

Chapter One



IF OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS *on a Saturday morning, am I still expected to answer the door?*

The question powered my glare at my cell, jingling its way across the kitchen counter. Technically, opportunity was ringing, not knocking—like that changed anything. There was still no reason to assume Harry Dane wasn't dialing from the middle of another hangover. It would follow the pattern of the other times he'd called in the year since we'd graduated from Chapman U—three of them, not that I was counting—all of them on Saturdays, all revealing nothing except that he was still with Beth, living in a craptastic studio apartment in Torrance, waiting for Hollywood to notice his directorial brilliance.

In short, a good occasion to be thankful for voice mail.

There was a time when I'd have pulled triple backflips to be the girl in that apartment with Harry. The days when life was going to be him, me, and destiny. We were going to change the world, one meaningful, Sundance film fest winner at a time. Back in the days when I still thought we could all change the world by just believing we could.

The days before Beth.

Before I grew up.

Regrettably, my libido hadn't caught up to reality. The girl parts still tingled when Harry's face, a gorgeous blend of his Hawaiian mom and French dad, appeared in my phone's window. A tiny piece of my heart still ached to think of how our kids would've turned out. A little girl in a hula

skirt with his dancing brown eyes and my long black hair, or a little boy as intense as his dad, resolute chin joined to my turquoise gaze.

A couple more rings and I could shove all that away again. Forget about Harry until after I'd finished my good-for-me self-help book, my shitty-for-me cereal, and my congrats-you're-a-human-again shower.

Which was why I reached across the counter and picked the damn thing up.

Too busy creating different ways to call myself an idiot, I forgot to greet the man properly. Probably why *his* voice came as a surprise. "Cam? You there?"

Wait. The surprise stemmed from something else. I actually understood him. Not a single sloshy word or half-blitzed burp.

"Hey. Hi. I'm here."

Whoosh of breath from his end. Relief? Dread? I had a second of static to contemplate that before he gushed, "Awesome. There's my rock star."

Wait. Whoa. *Gushed?*

"What the hell?" I blurted.

"What the hell what?"

"You're sober."

"Uhh, yeah. I am."

"You never call me unless you're drinking." *So why don't you act your age and drink more?*

He chuckled. *Dammit.* His chuckle was still really sexy.

"Okay, so..."

"Yeah, uh..."

"Harry." By the time it popped out, there was enough rebuke in it to remind myself of my own mother. *Isb.*

"Cam." It was all he said. But in a way, all he had to say. The syllable was...serious. For that reason alone...strange. Unless he was behind a camera dictating a shot, Harry wasn't serious about anything.

I stared at the marshmallow clovers still floating in the milk in my bowl, wondering if I was about to puke on them. "Harry?"

"Cam." Again, it was all he said. If my heart wasn't pounding so hard, I would've laughed at our exchange. This was so ridiculous it wouldn't even fly as a rom-com script.

“You said that already,” I snapped. “What the hell’s going on? Are your mom and dad okay?” I hadn’t talked to Phillippe and Kalea Dane beyond emails in the last three months.

“They’re fine. Everything’s fine. Chill out, Camellia Diana, and that’s an order.”

I was about to rinse out my bowl and spoon. I left them behind in the sink, falling into a chair at my new Mission-style dining room table. Normally, I’d caress the polished surface in adoration—but right now, barely noticed it.

“Shit,” I rasped.

“What?” Harry laughed again. I really was going to deck him.

“*What?* You don’t drop the ‘Diana’ bomb randomly, Dane. Spit it out. What kind of trouble are you in?” The money angle could be written off. Harry’s parents weren’t hurting. Even if they were, they’d sell their own limbs to help their son. “Ohhhh, crap. Beth—”

“Isn’t pregnant.” A smile tinged his voice. “Fuck. I *knew* you were going to go there.”

