



SUSAN CARLISLE

The Surgeon's
Cinderella



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



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Аннотация

From matchmaker...to perfect match? Whitney Thomason prides herself on being able to find the perfect partner for anyone, but heart surgeon Tanner Locke is a real challenge! He wants to settle down, but he's adamant there'll be no falling in love... When Whitney's candidate falls through it's up to her to be the girlfriend Tanner needs for his business weekend getaway, but two days in close proximity prove torturous. They know giving in to temptation is a bad idea but desire is more powerful than reason...

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Dear Reader,

I never know where a story idea is going to come from. This one literally came from the sky. While I was on a plane, reading the airline magazine, I noticed an advertisement for a matchmaker who specialised in helping the busy professional. A spark of an idea was born, and that became Whitney and Tanner's story.

This was a fun one to write—especially when this couple finds out that what they want is right under their noses. The setting isn't bad either—San Francisco and Napa Valley.

I hope you enjoy the journey that Whitney and Tanner take on their way to finding true love. Hearing from my readers is one of my greatest joys. You can contact me at SusanCarlisle.com.

Happy reading,

Susan

The Surgeon's Cinderella

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To Eric.

Everyone should have a son-in-law like you.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

TANNER LOCKE NEEDED a matchmaker's help.

Two days earlier Whitney Thomason's hand had quivered slightly as she'd held the phone. He was certainly a blast from the past. Why would someone like Tanner require her help?

An hour earlier he had texted her that he needed to change their arrangements and asked her to meet him at a small airport outside San Francisco. As the owner of Professional Matchmaking, Whitney had made concessions for clients on more than one occasion, but this was the first time she'd been asked to meet one at an airport at dusk.

Tanner had said something had come up and that he couldn't join her at her office. He would appreciate her meeting him at the airport. If she hadn't been familiar with his status in the community she wouldn't have considered such a plan. She wasn't acquainted with the small airport but had agreed to do as he'd requested.

Having the Dr. Tanner Locke's name on her client list would be good for business. Even though it was unethical to publicize his name, she could say that an eminent doctor in the city had used her services. Who knew? He might even send her referrals. Either of those would make it worth her drive to meet him.

As the "big man on campus" when they'd been at Berkeley, all the girls had had a crush on Tanner, including herself. But she hadn't been his style. He had been into thin, blonde, preppy sorority girls while she had been the heavy, dark-haired, mousy nobody. At least she already knew his type.

In the past couple of years she'd seen Tanner's name in the news a few times. He was an up-and-coming surgeon in the heart transplant field. So why did someone as good-looking and eligible as Tanner need her help in finding a mate?

Whitney chuckled drily. For the same reasons her other clients did. They didn't have the time or energy to weed out the unsuitable. She handled the nitty-gritty work of finding people with similar backgrounds so they only connected with the people most appropriate for them. It was a one-and-done process.

She rolled through the gate of the airfield minutes before she

was due to meet Tanner. Would he recognize her? Why should he? She'd just been one of those people who had been a filler in a couple of his classes. Plus she'd changed a great deal since then. At least on the outside. She'd lost fifty pounds. She'd long outgrown having a crush on Tanner. Heavens, she didn't even really know him.

Pulling into a parking spot in the lot next to a red single-story, cement-block building, she turned off the engine. A gleaming white jet sat on the tarmac in front of the terminal. There were a couple of men working around it. Was Tanner going somewhere? Probably off to Hawaii for the weekend.

Normally Whitney liked to have her initial interview in a neutral and laid-back place. A local café, the park. Out of the client's high-pressure work world so that they were more relaxed, less distracted. She found that even though people's favorite subject was themselves, when it came to their personal life they weren't as forthcoming. Men tended toward telling about half of what she needed to know. The more successful her client was, the more insecure or demanding or both they were about their choices for mates.

At the sound of an ambulance siren, she glanced into the rearview mirror. The noise abruptly ended as the vehicle rolled through the gate at a normal speed and continued until the ambulance stopped close to the plane. A group of people dressed in green scrubs exited the back.

What was going on?

One of the men in the party broke away from the group and started toward her. That must be Tanner. It had been years since she'd seen him. He'd changed as well. His shoulders had broadened and his face had lost its youthfulness, having matured into sharper angles. He was still an extremely handsome man. Maybe even more so now.

With a wide stride that spoke of a person who controlled his realm and was confident to do so, he approached her. She stepped out of the car, closed the door and waited.

“Whitney?”

He didn't recognize her. Was she relieved or disappointed? She extended her hand when he was within arm's reach.

“Whitney Thomason.”

Tanner took her hand and pulled her to him, giving her a hug. What was he doing?

Her face was pressed into the curve of his shoulder. He smelled not of hospital antiseptic but of clean, warm male. Whitney was so surprised her hands fluttered at his waist. What was going on? She was released almost as quickly as he had grabbed her.

Tanner glanced over his shoulder. “Please just go along with me. First names only. No titles.”

She looked beyond him to see the others in his party watching them. He made their meeting sound like a covert operation. She took a small step away from him. “Okay. I'm Whitney.”

“I'm Tanner. I would prefer we keep my request between the

two of us.” His dark brown eyes beseeched her.

“I understand. I assure you I am discreet.” Most professionals she worked with wanted their interactions with her to remain low-key. Either they didn’t want others to know they needed help in their personal life or were just embarrassed they couldn’t find someone on their own. Whatever it was, she respected their desires. But no one had gone to the extent that Tanner was to keep his secret.

So why was he meeting her in front of his colleagues? “Then why here?” She nodded her head toward the group at the plane.

“I didn’t know I was going to have to go after a heart and I wanted you to get started on this right away.”

“After a heart?” Her voice rose.

“I’m a heart transplant surgeon. I’m in the process of retrieving a heart.”

“Oh.” He made it sound like that was commonplace. For him it might be, but for her it was a little unnerving.

He looked over his shoulder as the jet engines roared to life. “So what do you need from me?”

And he wants to do this right now, right here?

“It usually takes an hour or so for me to get enough information from a client to form a good idea of the type of woman they are best suited to.”

Tanner glanced back to where the others were loading the plane. “I don’t have an hour. I have a patient who needs a new heart.”

“Then I suggest we postpone this meeting.” Whitney reached for her car door handle.

“I’d like to get the process started. I’m up for a promotion and the board is breathing down my neck to settle down. I’ve got to do something right away about finding a wife. But with my caseload I don’t know when I’ll be able to sit down and talk anytime soon.” His voice held a note of desperation that she was confident didn’t appear often. “What I’m looking for is someone who takes care of herself, is good in social situations, wants to be a mother and would be supportive of my career.”

Really? That’s all he wanted? He hadn’t said anything about love. This would be a tough order to fill. “Those are pretty broad requirements. I like to know my clients well enough that I don’t waste their or their potential partner’s time.”

“Hey, Tanner,” the last man getting on the plane called. “We gotta go. This heart won’t wait on us.”

