch the light sateen material of her dress. Only a knot of fabric at her nape kept the halter in place. The gentlest pressure, the smallest tug…

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