I took a turn for a giggle. The relief of knowing he hadn’t knocked up Beth—well, it wasn’t like “opposites attract” ever had a prayer of reality with him and me—but even thinking of Beth having that lock on him, forever and always, was—

Not worth dwelling on anymore.

“Shut up,” I razzed. “This is my logical deduction, not yours. Sober *and* serious. This means...you’ve either decided to really go for it and pursue the master’s degree, or—”

I nearly choked.

He’s never serious. Except when it comes to calling the shots from behind a movie camera...

“Come on, Camellia.” His coax rose with confidence, on top of the world in an eerily calm way. “You’re almost there.”

“Holy freaking cow, Harry.” It was damn near just a breath. I couldn’t manage more. “Did you—”

“Get permission from the royal honchos of Arcadia to shoot my movie on their island, then score a boatload of financing from Pinnacle Pictures right after that? The answer to both of those would be yes.”

“Holy shit!” A scream this time. “Harry! Seriously?”

His chuckle didn’t drive me crazy anymore. It filled the line, warm and celebratory—and wonderful. “Wish I could see the faces on those assholes now.”

He didn’t have to elaborate. By *those assholes*, he meant *the* assholes: a group of five guys from our film workshop class who’d always labeled Harry’s ideas as unrealistic, narcissistic, and way too ambitious for “the financial paradigms of the new Hollywood”. Harry had really brought on their ridicule when, during a class discussion about dream location shoots, he declared he’d do a picture on Arcadia one day. The assholes had been relentless in their laughter, before rallying the whole class in their merry quest. I’d remained silent but in some ways couldn’t diss their reasoning, a truth I felt duty-bound to state again.

“Isn’t Arcadia still an independent monarchy—with restricted airspace and sealed borders?”

“Yes, yes, and yes,” Harry supplied. “I just happened to secure an exception.”

“An exception,” I echoed, “to bring in a whole film crew? To one of the most secretive societies in the world? Didn’t some tool in the press even name them the Amish of the Mediterranean?”

“Very good, Watson,” he drawled.

“Though I guess it’s not hard to enforce that kind of stuff when you’re an island.”

“Actually, it *is* hard. Arcadia’s been learning that lesson in some difficult ways over the last few years. Aside from a few strategic trade agreements for the island’s helium supplies, which have helped carry the island’s other economies, Arcadia has remained a shut-in from the rest of the world.”

“Which means...?”

“That the world has moved ahead and they haven’t.” Oddly, the bumper words were delivered with Harry’s growing excitement. “And I know it sucks ass for where they’re at now, but Cam...it’s been fucking awesome from a personal perspective. *Everything* happened the way I thought it would. You remember what I said that day in class, about the island’s king getting ready to step down, and all the changes his son was getting ready to make?”

I gave a wry hum. “How could I forget?”

“Well, my pecker hit that money solid.” His knuckle crack of victory popped across the line. “King Ardent knew he was up against an old-school government who would never be open to the changes Arcadia needed to continue in prosperity, but always hoped his children would find themselves under different circumstances, dealing with more open minds. I’m sure it was why he ordered they be schooled in England and France, not by Arcadia’s tutors. I think one of them even went to high school in the states, somewhere near Boston.”

“The guy who’s king now?”

“No. Not Evrest. And he’s not a ‘guy’, Cam. He’s a man. A king.”

“Gah. Whatever you say, milord.”

Loaded pause. “You *do* know who King Evrest is, right?”

Equally loaded snicker. “King Kilimanjaro’s brother?”

“Crap.” I pictured him indulging a face-palm. “Not ‘Everest’ with three syllables. ‘Evrest’ with two.”

“Thanks. That clears everything up.”

“Shit, Cam. Don’t tell me you’ve been that far under a rock for the last year?”

“I’ve been *working* for the last year. As in, making the most of my scintillating double degrees in math and strategic comm. Concerned with shit like condo payments, groceries, health insurance. Being a grown-up. Any of that ring a bell?”