Tanner looked back to her. “I’ve got a patient that’s been waiting for months for this heart. I have to see that he gets it. Look, I’ve heard you’re the best in town. Do your thing. I’m sure you can find someone for me. Here’s my contact information.” He handed her a business card. “Call when you have something. Don’t pull away. I’m going to give you a quick kiss on the cheek. I need for these guys—” he nodded toward the plane “—to think that you’re my girlfriend.”

Before Whitney could agree or disagree, his lips brushed her face and he jogged away.

The man's nerve knew no bounds!

Minutes later Whitney watched as the plane lifted off the ground and flew into the darkening sky. Somehow tonight the Tanner she'd had such a crush on and worshipped in college from afar had become a mortal man. The thing was she really didn't know this Tanner any better than she knew the old Tanner. If she did manage to find him a match, would he take the time to get to know the woman or just expect her to bow to his list of requirements? Whitney's goal was to find love matches, and Tanner had said nothing about wanting that.

And while they worked together there would be no more physical contact. She was a professional.

* * *

Tanner looked down from his window seat of the plane at the woman still standing beside her small practical compact car. She looked like a matchmaker. Simply dressed. Nothing sexy or suggestive about her clothing—he'd even characterize her style as unappealing. Her hair was pulled back into a band at her nape.

He didn't go around kissing strangers but he had kissed her. Little Ms. Matchmaker had the softest skin he'd ever felt. She was nothing like the women he was attracted to yet he found her no-nonsense, straight-to-the-point personality interesting. People generally didn't speak to him so frankly.

Did he know her from somewhere? Maybe she'd been a member of one of his former patients' families? But she'd said nothing about knowing him. He was good with faces. It could be

her smile that drew him. It was one of the nicest he'd ever seen. Reached her eyes.

He hoped he'd made the right decision in calling her. There had been noises made by the powers-that-be at the hospital that he might be in line for the head of department position when Dr. Kurosawa retired. A subtle suggestion had been made that a settled married man looked more appealing on the vita than a bachelor.

For a moment he'd thought about doing the online dating thing but couldn't bring himself to enter his name. He didn't have the time or inclination to wade through all the possible dates. Make the dates and remake dates. The speed-dating idea came close to making him feel physically sick. Being thought pathetic because he used a dating service also disturbed him. The fewer people who knew what he was doing the better. Truthfully, he was uncomfortable having others know he needed hired help to find a partner. Even employing a matchmaker made him uneasy. But he'd done it. He wanted that directorship.

Finding women to date was no problem for him, but he had never found someone who met his requirements for a lifelong commitment. Tanner wasn't interested in a love match but in a relationship based on mutual life goals. Maybe with the help of an outsider, an impartial one, he could find a woman who wanted the same things he did? The search would be handled like a business, a study of pros and cons.

One thing he did know was that love wouldn't be the deciding

factor. He'd already seen what that did to a person. His mother had loved his father but his father had not felt the same. In fact, she'd doted on him, but he'd stayed away more than he'd been at home. Each time he'd left she'd cried and begged him not to go. When he'd leave again she'd be depressed until she learned that he was coming home. Then she'd go into manic mode, buying a new dress and spending hours "fixing herself up." His father had never stayed long. Leaving two boys to watch their mother's misery as he'd disappeared down the drive. Finally he'd divorced her. Tanner refused to have any kind of relationship like that. His career demanded his time and focus. He had to have a wife who could handle that.

Maybe the executive matchmaker could help him find what he needed in a woman. If that woman was happy with what he could offer outside of giving his heart then she would suit him.

"Hey, Tanner," the kidney team surgeon said after a tap to his arm, "who was the woman you were talking to? Did you have to break a hot date?"

He shrugged. "Just a woman I met."

"You know one day you're going to have to settle down. Hospital boards like to have their department heads going home to a family at night. I've got a friend of a friend with a sister. Pretty, I heard."

"I'm good, Charlie."

He grinned. "I'm just saying..."

Tanner was tired of being fixed up by friends and family.

Everyone wanted their daughter or friend to marry a doctor.

He looked over at the nurse sitting beside Charlie. She was talking to a member of the liver team. They'd been out a number of times but nothing had really clicked. Tanner didn't want to date out of the nursing pool anymore. He wanted to go home to someone who wasn't caught up in the high adrenaline rush of medical work. A woman who gave him a peaceful haven where he could unwind.

He expected Whitney Thomason to find that person for him.

By the next morning, Tanner had put in over twenty-four hours at the hospital, but his patient, who had been at death's door, was now doing well in CICU. The life-giving gift of a heart transplant never ceased to amaze him. He was humbled by his part in the process.

Thankfully he'd managed to catch a couple of hours' sleep on the plane to and from the hospital where his team had retrieved the heart. Now he had morning rounds to make and then he was headed home to bed. His scheduled surgeries had been moved back a day or postponed. Sleep was the only thing on his agenda for today.

Knocking on the door of Room 223 of the step-down unit, he slowly pushed it open. "Mr. Vincent?"

"Come in." The man's voice was strong.

Tanner entered and moved to the bed. "How're you feeling today, Mr. Vincent?"

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't sore."

Tanner smiled. Mr. Vincent was only a week out from transplant. Where he'd hardly been able to walk down the hall in the weeks before his surgery, now he could do it back and forth with confidence. Transplants were amazing things. "Sorry about that but it's just part of the process. It should get better every day." Tanner looked around the room. "Mrs. Vincent here?"

"Naw. She had a hair appointment. She doesn't like to miss them." He sounded resigned to his wife's actions. "She'll be here soon, though."

"The plan is for you to go home tomorrow. There are a number of things that the nurses will need to go over with you both."

"Cindy doesn't like blood and all this hospital stuff."

"She'll need to help with your care or you'll have to find another family member to do it. Otherwise home health should be called in."

Mrs. Vincent's self-centeredness was just the type of thing that Tanner couldn't tolerate. This man's wife was so focused on her own needs that she couldn't be bothered to support her husband's return to good health. Her actions reminded him too much of his father's.

"I need to give you a listen, Mr. Vincent." Tanner removed his stethoscope from his neck. After inserting the earpieces in his ears, he placed the listening end on the man's chest. There was a steady, strong beat where one hadn't existed before the transplant.

"Can you sit forward, Mr. Vincent?"

“I can but I won’t like it much.” The middle-aged man shifted in the bed.

Tanner was listening to the man’s lungs when a platinum blonde strolled through the door. She stopped short as if she was surprised to see Tanner.

“Hello, Dr. Locke,” she said in a syrupy thick voice.

Tanner had only met Mrs. Vincent a couple of times but each time he had the prickly feeling that she was coming on to him. This time was no different. At least twenty years younger than her husband, she was overdressed and too absorbed in herself for someone who should have been concerned about a husband who had recently been at death’s door. Wearing a tight top and pants a size too small, she sauntered up to the bedside, leaning over. Tanner had a view of her cleavage that had no business being shared with anyone but her husband.

More than once Tanner had seen his mother act the same way toward his father. The action then and now made him feel uncomfortable.

“Hi, sweetie. It’s nice to see you.” Mr. Vincent gave her an adoring smile.

