

*Mick & Moira & Prad*



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A ROMANTIC COMEDY

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*To Georja*



## Chapter One



The Century Club in West Los Angeles is about as exclusive as it gets, but Brad Davenport was showing a lack of aristo cool by waiting impatiently at the curb and frequently checking the time on his Rolex Oyster chronometer. One luxury vehicle after another pulled up and discharged its passengers — a Tesla Model X, a Bentley Bentayga, a Rolls Phantom, and even a vintage black stretch Town Car with limousine plates.

Where could she be? Hadn't he impressed on Moira the importance of this meeting? She might think it was just another tennis date. But this time its purpose was strictly business, and the whole afternoon — even into the drinking and dining later, if he were so lucky — would be a total write-off for Mackerel Brothers Partners.

Malcolm Botherall was that important, even more so because Brad's firm needed the man's business desperately. Botherall was chief executor of the St. Vincent College's stock portfolio, amounting to just shy of three billion, which only hedge-fund managers like Brad knew

how to parlay into undreamed-of realms of profitability. Everyone would benefit. In this market and with careful attention to the metrics, there would be no losers. But Bitsy Botherall stood in the way because she was a hard case. Unlike her simpering spouse, she demanded to be sold. This couple needn't pay any attention to the price tag of any material thing they might covet personally, but Bitsy, in her pecunious nature, demanded sufficient subservience from their vendors. Brad was astute enough, having researched the account, to know that her opinion counted for everything.

Like Brad and the principals of his firm, the Botheralls were club members. Last year they had placed in the mixed-doubles tennis tournament, and Brad was acutely aware that any evidence they were ready to grab the coveted crown would endear them to their less fortunate adversaries. Although he'd not partnered with her until today, he knew that his girlfriend Moira had been on the tennis team in college. For his part, Brad was fair to middling, as he claimed with false modesty, but winning was clearly not the objective today. The goal was simply to make the Botheralls feel like pros. If Moira could acquit herself well – but not spectacularly – they'd win the day.

And then here came Moira in her not-so-late model Prius. She screeched to the curb, popped the door, grabbed the paper ticket from the valet, and deferred to him to park it. She was in business attire, a gray pinstripe twinset with a white-silk blouse, and carried a mock-designer overnight bag, a Gucci lookalike.

Her skin was latte cappuccino. What mix of races,



Brad could only imagine. But he did know that the dominant genes on all sides were in full force in her. He was ashamedly white – not to be perceived as bland, he hoped, but admittedly in the pink of a Northern European.

She was breathless and gave him a peck on the cheek. “I’ve just come from court,” she explained. “They drone on, you know. I really did try.”

He returned the peck, saying, “Why don’t you quit that job? You keep telling me you hate it, defending lowlifes you know are guilty. I mean, criminal defense – what’s even the point?”

She explained, “Believe it or not, I care about all of them. But I need to be in a bad mood to win. Go for the jugular, show no mercy, take no prisoners. I’m doing right by the bad guys, which is sometimes more than they deserve.”

He bent to kiss her. He was a foot taller, proud of his lean stature, and at times like these, he lorded and made the most of it. Pulling away, he grabbed her bag and smiled. “How about pasting on your sweet face? That’s the one I’m in love with. Do you remember the point of this appointment?”

She nodded, catching her breath. “The Botheralls. Mixed doubles. He double-faults, and she has a weak backhand.”

“They want to be club champions, and we don’t want to convince them otherwise.”

She smiled. “And would I want to be a member of a club that would have me as a member?”

She’d hoped he’d at least grin at her joke, but his

expression went the other way. “Tone it down, back it off a notch. They don’t need to know what you did at UCLA, and they certainly don’t need to *see* it.”

She nodded in agreement. “If I slip up and show off, please pretend it’s a mistake.”

He counseled, “Remember, it’s the portfolio I want. Besides his university portfolio, there’s the Bitsy Bothrell Foundation. They want to put a new wing on Cedars.”

“Where? There’s no space to expand. What are they going to do, knock down the Beverly Center?”

Hers was intended as another joke, but Brad wasn’t in the mood. She couldn’t believe he was serious when he replied, “Let’s just say, with that crowd, anything is possible.”