“Evrest. Cimarron.” He stamped the words like pointing out I had a nose on my face. “Okay, when you’re buying your precious groceries, do you ever glance at the magazines next to the register?”

“No.” *Overtone of ew, activate magical powers.* “Okay, sometimes.” Before he called me even more of a dweeb, I pulled over my laptop and tapped *Arcadia King* into the search string. “But seriously, I don’t pay attention or...”

Anything.

The word never made it to my lips. Because it vanished from my head. Another took its place, filling every inch of my consciousness.

Everything.

Evrest Cimarron was absolutely everything that turned me into a hot, gooey, disgusting, lusty, mess.

I recognized him now, of course. The American press didn't call him by his full name. They'd borrowed parts of it for snappy expressions like *Revin' Ev*, *Get Your Ev-Watch Here*, and *The Cim is Simmering*. But I might have been completely wrong about those headlines, because the second I saw the man on any magazine cover I forced myself to turn away. Concentrating on celery, toothpaste, and Nutella was my only chance of banishing the image of him, all thick black hair, brilliant Sultan eyes, and sleek, sculpted body, into the darkest pit of my mind. The shadows only visited when it was time to bring the vibrator out of the nightstand—and my fantasies out of their cage. The images of his bronze hands against my pale skin...

spreading me
exposing me
then filling me
with himself.

Not happening. Not right now. Dammit.

But he still dominated my screen, taunting me with his burnished beauty, penetrating stare, regal strength...and something else, too. A strange echo in my pulse, as if a part of me actually recognized him...or at least the sight of him. With every moment I gazed, that cadence sprinted faster, commanding me not to look away though my libido screamed with the sensual torment of it.

Ohhh, shit.

Definitely wasn't exiting this one unscathed. My dry mouth said as much. And my shallow breaths. And the aching throb between my thighs.

"Uh...okay," I finally stammered. "Yeah. He's...a little familiar. Maybe."

Wicked snort. A Harry special. "Ohhh, Cam."

"Ohhhh, Cam', what?"

"Hey." I envisioned him holding up his free hand in protest. "I'm not hatin'. If I swung that way, he'd jump to the top of my dream fuck list, too."

"Shut up."

"You need a moment alone with your laptop, honey?"

"Shut *up*."

"Okay, I have a better offer." The pause he took was too long for my comfort. "How'd you like to meet him in person?"

I closed my laptop with a vengeful thud. Focusing on the action helped me stay rooted in reality—not the wild idea he’d seemingly just proposed. “Meet who in person?”

His groan filled the line. “Maybe *you’re* the drunk one today, yeah?”

Deep fume. “No. I just can’t figure out what you’re getting at. What the hell?”

He repeated the groan, dropping a register. “His Majesty, Evrest Cimarron of Arcadia. What would you say about meeting him?”

I considered myself a straight shooter when it came to conversation. When I received the same from others, I usually appreciated it. But Harry’s turn at come-right-out-with-it didn’t come close to the target. My belly twisted tighter. My nerves were icicles. “I...don’t know what I’d say. I’m puzzled. Did you get invited to some event with him now that you’re going to turn his kingdom into a glamorous movie set? You need a date or something?” *And if so, why aren’t you asking Beth?*

Harry didn’t help things by chuckling again, piling on the indulgence. “No. I don’t need a date. I need a production manager.”

“Huh?” His words floated on my comprehension like leaves on water, refusing to sink in.

“And for that matter, a prop mistress, second unit liaison, accountant, and about six other job descriptions I won’t name now, in order not to scare you off.”

I took a turn to laugh. In disbelief. “Why would I be scared? It’s an impossible proposition.”

“Why?”

“Why?” I toyed with flipping the conversation to Face Time, bed head be damned. If he saw the glory of my incredulity, maybe he’d believe it. “Because I have a life now, Harry, that’s why. Responsibility—”

“Right,” he cut in. “Responsibilities. Like that family you have to take care of?”