“So how’s the patient doing?” she cooed, not looking at her husband. His mother had used that same tone of voice when she’d spoken to his father.

“He’s ready to go home after we make sure you both understand his care.” Tanner wrapped his stethoscope around his neck.

“I’m not sure I can do that. I’m no nurse. I’m not good with blood and stuff.” She gave him a wide, bright, red-painted-lips smile.

Tanner stepped toward the door. “I’m sure the nurses can help you practice so that you become comfortable with what you need to do.”

“Cindy, sweetie, we’ll figure it out together.” Mr. Vincent took her manicured hand and gave her a pleading look. Just the way Tanner’s mother had looked at his father before he’d left for weeks.

“I’ll let the nurse know that you’re ready for her instructions.” Tanner went out the door.

The Vincents’ marriage was exactly the type he didn’t want. The one-sided kind. Tanner was afraid he would be too much like his mother. Give his heart and have it stomped on. A relationship where one of the partners couldn’t see past their love for the other while the other cared about nothing but themselves. A bond based on mutual respect would be far more satisfying in the long run. With his executive matchmaker contacts, that should be just the type of arrangement he’d manage to find.

The censoring look in Whitney’s eyes when he’d given his list of requirements had him questioning that she might have expected something more.

* * *

Whitney had spent the last two days working through her database in search of women who fit the description of what

Tanner wanted. She had five names she thought might be of interest to him. Now she had to pin him down for a meeting so they could start the process.

She picked up the card he'd handed her and tapped it on her desk.

Why couldn't Tanner find his own mate? What was his deal with the passionless list of requirements? He had nothing in common with her in that regard. She was looking for true love. The kind of love that endured forever, no matter what the hardships. The till-death-do-us-part kind that her parents and grandparents had. She'd built her business on that idea. Believed her clients should have that as well.

Once she'd thought she'd had it. That love. With a business degree in hand, she'd taken a job in a corporation. There she'd met Steve. He'd worked in an adjoining department and had seemed not to care that she'd been heavy. That had been a first for her. She'd had no dates in high school and very few in college. When Steve had started giving her attention she'd been ecstatic. For once in her life someone had been interested. After dating for over a year, they'd started planning a wedding.

Two weeks before the ceremony he'd called and told her he'd found someone else. The woman had turned out to be thin and pretty.

Whitney had been devastated. Again that inferiority she'd felt in high school and college had come flooding back. To fight the pain, she'd done whatever she could to keep busy. She'd spent

her time walking whenever she'd been alone to prevent dwelling on her broken heart. After a while she'd become interested in wellness nutrition and had adopted a healthy lifestyle. Soon she'd joined an overeating support group and continued to slim down. Men had started paying attention to her but she'd not yet found one that she trusted to stick with her. She wanted a man who cared about her and not just her looks. Those faded.

In college she'd introduced a number of friends to other classmates. The majority of those relationships had become long-term ones and many of the couples had gone on to marry. Whitney had gained the reputation of being a matchmaker. When her boss had confided in her that she was having trouble dating, Whitney had introduced her to a friend of her family. They too had married. A few years later, when the company she'd worked for had downsized and Whitney had been let go, she'd decided that if she couldn't find someone for herself she could at least help others find the right person. Opening Professional Matchmaking had been her answer.

Despite her own disappointments, she still believed that there was a soul mate for everyone. So what had happened in Tanner's life to make him not believe in love? Could she convince him it was necessary for him too? But that wasn't what he was paying her to do. He wanted the best mate possible and it was her job to see that she found that person, not change his requirements.

Whitney punched in Tanner's number from the card. Now it was time to help him do just that.

On the second ring he answered. “Locke.”

“This is Whitney Thomason.”

“Who?” His voice became muffled, as if he was speaking to someone else.

“Whitney Thomason of Professional Matchmaking.”

“Uh, yeah. Just a minute.”

She waited while he spoke to the other person, giving orders about what should be done for a patient.

Even with his abrupt speech he had a nice voice. Sort of warm and creamy. The kind a woman liked to hear in her ear when a man rolled toward her in the middle of the night. Heavens, that wasn't a thought she should be having about her newest client.

Seconds later the background noise quieted.

“I only have a few seconds. What can I do for you?”

She understood about being busy but he was the one requesting her help. “I have compiled a list of possible matches for you. I'd like to get together and discuss them. Start setting up some socials.”

“Socials? I'm not interested in, neither do I have time for, tea parties.”

That's why he didn't have anyone. He wouldn't put in the effort it took to develop a relationship. “Socials are when you have your first meeting with a potential mate. Before I can set those up we need to talk and sort out who you'd like to consider first.”

“Can't you just take care of that?” He already sounded distracted. Maybe he was the same self-centered guy she'd

known in college.

“Tanner, are you sure you want to do this?” Her voice took on a hard note. “You have to put some time and effort into finding the right person. Maybe you aren’t ready yet.”

There was a pause then a sigh of resignation. “What do you want me to do?”

“Can you meet me at Café Lombard at six this evening?”

“I’ll be there.” There was a click on the line as he ended the call.

Had she made him mad? Her time was valuable too. Tanner had come to her for help. He was going to have to meet her halfway, do his part to help find the perfect match for him. That required energy. If their conversation at the café didn’t go well, she’d just tell him that he needed to go elsewhere for assistance.

* * *

Café Lombard was a small establishment at the bottom of Lombard Street, which was famous for being the curviest street in the world. Flowers bloomed between each of the curves, making it a fun street to look at but not to drive along. Tanner wasn’t a fan of quaintness and this was one of the most picturesque places in San Francisco. When he arrived right at six, he spotted Whitney sitting at a table for two in the patio area.

Again her shoulder-length hair was primly pulled back into a controlled mass at the nape of her neck. She wore a simple blouse that gave little hint of her body shape and with that were a pair of black pants and flat shoes. There was nothing flamboyant

about her. She looked as if she wanted to blend in, go unnoticed.

He started across the street toward her. She glanced up. A smile came to her lips as she waved at him. Now that expression stood out. It encouraged him to return it and he did.

Tanner joined her at the table.

“You’re not going to grab me, are you?” She put a chair between them.

“Not unless you want me to. Look, I’m sorry about that. I just didn’t want my colleagues asking a lot of questions. It was easier to pretend you were my girlfriend.”

“I guess I can understand that.”

He dropped into the chair across from her.

“Would you like something to drink or eat? It’s on me, of course,” Whitney offered.

She seemed to have already forgotten his invasion of her personal space. She was a good sport. “Thank you. I’m starved. But I can get my own.”

The waiter came to their table.

“I’ll have a cob salad and a water,” Whitney said.

“And I’ll have a steak sandwich with fries with a large lemonade.”

The waiter left. Whitney quirked a corner of her mouth up as if perplexed by something.

“What?” Tanner asked.

“Lemonade? You seem more like a beer guy.”

“I am, but I’m on call.”

“Ah, that makes sense.” She appeared to approve.