Moira’s first serve to Malcolm hit the canvas tape at the top of the net, *thwack!* and bounced back onto her side. Perhaps rehearsing to be the good-natured loser, Brad called out, “Fault!” with a deprecating smile.

On her second serve, Moira tried not to smirk as she tossed the ball over her head to meet the powerful *whoosh* of her overhead swing, delivering a cannonball ace in the far corner to the older man’s forehand. He reached mightily but not far enough and swung on air. Moira was sure Brad had no clue how difficult it would be for a skilled player like her to fake an amateurish performance convincingly. This zinger had been for spite. In her mind, there wasn’t much difference between underperforming

on purpose and outright cheating. She deserved a few like this, she told herself, as long as she was willing to keep her nefarious promise to Brad and go down eventually. But Brad called "Out!" as if the serve had missed the paint rather than landing squarely on it. The serve had been good, but neither of the Botheralls bothered to gainsay Brad's mistaken call.

"Love-fifteen!" Malcolm yelled helpfully.

Okay, now Brad truly owed her one. Time to show she had the stuff. On her serve to Bitsy, Moira gave the racket a last-moment twist as she torqued the head to slice the ball smartly at the peak of her overhead swing. The shot was not aimed at a corner but squarely down the middle of the zone and to Bitsy's weak backhand side. The woman might have had a sporting chance of making a solid return, but as the ball bounced, it took off crazily at an angle that avoided her swing entirely. "Whew! Did you see that?" she exclaimed in amazement, the beads of sweat popping out on her upper lip.

Brad gave a forced laugh, explaining to them but directed to his partner, "Hey, sometimes those flukes work in our favor, right, Babe?" His expression said, *Don't do that again.*

"Fifteen all!" Malcolm called out.

"Server calls the score," Moira muttered as she walked back to the line. The other couple couldn't see Brad scowl at his partner's retreating back.

And so it went for two sets on an air-conditioned indoor court on a working afternoon. Moira and Brad gave it up 2-6 and then, more respectably, 4-6. Moira had been tempted to make the second set more interesting,

but she chose instead to double-fault at match point when it was her serve at 4-5. If she hadn't muffed that serve, it would have gone five all, requiring Moira to fake a lot more flubs to make it come out eventually 7-5 for the Botheralls. And no one, especially not the visibly tiring older couple, wanted it to go three sets. Moira was proud, but she wasn't vain, and a deal was a deal. The Botheralls' opinion of her actual skill wasn't worth the pointless extra effort.

As they came off the court with smiles all around, Bitsy rested a comforting hand on Moira's waist and confided, "You know, Mal and I practice all the time. You're a working girl, I know, and I bet if you could put more time in, you'd have a killer game."

Killer, yes. It consoled Moira to think that if Brad did manage to win their business, it was she and her unscrupulous boyfriend who had slain the unwitting Botheralls today.

In the women's locker room, Bitsy was toweling off as Moira lingered luxuriously under the hot water. On this weekday, they had the stalls to themselves. It was usually only at moments like these, when her subconscious let loose, that Moira would break into song. She sang "Ah! Fors' è lui" from the first act of Verdi's *La Traviata*. She'd admired the Joan Sutherland recording with Luciano Pavarotti. Moira's voice was more delicate than the famous diva's, but she managed the full range of alto to soprano, including the nearly impossible high notes, just as capably as Sutherland had. From a tender age, Moira had sung opera even better than she played

tennis, but she'd given up both when she'd committed to immersing herself in the law at UCLA.

Singing was her joy and her liberation, but perhaps because she felt she'd betrayed her talent, she kept it hidden. Except in private moments like this.

But this time, she had an audience. Bitsy paused pampering herself to listen intently.

As Moira emerged from the shower, Bitsy tossed her a fresh towel, saying, "You've got a set of pipes on you, kid. Mal and I support the opera. His family had seats in Founders' Circle from the beginning."

Moira shrugged. "My coworkers drag me to karaoke, but I won't let myself go onstage. I could chug a couple of margaritas, but then maybe I'd have no control and warble the high notes." And she chuckled. "Besides, there are no pop songs in my repertoire."

Bitsy asked, somewhat rudely, "What's your background, dear?"