“Dammit,” I muttered. He knew my parents as well as I knew his. Mom—aka Louise—was doing just fine, training for her fifth marathon and screening prospects for her third boyfriend in a year. And Dad? Well, Dad was...Dad, off in a part of the world where even if they had internet and cell reception, he wouldn’t care. Bones and relics, the older the better, were the

man's oxygen—likely reason number one behind Mom's quiet request for a divorce during my junior year in high school.

"Cam," Harry persisted, "you don't even own a dog."

"No shit." Time to let the snark fly. "I was seeing if I could keep plants alive first. You know what's going to happen to my plants if I run off to the Mediterranean with you?"

"Faye can check on them."

"No, she can't."

"Why not?"

"She's my boss, Harry."

"The boss who happens to think you walk on water."

He was right. Faye Mellencamp and I had formed a mutual admiration society from my first interview at her small but chic Newport Beach office. Landing a position with her had made purchasing this place possible. And the new car. And even a little bit of savings in the bank, too. A decent nest egg...

For what?

To spend on who?

I swallowed against the ache that came with the demands, invading my chest and forming a lump at the base of my throat. If I didn't know any better, I'd have called the feeling loneliness. But I did know better—and I was proud of that. At twenty-four, I had already accomplished so much.

Including that whole changing-the-world thing. Right, girlfriend?

Frustrated growl. And the easy recognition that I directed it as much at Harry as the taunting voice from inside. "This is crazy. Traipsing off to Arcadia for eight to ten weeks is just—"

"Six."

"What?"

"Six weeks," he corrected. "That's all Arcadia is going to give us for the shoot."

Groan. "Then tell me we have more for pre-production." A significant pause. Another. "Harry?"

I swore his discomfort had its own special static. "Two months for pre-production."

Harder groan. "I had to ask."

“*Now* do you understand why I need you? You’re used to pressure like this.” Thanks to the dozens of shoots I’d assisted him on during our years at Chapman, he knew I couldn’t argue the point. “It’s going to be tight but we have no choice. Arcadia’s given us the window and we have to abide by it. As soon as we leave, everyone on the island will be wrapped up in a big-ass celebration—a week-long festival to celebrate Evrest’s engagement.”

“Oh.” I sounded as nonchalant as a sixteen year-old at a shoe sale—and just as gawky and confused—and eventually short on budget for everything I wanted. Stir in zits and I’d be dandy. “He’s getting married?”

“That’s the plan.”

Harry sucked at containing his sarcasm more than I did with the little green monster. Cue the Cam Special: awkward laugh topped by a stab at glib. ““The plan”? Sounds like they’re scheduling him for an execution instead of a wedding.”

“Strong chance he’d agree with you on that.”

“An arranged marriage?”

It was angrier than I intended. I had no place rendering an opinion on the matter. I wasn’t naïve about this. Pre-arranged marriages were still acceptable, even normal, in many countries. But attempting to connect a gorgeous, worldly hunk like Evrest Cimarron with such a cold and archaic practice...yeah, the gray matter threatened to implode.

“That part’s a little more complicated,” Harry answered. “But I can explain it in detail once we make it to Arcadia.” A smirk snuck into his follow-up. “I promise it’s *very* interesting. You won’t want to miss it.”

“Bastard.”

“*Adorable* bastard. You always forget the important part.”

I tried to laugh as I rose again. Only the slightest surprise set in when my phone shook next to my ear—because of my trembling fingers.

Did I dare consider his offer?

I was still asking the question, wasn’t I? Telling. Perhaps revealing. *Fine*; I still contemplated it. More than a little. Wasn’t that understandable? A movie shoot. A *real* one in the *real* world, not a class project or a music video as a favor for one of Harry’s friends. And not in just any setting. The island of Arcadia, seen by few outside eyes before. Even the business people who traded with the country had likely not seen it as we were about to.

In many ways, we'd be like explorers. Discovering a new land and in turn, teaching them about ours. Columbus and the Indians, only with better plumbing. I hoped.