He leaned forward and crossed his arms on the table. “I’m sorry I was so abrupt with you on the phone. I’ve just been super busy this month. Under a lot of pressure.”

She smiled. “I understand. I’ll try to keep this short and sweet.”

“So what did you need to see me about?”

“I’ve found some potential dates I think you might be interested in. I’d like you to review their files and see what you think. Then I’ll set up a social with the one you like best.” Whitney pushed a pink folder toward him.

Pink seemed an appropriate color for a matchmaker. At least her office supplies had some flair. Tanner opened the folder to find a printed page with the name of a woman at the top and information about her. He looked at Whitney. “No picture? I don’t get to see what they look like?”

“Not until you meet them. I think a lasting relationship should be based on something more than looks. I want my clients to see beyond the surface.”

“Interesting.” Was there something peculiar about that belief? She no doubt believed in true love and happily-ever-after. He’d learned long ago not to believe in fairy tales. He flipped through the other pages. The women seemed interesting but a couple of them owned their own businesses. He picked up their sheets. “These don’t look like they would have time to devote to children, take on social obligations.”

“They both assure me that they would be willing to change

their lifestyle for the right person. We can put them at the bottom of the list, if you wish, however.”

“Have you spoken to them about me?” He didn’t relish the idea of being discussed like a piece of merchandise. Yet he was doing the same thing in regards to those women.

She took the women’s profiles from him and placed the open file on the table between them both. “I didn’t disclose your name or picture but, yes, they have reviewed your profile as well.”

“So this is how it works.”

“Yes.”

The waiter returned with their meals. Neither of them said anything until he left.

Whitney leaned forward with a reassuring smile on her lips. “It’s not as painful as you might think. All my clients are interested in finding the same thing. Happiness with someone.”

She made it sound like this was about a love match. A ride off into a beautiful sunset. “I’m more interested in someone who’s compatible and interested in the same things as I am.”

“I think if you spend some time reading this information—” she tapped the folder with her well-manicured, unpolished index finger “—you’ll find these are all women worth meeting. They’re all very lovely people.”

Tanner took a bite out of his sandwich as he flipped the pages back and forth. He continued to eat and review the women’s information. A couple of them sounded like they might work. He glanced at Whitney. She was sitting straight with one hand in her

lap, eating her salad. Her manners were excellent.

He pushed two sheets toward her. “I think I would like to start with these.”

She put her fork down and looked at the papers then nodded. “These are good choices. I’ll see about setting up socials. I’ll let you know when and where to meet.”

“How will I know them?”

There was that reassuring lift of the lips again. “I’ll be there to introduce you. It’s very uncomfortable to wait for a person you don’t know so I’ll make the introductions and then leave you to get to know each other.”

“So that’s all there is to it?” He closed the folder and nudged it back toward her.

She moved her half-eaten salad away and took the folder. “That’s it, except for the bill.”

He raised a brow and grinned. “I thought you were getting the meal.”

“I am, but there’s the charge for my services so far.” Whitney reached into her purse, removed an envelope and handed it to him.

“Did you add extra for meeting me at the airport and the hug and kiss?”

Whitney pushed the chair back. She looked dead serious when she said, “No. That came for free—once. Next time it will cost you.”

“I hope it isn’t necessary again. I’ll have this in the mail

tomorrow.” He stuffed the envelope into his pants pocket.

Again she dug into her purse, came out with a couple of green bills and placed them on the table. “Thank you for that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll get started on setting up those socials. I’ll be in touch soon.”

Tanner watched her leave the patio and cross the street. Interesting person. Combination of quiet firmness and solid businesswoman. He grinned. She’d become a little flustered when he’d mentioned that hug and kiss again. There was a softness under that businesswoman tough exterior. His gaze moved to the swing of her shapely hips. That wasn’t bad either.

CHAPTER TWO

IT HAD BEEN two days since Whitney had spoken briefly to Tanner about the social she had set up for him today. He’d assured her he would be there but he’d yet to show. She’d always had one of her clients meet her early so that they were waiting for the other one when he or she arrived.

Whitney looked around the coffee shop again. Still no Tanner. Picking up her phone, she texted him.

“Were you worried that I wouldn’t show?” a deep voice asked from behind her.

She looked around and into Tanner’s dark, twinkling eyes. He had nice eyes. Eyes she suspected saw more than he let on. “I was more worried about your tardiness hurting your chances with Michelle Watkins. After all, we’re doing this for you.”

“And I appreciate that. It’s the reason I am here. So I’m going

to be meeting Michelle. Five-six, brown hair, educated at UCLA and likes the outdoors.” He came around the table and took the chair across from her.

“I see you remember your facts.”

“So what happens now?” He leaned toward her as if what she was going to say was super important. She’d bet he had a great bedside manner.

“When Michelle arrives, I’ll introduce you to each other, then I’ll leave you to charm her.”

His focus didn’t waver. “How do you know I can do that?”

Tanner’s intense attention made her nerves jump. She’d said more than she’d intended. Would he see the weakness and insecurity she worked to keep at bay? Since he hadn’t remembered her she hadn’t planned on bringing up their college years. Now she either lied to him or admitted she’d recognized him. She wasn’t a liar. With her ex, Steve, she’d lived a lie and wouldn’t ever treat anyone that way. “You and I had a few classes together at Berkeley.”

He looked truly surprised. Cocking his head to the side, he asked, “We did?”

“Yeah. They were lower-level classes.” From there she’d gone into business classes, he into sciences. She’d still seen him around campus, though.

He appeared to give that thought, as if searching back through his memories of those days. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember you.”

His tone led her to believe he was sincere. “There’s no reason

that you would.”

Tanner leaned back in his chair and studied her. “So how does a woman with an education from Berkeley become a matchmaker?”

“Mostly by accident. I helped some people in college meet someone and then later did the same thing for my boss, and the rest is history.”

He nodded sagely. “Just that easily you started a business matching people up?”

“It wasn’t all that easy at first. But the word got around that I am discreet and, most of all, successful.” She glanced toward the front door then raised her hand, drawing Michelle Watkins’s attention.

Tanner looked over his shoulder then quickly stood. Whitney gave him points for being a gentleman. But she wasn’t the one he needed to impress. Michelle was. She was smiling, which was encouraging.

When the woman reached them Whitney introduced them. “Michelle, I’d like you to meet Tanner Locke.”

Tanner offered Michelle his hand, along with a warm smile that Whitney recognized from their college days when he’d been charming a crowd of women. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Michelle. Please, join us.”

Michelle couldn’t seem to keep her eyes off Tanner. Was she already bowled over by him? Whitney was tempted to roll her eyes. The man’s magic knew no bounds.

“Thank you,” Michelle cooed, and took the chair Tanner held for her.

“Why don’t I order us all something to drink?” Whitney suggested as a waitress came to the table.

“That would be nice,” Michelle agreed, not taking her gaze off Tanner.

Whitney placed the order and the waitress left.

Tanner looked at Michelle. “I understand you like the outdoors.”

“Yes,” Michelle simpered. “I love to hike when I have the time.”