Moira wanted to say, "Why, I'm from Los Angeles," but she was used to getting the question. Her answer was, "My father was Moroccan and my mother French. They told me to use her surname instead of his. So it's Halimi-Joubert instead of the other way around. He was Muslim, she's Catholic. So, either way, I'm not permitted to do anything."

Bitsy picked up on, "So you're mother's still with us?"

"That's right," Moira said. "We talk only occasionally because there's only so much guilt I can take."

"And your father? Passed?"

"Yes, it's been some years now. They emigrated to

Los Angeles because he was star-struck with old movies. He started a chain of bookstores, specializing in French literature. He did very well, but not because of the books.”

“I don’t understand.”

“My mother told me — and it was after he was gone — that there was a back room where they sold risqué postcards and ‘French letters.’”

“French letters?”

“The old gentlemen’s euphemism for condoms.”

But Bitsy only smiled, betraying her worldly knowledge of what men for generations have done who think they are fooling women. Still in an admiring tone, Bitsy went on, “You know, that serve of yours that bounced funny in the first set? You could learn to control that slice.” She thrust out her hand to demonstrate twisting her grip on the racquet. “Do some exercises, build up the strength in your wrist, and you could make it happen on purpose.” She giggled as she added, “Like when the old gal on the other side is winded and it’s match point.”

Bitsy insisted on exchanging phone numbers. Moira decided she might like the woman, given time.

## Chapter Two



Dinner with the Botheralls was at Mouffetard, a *nouvelle-precieuse* French restaurant Brad had chosen that served small portions of signature-chef cuisine with artistic presentation and confusing flavors. Bitsy chatted to Moira about opera and did most of the talking, expressing her confusion why some passages of Puccini are blissfully melodic and others sound like so much chatter. The guys started talking about stocks, a dry discussion from the sound of it, which devolved into a spirited debate about the virtues and vices of taking flyers on crypto.

Had Moira taken her own car from the club, she might have excused herself early, citing the need for overdue attention to her court brief for the following morning. Brad hadn't driven either, preferring to use Uber Reserved with a "favorite driver" whenever he was in town. At the end of the evening, he was about to summon one as they bade goodbye and Malcolm and

Bitsy sped away in their predictably black Mercedes sedan.

“Drop me at the club,” Moira suggested as they waited at the curb for their ride.

Brad shook his head. “Poor planning, I’m afraid. Their lot closes at ten. Hey, I’ve got the company apartment. We can crash there, get you where you have to go in the morning, and grab your car whenever.”

“Then drop me at home tonight on your way.”

Her sports bag with her racquet, as well as his, were with the concierge at the club. Clearly, Brad had assumed their logistics for later in the evening would coincide.

Smiling coyly, he approached her and rested his hands on her upper arms, his opening for an embrace.

She backed off.

His smile broadened to a grin as he teased, “Bitsy says you sing in the shower.”

She glared at him. “Don’t think you’re finding out anytime soon.”

“What’s the matter? We’re way past hello. And we’ve got a lot going already, you gotta admit.”

She didn’t share his humor, calling him on his mood of minutes earlier when she said, “You’re still pissed I couldn’t resist showing off. And you made it worse by making it like my aces were flukes. Bitsy was giving me pointers, and it took an effort not to set her straight.”

He shrugged, “Hey, client relations. It was a big ask of you, I know, but I’ll make it up to you.”

“If you’d behaved yourself, you wouldn’t have to. We let them win, and it seems like you’ve won him over.”

“Thank you. You’re a good sport.” Then he thought



he'd lighten the mood with a chuckle, "And I know how lawyers hate to lose."

"I don't mind losing if it's a fair fight and the perp I'm defending is guilty. I do what I have to do, and I do it well. No different today." On seeing his ride pull up, she added, "Don't worry. I'll order my own ride."

She stepped back farther to signal she wasn't about to get in. He'd let go of her by now, but he tried to reach back and missed.

He put on his most endearing smile, and cooed as he started to get in, "Don't forget my birthday is on Tuesday."

"I don't have to ask what you want," she said flatly.

## Chapter Three



“Silk pajamas?” her friend Lana feigned surprise as Moira sampled the cloth of the selections in the men’s store. “He’ll think you’re trying to say you’re ready to kiss and make up!”