A chance to change the world.

Even if just a little.

But I couldn't lie to myself. As noble as that sounded, my intentions weren't all light, goodness and Angelina Jolie. This was a chance to be near Harry again. I wasn't so delusional to think he wouldn't find a way for Beth to come, as well—if he hadn't given her the lead in the movie already—but a pressure cooker like this could do strange things to people. And intrinsically, Beth wasn't "strange". She was actually pretty nice, to the point that I already knew she'd gracefully welcome me on the shoot and mean it. But that was because she had bigger things to focus on—like herself. It didn't make her bad. It just made her an actress.

Stick to the point, Saxon.

Fine. If Harry and Beth *did* decide to fill their free time during the shoot with the horizontal mambo, I had a great backup plan. His Majesty, King Dark and Sexy, would be perfect for some harmless mental swoonage. He'd be busy making engagement party plans, landing him smack in the file of beautiful but safe, meaning I could openly fantasize to my heart's content. Now I just had to put extra vibrator batteries—or an appropriate electrical adaptor—on my packing list. Crap. Were Arcadian maids the snooping type?

"Cam?" Harry busted into my thoughts—and the flawless, shirtless image of Evrest Cimarron that had broken in again. "You still there?"

"Hmm? Duh. Yes. Of course I am, bastard."

A fast *psshh*. Then with a shit-ton of caution, "You're quiet. I hope that means you're talking yourself into this."

I bit the inside of my lip. Now that I was out of my imagination and back into my head, a thousand more protests attacked. I owed it to myself to voice the main ones. "Look, Harry—"

"Awww, no," he volleyed. "No, no, no, honey. Not the 'Look, Harry'. Not now!"

"For one thing, I'm not your honey anymore. But as long as you've conveniently brought up the subject—"

"Really? You're using *Beth* as your excuse to turn me down?"

I fought to ignore the lump of dismay in my chest—as well as my anger for indulging it to start with. “So she *is* going.”

“Why does that even matter to you?”

I quashed a huff. Fine, I was jealous. A *little*. Why the hell that shocked him was beyond me.

Maybe because he’s moved on and you haven’t?

Shit. No matter how it got sliced, the truth stung. Sometimes right behind one’s eyeballs, in the middle of what should have been a perfect Saturday morning.

Gritted teeth. The beginning of a headache. The kind that would cling all day. A stupid, stabbing reminder of reined-in tears.

“Dammit, Harry. It doesn’t matter in the least and you know it!”

“Okay, okay. Of course I know.”

But his tone was still skeptical. He released a measured breath, easing the headache at least a little. At least his gentlemanly side resurfaced.

“Look, Cam. You were the top name on my list for this call. All right, you were the *only* name. Nobody’s qualified for this in the same ways. You know me. How I work. And hell, you nearly minored in film production. I really do need you.”

I took a breath myself. *Time out*. We both needed it. And yeah, it felt good to savor what his confession did to my bloodstream. I’d forgotten what his reassurances felt like. They were nice. Damn nice.

A smile finally crept at my lips. “Okay, knock that off.”

“Knock what off?”

“The sweet and sincere thing. It’s easier when I can just call you a cocky ass.”

“Call me whatever you want. Just follow it up with a screaming ‘yes’ and we’ll be good.”

“Didn’t we just confirm that I don’t scream anything for you anymore, Mr. Dane?”

Silken rumble. “God, Cam. I’ve missed you.”

Shit. That officially screwed my resolve to save the swooning for King Evrest. Thank God for my dexterity with the mute button, engaged before Harry could hear my conflicted whimper.

Conflicted? Understatement. I felt like a rabbit who'd gotten used to the winter in my burrow, only to be told it was spring and I could run in the sun again.

And what about the woman who'd kept me safe in the burrow?

"Faye." I blurted her name after opening the line again. "What about her, Harry? I can't just up and quit, not after everything she's—"

"Who says you have to quit?"