Whitney sat back and listened as the two traded stories about their favorite hikes. They seemed to have forgotten she was there, something that had happened to her more than once in her life. She’d learned to live with it. This time it was part of her business.

The waitress brought their drinks, which swung Tanner’s attention back to her. “Thank you for the lemonade. I’ll get these this time,” he said to Whitney, then his attention returned to Michelle.

Whitney took a long swallow of the cool, tart liquid. Setting the glass on the table, she said, “I’ll leave you both to get to know each other better. I’ll be in touch.”

Tanner nodded.

Michelle said, “Thank you, Whitney,” before her attention went straight back to Tanner.

Whitney walked to the front door. She looked back at them.

They made a nice-looking pair. Two dark-haired, well-groomed, professional people who looked as if they were enjoying each other's company.

That was what her matchmaking was all about. So why couldn't she do that for herself?

* * *

Two days later, Whitney answered the phone.

"We need to talk."

Whitney didn't have to question who she was speaking to. She knew that voice at the first roll of a vowel. This time it wasn't warm and creamy. It was icy and sharp.

"Tanner, is something wrong?" She kept her voice low and even. She didn't often have to talk a client down after a social or a date.

"Michelle won't do. We need to meet again. Bring that file."

Whitney stiffened. She wasn't one of his OR nurses to be ordered around. "What's wrong?"

"I don't have time to talk about it now."

And he thinks I do?

"Let me see. How about the coffeehouse on Market Street tomorrow morning around nine?"

"I have surgery then. Could you come to the hospital in about an hour?"

What? She wasn't at his beck and call. She'd already gone out of her way for him once and now he wanted her to drop what she was doing and drive downtown. "I don't know. That isn't how

I like to conduct business. I thought you didn't want anyone to know you were using my services. Aren't you afraid someone might ask you questions?"

"They might but I don't have to answer. Whitney, it would really help me out if you could come here. I'm tied up with cases but I'd really like to get this other stuff rolling along."

Other stuff rolling along.

Was that how he thought of the woman who would share the rest of his life? She was glad she didn't fit his list.

Unfortunately, she didn't really have a good excuse why she couldn't help him out. "Okay, but I won't be doing this again."

"Great. Just give me a call when you get here." He hung up.

Tanner hadn't even said goodbye. It was time to have a heart-to-heart with him about whether or not he was really interested in doing the work needed to find a soul mate.

The traffic was light so she made good time going up and down the hills of San Francisco. The city could be difficult to drive in but the views of the bay made it worth it. She was just sorry a streetcar didn't run close enough to the hospital for her to take one of those.

She found a parking spot in the high-rise lot next to the hospital. Crossing the street, she entered the towering hospital. In the lobby, she pulled out her phone and called Tanner's number. Never in her wildest dreams would she ever have imagined having it at her fingertips. She and Tanner didn't move in the same circles and never would.

He answered as he had before. There was an arrogance to how he responded but the crisp sound of his last name seemed to suit him.

“It’s Whitney.”

“Hey.” His tone changed as if he was glad to hear from her. She liked that idea too much. Obviously since he’d gotten his way he had calmed down. “From the main lobby door continue down the long hallway to the second bank of elevators on your right. They’ll be about halfway down the hall. Take one of them. Come up to the fifth floor. I’ll meet you at the elevator.”

Tanner didn’t wait for her to answer before closing the connection. That she wasn’t as accepting of. She’d rather be told goodbye.

Whitney found the bank of elevators and took the next available car. At the correct floor she stepped off. As good as his word, Tanner stood there, talking to another man also dressed in scrubs. When he saw her he left the man and strolled over to her.

He was the epitome of the tall, dark and handsome doctor. He still had the looks that drew women’s attention. What had happened between him and Michelle she couldn’t fathom.

Michelle had called yesterday morning all but glowing about the social and the date they’d had the night before. How she could have seen it as being so wonderful while Tanner was so unhappy was a mystery to Whitney.

“Thanks for coming.” Tanner ran his hand over his hair. “I know it wasn’t what you wanted to do. I had to come in last night

to do an emergency surgery. I just couldn't get away today. I have one more patient to see. Would you mind hanging out for a little bit?"

If he'd asked her that in college she might have fainted. Now Whitney only saw him as a man who needed her services. "Sure. I wouldn't mind watching what you do. It might help me better understand you, which would assist me in matching you."

"All business, all the time."

"You're one to be talking," she quipped.

He grinned. "You're not the first person to say that. After I see this patient we'll go to my office to talk."

They walked down a hall until they came to double doors. Tanner scanned a card and the doors opened from the middle out. They entered a hallway with patients' rooms. He stopped at the third doorway along the passage. "This is Mr. Wilcox. Let me get permission for you to come in."

"I don't mind waiting out here."

Tanner touched her arm when she started to move to the other side of the hall. A zing of awareness traveled up her arm. "He's rather lonely. He'd like to have the company. See a face that has nothing to do with the hospital."

That was a side of Tanner she hadn't expected. Compassion beyond the medicine. "Then I'll be glad to say hi."

Tanner raised his hand to knock on the door but turned back to her. "He has a lot of pumps and drips hooked to him. That stuff doesn't bother you, does it?"

She smiled. "No, I promise not to faint or stare."

"Good." Tanner appeared pleased with her answer. Had other women he'd known acted negatively to what he did for a living? He knocked on the door and stuck his head around it. There was a rumble of voices, then Tanner waved her toward him.

"We'll need to wear masks." He pulled a yellow paper one from a box on a table outside the door and handed it to her before entering the room. She followed.

Mr. Wilcox was about her father's age, but his skin was an ash gray. Beside him was a bank of machines with lights. There was a whish of air coming from one. A clear rubber tube circled both the man's ears and came around to fit under his nose.

"Mr. Wilcox, I brought you a visitor," Tanner said.

The man's dull eyes brightened for a second as he looked at her.

"Whitney Thomason, I'd like you to meet Jim Wilcox."

"Nice to meet you, young lady," Mr. Wilcox wheezed as he raised a hand weakly toward her.

"You too, Mr. Wilcox." Whitney stepped closer to the bed.

"So how're you feeling?" Tanner asked, leaning forward, concern written on his face.

Whitney was impressed with the lower timbre of his voice, which sounded as if he truly wished to know. She could grow to admire this Tanner.

"Oh, about the same. This contraption—" Mr. Wilcox nodded toward the swishing machine beside him "—is keeping me alive

but I'm still stuck in this bed.”

“Well, maybe there'll be a heart soon.”

“That's what you've been telling me for weeks now. I'm starting to think you're holding out on me.” Mr. Wilcox offered a small smile and perked up when he looked at her. “At least you were kind enough today to bring me something pretty to look at.”

Whitney blushed. “Thanks but—”

“Aw, don't start all that stuttering and blustering. I have a feeling your beauty goes more than skin deep.”

Whitney really did feel heat in her cheeks then. “I think that might be the nicest compliment I've ever received.”

Tanner's eyes met hers and held. Did he agree with Mr. Wilcox? Did he see something that others didn't?