“Maybe I am,” Moira admitted. “I haven’t decided.”

Lana insisted, “He unwraps those, and he’ll think it’s more than a hint. In his mind, he’ll have you both undressed already. If you don’t go through with it there and then, he’ll be way past upset.”

“And wouldn’t that be a great gotcha.” Moira was enjoying the thought, then had another. “You know, one kind of man would be angry. It might all end right there. But what if he swallows hard and takes it on the chin when I tell him the sleepwear is all he’s getting tonight? What if he says something like, ‘I guess I deserved that?’”

“He wouldn’t be like any of them I ever knew. Maybe you think you’d have a keeper, but could be he’s just doesn’t care enough.” She went on, “But maybe I don’t have a clue how men think these days. Sarah and I have

been together long enough I'm out of the game, maybe I never really knew how to play it. I mean, we're such a couple, we'd share these pajamas. I wear the tops, she wears the bottoms." Then she teased, "Is Brad a top or a bottom? Oh, that's right. You wouldn't *know*."

"Can't he be both? According to you, he should have whatever he wants."

"Frankly, I don't know what you're waiting for. The billionaire boyfriend is supposed to be every girl's dream, and besides that he's tall, slim, and his nose is just big enough to keep that face from looking too perfect."

"Since when were you paying such close attention?"

"I was right there with you when he walked over to us at Vanessa's party. I could see him as well as you. For a moment there, I thought he wasn't sure which one of us he wanted to take home." She teased, "I worried in fact I'd have to discourage him so you'd have a chance."

Moira decided to share, for no particular reason, "You know, my father used to parade around the house in his baggy boxer shorts. My mother corrected him constantly, but he wouldn't listen. She was the one who wore the pajamas. Flannel. It wasn't a becoming look."

Within earshot of the women, Mick McGraw had adopted an awkward soldierly stance in front of the full-length mirror as a tailor was busy fitting him with a suit coat.

As he fumbled with the button at his middle, Mick complained, "Why do they have to put this button so high?"

"I'm afraid, sir," the middle-aged tailor explained, "any off-the-rack model will be cut this way." The man

fussed over his client, straightening to brush his expert fingers across the lapels. “You see, this one is undoubtedly your size. Notice the fit across the shoulders. If we go larger, the result will look like a sack.”

Mick was broad in the shoulders with a powerful build but soft in the belly. He was single and in his mid-thirties, wondering whether a midlife crisis ever came this early.

“So, is this is the best you can do?” he winced.

“Oh, no. Not at all. Custom tailoring would get you the look you want, but we’d have to start from scratch, pick out a bolt of cloth. I assure you, the result in that case would be as handsome as handsome gets.”

“And how long would it take?”

“Two and a half weeks and three fittings, sir. Provided we’re not too close to the holiday season. Then we tend to be in a bit of a rush. And we don’t want to rush.”

“If I need it for tomorrow morning, I guess I’m stuck with this. Showing off my belt buckle.”

Moira had turned to watch the exchange. She took two brisk steps over to stand behind Mick and study his image in the mirror. Then she observed, “And for sure you don’t want to show them that much, er, *shirt*.”

Mick turned and was about to snap at her, then saw how pretty she was and lowered his voice to say, “Okay, I could start skipping the doughnuts, but it won’t help me for my meeting tomorrow.”

“I’d say wear whatever you have that makes you feel good about yourself. If you show up as a well-built man

in a suit designed for a twenty-something scarecrow, they'll think you're trying too hard."

He grinned. "Sweetheart, in my business, over thirty and trying harder is all you can do."

Before Moira could ask what his business was, Lana stepped in and announced. "Sorry, my friend Moira is a picky Virgo with an overactive fashion sense. No offense."

"None taken," Mick said, recovering his pride, not at all offended being the object of attention of two lovely women.

Lana grabbed Moira by the arm and as she led her away, advised in a hush, "Why don't you save the razor-sharp wit for the courtroom? Okay, he's got a tummy, but what's the percentage in embarrassing him? He's not bad looking, his watch looks expensive, and so do his shoes."

"I kept him from making a fool of himself. He needs someone to do that for him."