"I don't understand."

"You haven't taken a single sick day since you started with her. You have at least a month of time off already on the books, and I'll bet she'd let you have the rest on credit."

Brain, picking up crayons—and connecting dots. Fast. "You bet she would, huh?" I didn't bother hiding the pointing finger in my tone. "And you just happen to know all about my work attendance...how?"

He snorted. "Don't pull a Sister Camellia on me, girl. Yeah, I called Faye. And I'm not sorry. And guess what? She's probably more excited about this than you are. I'm surprised *she* hasn't called *you* yet, ordering you to straighten out your files so you can turn them over to a temp."

I squirmed in my chair. Fought like hell to summon a proper snit at the bastard for daring to call my boss behind my back. I only managed to mutter, "I never said I was excited."

"You didn't have to."

Because you know me so well?

I left the retort unspoken. It'd be useless to voice it. Both of us knew the answer. Of course he knew me that well, because I knew him in the same way. Might've made us shitty lovers, but our friendship was quite the E-ticket spin—except at times like this, when he knew he'd ripped down the last of my viable defenses.

And for payback? Made him wriggle on the hook a minute longer, of course.

"So I assume there's pay for this gig, Dane?"

His combo of growl and groan roughened up the line. "Do you really, seriously, care?"

Of course I didn't—he probably knew that without a doubt, too—but I relished the stringing-him-out-because-I-could element. Noticeably giggled,

just to be sure he knew that. “How much, Mr. Dane? C’mon, I’m a homeowner now. The IRS has me on the grid, not to mention Audi USA Financing. I have to be a responsible girl and all.”

“Responsibility is overrated.”

“Says the guy about to have a mind-shattering load of it on his shoulders.”

Funny. His answering grunt wasn’t so derisive now. “Says the girl who’s about to share that load with me.”

“Not so fast, hot stuff. Contract? Paycheck? I can’t work for Doritos anymore.”

“Hmmm. Well, I managed to renew your card with the union even though you’ve been inactive for a while, so let’s just say you’ll be happy with the compensation.”

“Hmmm.” I was equally blasé about the echo. Harry didn’t need to know that my heart raced so fast with excitement it pounded at the base of my throat—and that every neuron in my brain felt switched on for the first time in a year.

And that my stomach twisted with guilt for all of it, too.

I owed Faye so much. She’d given me a chance I couldn’t kiss her toes enough for. Financial stability like mine was enjoyed by few *people* my age, much less women. And yes, I liked the work, I really did—but advising millionaires how to become billionaires hadn’t fed a shred of my soul. Forget about the hit it had taken on my social life. Even committing to an advance signup for cycling class at the gym felt like a risk, subject to destruction at the hands of some guy needing to liquidate assets to buy himself out of the doghouse with his wife, mistress, or both.

I missed being on a film set. Period. I missed the bad coffee and the buzz of excitement. I missed being on a team committed to creativity, working to combine light, sound, motion, and words into something completely new—and sometimes magical. Where if only for a little while, I felt part of a pretty cool family.

Changing the world.

If only by a little bit.

Damn.

The excitement turned into an ache. Twelve months of shoving this feeling aside took revenge on my composure in one blow. I forced the phone away while swallowing from the hit.

“Helll-llo?” Harry’s sing-song tease filled the line. “I know I need to just shut up and be grateful for the silences, but girl you’re making me a wreck.”

Another giggle. It felt good. It felt right. “Oh, dear. We can’t have you wrecked, Mr. Director.”

“What does *that* mean?”

I tossed back my head as a grin spread across my lips. “It means you’d better tell me when we’re leaving for Arcadia, so I can get properly packed.”

Including the vibrator batteries.

As Harry whooped, I almost laughed again. With my luck, the reality of Evrest Cimarron would be much different than the myth. Up close, he was probably a dog. Or a dick. Or both. But, as they said, a girl could dream. Especially when the adventure of a lifetime awaited.