The older man cleared his throat.

Tanner's attention returned to him. “Okay, Romeo. I need to give you a listen.” He pulled his stethoscope from around his neck. “I might have done a bad thing by inviting Whitney in.”

“If I promise to be nice, will you bring her back again?” Mr. Wilcox asked with enthusiasm in every word.

Whitney touched the older man's arm. “Don't worry, he doesn't have to invite me for me to come again.”

She felt more than saw Tanner glance at her.

“Then I'll look forward to it. So tell me how you know this quack over here?” Mr. Wilcox indicated Tanner.

Her gaze met Tanner's. There was panic in his gaze. He probably didn't want the man to know she was helping him find

a wife. “Oh, we were in college together.”

Tanner’s brows rose. He nodded as if he was pleased with her response.

“Where’d you go?” Mr. Wilcox rasped.

“Berkeley,” she told him.

“Then you got a fine education.”

Tanner interrupted them with, “So, are you having any chest pains?”

Mr. Wilcox paused. “No.”

“That’s good. You seem to be holding your own.” Tanner flipped through the chart he’d brought in with him and laid it on the bed tray. “You need to be eating more. You have to keep your energy up.”

“I’ll try but nothing tastes good.” Mr. Wilcox pushed at the bed table as if there was something offensive on it.

“Not even ice cream?” Tanner asked.

“I’ve eaten all those little cups I can stand. I’d like a good old-fashioned banana split that I could share with someone like your young lady.”

Tanner chuckled. “When you get your heart and are out of here I’ll see if I can get Whitney to come back and bring you a fat-free split.”

“Fat-free,” he spat.

“That’s it,” Tanner said with a grin.

“Well, if Whitney shares it with me maybe I can live with it. She has nice eyes. Windows to the soul, they say.” Mr. Wilcox

smiled.

“That she does,” Tanner agreed.

Whitney looked at Tanner. Did he really mean that? She’d had no indication that he’d noticed anything about her.

“So is she your girlfriend?”

“Just friends,” she and Tanner said at the same time.

Whitney wasn’t sure that their professional association qualified as friendship. Tanner wanted his personal business kept private, so “friends” seemed the right thing to say. Could they be friends? She didn’t know. What she did recognize was that she liked the Tanner who was concerned enough about his patient’s loneliness to invite her to meet him just to cut the monotony of being in the hospital day after day. That was a Tanner she could find a match for. Sad that the other Tanner wouldn’t let this one show up more often.

“Even behind that mask I can tell she’s pretty enough to be your girlfriend. You can always tell a special woman by her eyes. My wife, Milly, had beautiful eyes.”

Tanner put his hand on the man’s shoulder. “I think we’d better be going.”

Whitney touched Mr. Wilcox’s arm briefly. “I hope to see you again soon. It was nice to meet you.”

He lifted a hand and waved as she reached the door. “You too. You’re welcome to my abode anytime.”

Whitney smiled. She liked Mr. Wilcox. “Bye, now.”

Tanner joined her. “See you soon, Mr. Wilcox.”

“You too, Doc.”

Whitney stepped out into the hall and Tanner followed, pulling the door closed behind him.

As they removed their masks Tanner said, “I’m sorry if he made you feel uncomfortable in there or put you on the spot about being with me. Mr. Wilcox can be pretty cheeky.”

“I didn’t mind. He seems like a nice guy who’s lonely.”

“He is. As a doctor I’m not supposed to have favorites but I really like the man. He’s been waiting too long.”

She watched for his reaction as she said, “That’s why you took me to see him. You knew he needed something to prick his interest. You didn’t mind him assuming I was your girlfriend because that would give him something to figure out, live for.”

“Why, Ms. Thomason, you are smart.”

Whitney couldn’t deny her pleasure at his praise. She also couldn’t help but ask, “I know you can’t tell me details, but what’s going on with Mr. Wilcox?”

Tanner’s eyes took on a haunted look. “Most of it you heard. He’s waiting for a heart. He needs one pretty quickly.”

“Or he’ll die,” she said quietly.

Tanner’s eyes took on a shadowed look. “Yeah.”

“You seem to take that in your stride.” She sounded as if she was condemning him even to her own ears.

“It’s a part of what I do. Medical School 101. But that doesn’t mean I like it.” His retort was crisp. He started down the hall and she followed. At the desk he handed a nurse Mr. Wilcox’s chart

and continued on. “My office is this way. I’m on call tonight.”

Whitney had to hurry to keep up with him. They walked down a couple of hallways to a nondescript door. Again Tanner swiped his card. There was a click. He turned the doorknob and entered. She trailed him down a short hall to a small sterile-looking office. It became even smaller when Tanner stepped in.

There was a metal desk with a black high-backed chair behind it and a metal chair in front. What struck her as most interesting was the absence of pictures. Didn’t he have family? Nieces or nephews? A dog?

“Please, come in.” Tanner walked around the desk and settled into the chair. Was his home this cold as well? Could he open his life enough to have a wife and family?

Whitney sat in the uncomfortable utilitarian chair. Apparently whoever visited wasn’t encouraged to stay long. “I understand from Michelle that she had a wonderful time the other night. So what’s the problem on your side?”

Tanner picked up a pen and twisted it through his fingers, a sure sign he wasn’t comfortable with the question. “She wanted something that I won’t give.”

There was a chilly breeze in the words. “That is?”

“Let’s just say she was already getting more emotionally attached than I want to be. You need to go through your file and find me some women who are interested in security, financial comfort, social status, not whether or not they are loved. I’m looking for something far more solid than love. Companionship.”

Whitney felt like she'd been punched in the chest. She'd never heard anything sadder. All the compassion she'd just seen Tanner show Mr. Wilcox was gone. Now all she saw was a shell of a man. For him a heart was nothing more than an organ that pumped blood. Not the center of life she believed it to be. "The women I represent all want to be loved."

He put his elbows on the desk and steepled his fingers, giving her a direct look. "For the amount of money I'm paying you I expect you to find someone who suits my needs. I thought I'd made it clear what I wanted in a relationship. It's your business to find me that match."

If he had slapped her she couldn't have been more insulted. "I assure you I know my business. I'll set up a social with the next client on my list for as soon as possible." She looked him in the eyes. "But you should know, Tanner, it's my experience that most people see marriage less as a business deal and more as an emotional attachment."

Tanner's face turned stern. His voice was firm when he said, "That might be the case but that isn't the type of person I'm looking for. I've made my request and you've stated you can fill it, so that's what I expect."

What had happened to the man? How could he be so compassionate toward his patient but so calculating about the type of wife he wanted? Whitney stood. "I'll be in touch soon."

He got to his feet as well. "Good. If you take a right out of my door you'll come to a set of elevators. It'll take you down to the

lobby. Thanks for coming here.”

She'd been dismissed. That was fine with her. Whitney turned on her heel and left. Right now she wasn't sure if she should keep Tanner as a client. Truth be known, she wasn't certain she even liked him.

* * *

Tanner was at Café Lombard for the “social” before Whitney or the woman he was to meet. When Whitney had left his office the other evening she hadn't been happy. Her lips had been pinched tight and her chin had jutted out. Somehow what he had said she had taken personally. Hadn't he made it clear what he was looking for in a relationship during their earlier interview? Couldn't she understand that he had no interest in a love match?

Those only led to pain, not just between the husband and wife but for the children as well. He and his brother were a prime example of that. They hadn't seen each other in years. Tanner wanted a marriage based on something solid and not fleeting, like an emotion.

His date with Michelle had been wonderful. They'd had a number of things in common. They both enjoyed the outdoors, liked baseball and traveling. It wasn't that he didn't like Michelle, but he could tell by her speech and her body language that she was looking for more than he could give. There had been hopeful stars in her eyes. He wanted someone whose expectations were less dreamlike and more firmly rooted in reality.

Statements like “Children should know that their parents care

about each other. It makes for a more stable child,” or “I want a husband who can be there when I need him,” showed him that Michelle needed emotional support that he just couldn’t give. Tanner wanted someone who could handle their own ups and downs without involving him.

He looked up to see Whitney entering. The displeased expression she’d worn the other day was gone but there was still a tightness around her lips, indicating she might not be in the best of moods. When had he started being able to read so well someone he hardly knew?

He half stood. She flashed a smile of greeting. It was an all-business tilt of the lips instead of actual gladness to see him. Tanner didn’t much care for that. Yet why did it bother him to have her disgruntled with him?

Today Whitney wore a flowing dress with a small pale pink rose pattern on it that reached just past her knees. A sweater was pulled over her shoulders and the sleeves tied across her chest. She was dressed like an old-maid schoolteacher. Why did she wear such nondescript clothing? Did she do it because she thought people believed that was how a matchmaker should dress? She was too young and too attractive not to flaunt it some. What would she look like in a tight, short skirt? He’d be interested to see. Great, would be his guess. But why should it matter to him how she dressed?

“Hello, Tanner.” She took the chair across from him. “You’re early.”

“My last case was canceled due to a fever so I got away from the hospital sooner than I thought I would.”

Whitney clasped her hands in her lap and looked directly at him. “I think you work too hard and too many hours.” It wasn’t an accusation, more a statement of fact. She didn’t give him time to respond before she continued. “You’re going to meet Racheal today. I think you’ll really like her. She has a master’s degree in business and loves children.”

“I remember reading her profile. Did you make it clear to her what I am looking for?”

“I did. She’s interested in a family but doesn’t want to give over her freedom just to have that. She’s looking for the same type of relationship that you are.” Whitney made it sound as if the idea left a bad taste in her mouth.

“Do you have a problem with that?”

She shrugged then leaned back in the chair. “Not if that’s what you both want.”

He leaned forward, piercing her with a look.

She shifted in the chair.

Tanner crossed his arms on the table. “Tell me what you think this should be about.”

Her eyes widened. She did have pretty ones. Like green grass after spring rain. She blinked. “It isn’t about what I think but about what you want.”

“Spoken like a true matchmaker, eager to please. Are you married, Whitney?”

Her chin raised a notch. “I don’t believe that has anything to do with your case.”

“It might not but it gives me an idea of how good you are at this matchmaking business.”

She shifted in her chair. “If you don’t have any confidence in my ability then I’ll be glad to refund your money minus five hundred dollars for the work I’ve done so far.”

He’d hit a touchy spot. “And add the charge for the hug and kiss after all?”

She relaxed and shook her head. “No. I wouldn’t do that. This isn’t a joke.”

He leaned back in the chair and watched her for a long moment. Her direct look challenged his. This was a woman who wouldn’t give up until she had succeeded. “You’re right—it isn’t. I’m not ready to throw in the towel yet.”

“Then you do understand that I have the same responsibility to the women I introduce you to as I do to you?”

She had backbone and a moral line. What you saw was what you got with Whitney. That was refreshing. Most women he knew were only really interested in themselves. “I realize that. I’ll try to be on my best behavior.”

“I’m starting to wonder what that is. I also expect you to give them a fair chance.” Her tone had become schoolmarmish.

“You don’t think I gave Michelle that?”

She didn’t immediately answer. “Truthfully, I’m not sure you did.”

It didn't matter to him if she thought so or not. He knew what he wanted better than she did, matchmaker or not. It was his life they were talking about. He'd seen what uninvited and unrequited love did to a person. He wanted none of it. Good, solid, practical thought was what his marriage would be based on.

A blonde woman stepped up to their table. Whitney jerked around as if she'd forgotten all about her joining them. Tanner smiled. She'd been too flustered by his questions to remember why they were there. He liked the idea that he'd rattled Whitney. Too much.

"Hello, Racheal. I'm sorry I didn't see you when you came in." Whitney's voice sounded a little higher than normal.

Once again, Whitney was a contrast to her female client. Racheal had a short haircut and every strand was in its place. Her makeup was flawless and she wore the latest fashion with ease. She certainly looked the part of the woman he thought he would like to share his name. He looked at Whitney and somehow he found her more to his taste. Shaking that thought away, Tanner returned his attention to Racheal.

He stood and offered his hand to her. "Tanner Locke. Thanks for joining us."

He held a chair out for Racheal and she gracefully slipped into it.

"It's nice to meet you." Racheal had a no-nonsense note in her voice.

He looked at Whitney. "I've already ordered drinks."

“Thank you, Tanner. I think I’ll leave you and Racheal to get to know each other better. I’ll be in touch soon.”

Tanner remained standing as she left. A tug of disappointment went through him to see her go. Why?

* * *

Whitney hadn’t heard from Tanner in three days. Far too often she had found herself wondering how things were going between him and Racheal. She liked to give her clients time to get to know each other and digest their thoughts on the new match before she asked. This time she was particularly anxious to know.

Racheal had already checked in. She seemed pleased with Tanner. According to her, they’d had a wonderful time talking at the social and had enjoyed their first date. Maybe she had found the right one for Tanner after all. But she had thought that with Michelle. She would wait until tomorrow and give him a call. See if he was as pleased as Racheal.

That evening Whitney was just slipping into bed when her phone rang. A call this late usually didn’t mean good news. Was her father ill again? “Hello?”

“It’s Tanner.”

His voice was low and gravelly. There was no apology for calling so late. She wasn’t surprised. But with his schedule he probably thought nothing of it. “Yes?”

“You told me to call and let you know how things are going.”

She had indeed told him that but had assumed he would do so during business hours. An edgy feeling washed over her,

knowing she was in bed while talking to Tanner. It seemed far too evocative. She flipped the covers back and stood beside the bed.

“Racheal seems to be working out. We went out last night. I have a party on Friday that I’ve invited her to.” His voice was low and calm, as if he had all the time in the world to talk.

“I’m glad to hear it. I’ll check in with you both next week. I look forward to hearing how the relationship is progressing.”

“How have you been?” His voice was warm and silky.

Whitney walked to the window. “I’m fine.”

“That’s good. Goodnight.”

Whitney listened to the click on the other end of the line. She returned to her bed and pulled the covers over herself again. Somehow the sheets didn’t feel as cool anymore.

Maybe Racheal was it. Had Tanner found the one he wanted? Whitney wished she felt happier about that idea.

Even if he hadn’t, he wouldn’t look at her that way. Did she want him to? Turning off the light, she settled under the covers, but it took her far too long to fall asleep.

* * *

Whitney continued to wonder how things were going between Tanner and Racheal. More than once she’d been tempted to call him but had held back. She’d never had that problem before. Normally she let her couples go without thought or overseeing them, but Tanner’s case held too much of her attention.

Whitney was already asleep a week later when the phone rang. She picked up the phone and a man’s voice said, “Just what type

of women are you introducing me to? You're supposed to be the best at this."

"Tanner, what's going on? Do you know what time it is?"

"Yes. I know what time it is." He sounded angry.

At this point the time didn't matter. She was awake anyway. Despite that, she found herself happy to finally hear from him. "What's the problem?"

"The problem is that Racheal backed out of a weekend we had planned in Napa. It's a hospital retreat and I had already said I would be bringing a guest. I'm trying to make a positive impression on the board. This situation could hurt my chance for a promotion."

"I'm sorry." And she was. He was a good doctor and deserved it, she was sure.

"You should be. I hold you responsible."

"Me!" Whitney squeaked and set up in bed.

"I'm paying you to provide me with women who understand the importance of my job and position."

What was he raving about? "Racheal didn't?"

"I guess not. She agreed to go and now at the last minute she's backed out."

Whitney worked to keep her tone even. "Did she give you a reason?"

"She just said she wasn't ready for this step."

That sounded reasonable to Whitney. "You can't expect her to do something that she isn't comfortable with."

“I damn well can expect her to keep her word.”

He had a point there, but what did he imagine she could do about it? She couldn't make Racheal go with him. “I have to honor what my clients feel they need to do.”

“And you have to honor our contract. I need someone as my girlfriend this weekend.”

It was Thursday. How was she going to find someone who would go away with a perfect stranger on such short notice? “I wish I could help you, Tanner. At this point I don't know what I can do.”

“Well, I do. If you can't find me someone then you have to come. At least that way I'll be bringing a guest. I can make up a story about how we broke up later.”

What? Is he crazy? Spend a weekend with him?

“That's not possible. It's unethical. You're my client.”

“One you're expected to keep happy. You were supposed to vet the women you introduce me to. You failed in determining Racheal's true character. I expect you to meet your professional obligation.”

How did that logically extend to her personally replacing a client?

“Look, this weekend is important to my career, just as finding the right woman is. There will be no expectations on my part except for you to be pleasant and act as if we're a couple.” His voice was firm and determined, as if he wouldn't accept no as an answer.

Whitney's heart pounded. Was she seriously going to consider it? "You can't just demand that I spend the weekend with you."

"Sure I can." His voice had turned hard. "We have a contract for services and you need to hold up your end. It was your suggestion that I pick Racheal. She didn't hold up her end so that defaults to you."

Whitney wasn't sure she agreed with his reasoning but she didn't need him bad-mouthing her around town. She'd taken Tanner on as a client to increase her professional profile, not to hurt it. Plus, she hated that he was in a spot.

If she agreed to his demand she couldn't imagine the weekend being anything but long and miserable. She didn't belong in his social group. She was an outsider. Tanner wanted someone who could make a good impression. More than once she'd been judged by her looks. He needed someone who could influence. That wasn't her. She was good with people one on one but not as a member of a house party. To run in Tanner's world...

"I'll pick you up at nine in the morning. What's your address?"

"Tanner, I can't do this."

"Oh, yes, you can," he all but hollered down the phone.

He wasn't going to allow her a way out. Apprehension bubbled in Whitney as she gave him her address.

"You'll need a cocktail dress, swimsuit and casual clothes." There was a click on the other end of the line. Tanner had hung up. Once again.

Whitney lay there. What had just happened? She'd just gotten

press-ganged into a weekend with Tanner as his “plus one.” What was he thinking? What was she doing?

Those bubbles combined into a heavy mass of dread in her chest. She wasn’t part of Tanner’s world. What if she made a mistake and embarrassed him?

If she had really changed from that insecure girl from years ago it was time to prove it.

CHAPTER THREE

TANNER DIDN’T KNOW what had gotten into him when he’d insisted that Whitney join him on this weekend retreat. He had been so angry when Racheal had called and told him that she wouldn’t be going that he’d picked up the phone and dialed Whitney’s number without a thought. But to insist she attend a weekend with him might have been overreacting. Desperation had fueled his demand. He needed a woman on his arm.

Well, it was done now.

For him to have a “significant other” with him for the weekend was an unwritten requirement. Besides, he might have hinted to one or two of the board members that he’d become serious about someone. It mustn’t look like he’d been lying or he could kiss that promotion goodbye.

He pulled his car to the curb in front of Whitney’s home. To his surprise, he’d known the address. She lived in one of the famous “painted ladies.” Whitney stood waiting in front of a light blue Victorian row house with a yellow door and white gingerbread trimmings. Pink flowers grew in pots on the steps.

The house was an obvious reflection of Whitney. He'd always liked these old homes. Something about them said life was peaceful inside.

Whitney looked small compared to the towering three-story home. His heart fell. This wasn't good. She wore a full shirt that hung almost to her knees and underneath she wore baggy pajama-style pants and flat slippers. Her hair was pulled back into a bun. Whitney couldn't have looked more nondescript if she had tried. He really couldn't force her to dress better, or could he?

Stepping out of the car, Tanner went to the trunk and opened it.

Whitney joined him with her bags in her hand. "Tanner, I think we should really reconsider this idea."

"I've already done that a couple of times and I don't see another way. I need a girlfriend for this weekend and you are it." Even if her sense of style was missing.

Uncertainty filled her eyes. "This type of thing really isn't me."

"You'll be fine. Sitting by the pool and reading all day works for me. I just need you to attend the dinner this evening and tomorrow evening and all will be good."

She didn't look any more enthused but she let him take her bags and climbed into the car.

Yet again he felt bad about insisting she come with him, but he needed her. The board members would be at this retreat and he had to give them the impression he was getting close to settling

down. “Do you mind if I put the top down? It’s a beautiful day.”

“Not at all. I love a convertible.”

Tanner leaned over her to unlock the roof from the windshield. A floral scent that fit her perfectly assaulted his nose. Maybe the weekend wouldn’t be so bad. He flipped the other lock above his head. When he pushed a button, the roof slowly folded down behind them.

“I like your car. It suits you,” Whitney said.

“Thanks. I grew up wanting one of these and when I finished medical school I bought one.”

“I’ve always loved two-seaters. I’m going to enjoy riding in this one.” She gave him a weak smile.

So at least they had that in common. As Tanner started the car, Whitney pulled a long multicolored scarf out of her purse. With deft efficiency she wrapped it around her head and tied it under her chin. Great, now he had Old Mother Hubbard with him. Why did she dress like she did?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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