
Chapter 1

Camille Robertson sat behind the massive oak desk in her office and stared at the computer screen in front of her, a blank look on her face. She had no idea what she had been reading for the past ten minutes, as her thoughts were clearly elsewhere that morning. Her pretty brunette head bent, her well-manicured nails tapping nervously on the wood, she was a million miles away.

Her divorce from her husband Joe had become final the day before, and even though it had been an amicable split, Camille had to wonder what the future held for her. She thought back over the years to the romance she'd experienced with another man, Cody Larkin. Cody had been the perfect boyfriend, sweet, thoughtful, good-looking. He was tall, with light brown hair that was never quite all in one place, giving him a windblown look. His brown eyes sparkled in the sunlight. She remembered how he'd looked in those days, young and carefree. The couple had been so in love, and everyone thought they would tie the knot someday. Camille had thought so too, until she'd landed a job with one of New York City's largest publishing houses. She had started out as an editor, moving up the ladder quite quickly. Her

job required travel at that time, and when Cody had hinted that she might want to consider doing something else after they were married, Camille had taken stock of the situation. She loved Cody and their life together, but she also loved her job and the promise of growth within the company. She'd worked long and hard to get where she was. Was it fair of Cody to ask her to step down? At the time, she'd thought it was very unfair of him, and she told him exactly that, the night she broke off their engagement. He had pretty much given her an ultimatum, and she was having none of that. Cody wanted to be the dominant in their relationship, and that was something she just couldn't fathom back then. She had never submitted to anyone, and she didn't intend to start any time soon.

The breakup hadn't been easy for her or for him. She thought back to the question he'd asked her that night: "Are you absolutely certain this is what you want?"

She'd shaken her head and replied, "Yes, Cody, I'm sorry. I can't see myself spending the rest of my life with a man who can't support my career. You want a stay-at-home wife and mother, a houseful of kids in the suburbs, and that just isn't me. I love the city, the travel and the challenges being an executive with a big-name pub gives me. I'm not the woman you need. It's better to break things off now than to realize later that we've made an abominable mistake."

Had she ever regretted that decision? Only every day of her life since that night. Oh, her career had advanced, just like she'd thought it would. She was now the vice president of the New York office, and she spent her days overseeing the office staff, making vital decisions, and traveling to events all over the country. The problem? Cody wasn't the one sharing it all with her.

When one of her editors had been given a chance to reunite with the love of her life, several years after their split up, Camille was the first to advise her to take the plunge. She'd divulged her

secret to Cora, the story few people knew, the story of Camille and Cody.

Now, Cora and Dale were happily married, living in their hometown in Texas with their two adorable children. Cora had started her own small publishing company, and another employee, Audrey Carson, had joined Cora in the business, after falling in love with a Texas cowboy on a visit with Cora and her family.

What had happened to Cody? He had married someone else, a year after the breakup with Camille. He and his wife were happily raising four children in the suburbs, until his wife fell ill and passed away, leaving him to raise their babies alone.

And Camille? Many years after Cody, she had met Joe Robertson, a very dear man. He was no Cody, but he and Camille got along fairly well. Joe supported her career, didn't want children, and loved the New York scene. What had happened to cause a divorce in a seemingly perfect alliance? Joe had finally come out of the closet, admitting to his wife that he was gay and had met someone he wanted to start a new life with. The couple started divorce proceedings, and it had been extremely amicable—almost unbelievably so.

The assets were split in half, with Camille remaining in the loft they had shared. It was a very elegant place, with several rooms, in the Manhattan area of the city. She bore no ill will against Joe; in fact, it had almost been a relief when he'd asked for a divorce.

But the fact remained as of the day before, she was a single woman once again, and Cody Larkin was back in her life, in a roundabout sort of way. Her thoughts were interrupted when her senior editor Kayla knocked lightly on the door before she stuck her head in and asked, "Are you busy right now, Camille?"

"Not with anything that can't be interrupted. What do you need?"

"The art department needs you. I'd go, but I have an appointment in twenty minutes."

"You go on. I know you're busy with your wedding planner this morning. I'll put out the fire with the art folks."

"Thanks, Camille, I owe you one," Kayla said as she waved and quickly made her exit.

Camille stood up and stretched, taking her time before leaving her office to grab the elevator to the second floor, which housed the graphic arts department. *What now?* She stepped out into the hallway a few minutes later. It seemed there was always a crisis of some sort these days. She missed the old days when Cora and her assistant, Audrey, kept things running smoothly. Oh, Kayla was good at her job, but it seemed the four of them had made such a good team. Things hadn't been the same since the other two had relocated to the Lone Star state to begin their new lives.

Maybe she had a touch of the green-eyed monster working on her. Not that she wasn't happy for her friends and former coworkers, but damn it, she wanted a happy ending too. *Even Kayla, who has always had bad luck with men, has finally found the perfect mate and is busily planning the wedding to outdo all weddings,* she thought as she walked into the offices of the art department.

"Camille, thank God you're here," the girl seated at the front desk said when she entered.

"What's up?" Camille asked with a smile.

"Gregory and Ron are at it again. They can't agree on the cover for the new Rhonda Royce book."

"Rhonda Royce is one of our biggest sellers. That cover has to be perfect. I'd better see what they're arguing about this time. Excuse me."

She walked briskly into the room on the right and marched to the desk of one of her graphic arts people, Gregory Lane.

Gregory looked up from his computer and said, "Greetings, Ms. Robertson, what brings you up here this morning?"

"I think you know. Where is Ron?"

"He went for coffee. Someone told you we are having a minor disagreement. You didn't have to take time out of your day to worry with it."

"Show me," she said in an authoritative tone.

"Yes, ma'am," Gregory replied meekly as he pulled up his work on the laptop.

"I see a problem right off the bat. I want you to tell me what Ron said." She waited, tapping the toe of her black leather pump on the tile floor.

"He says the font isn't bold enough. I think it's perfect."

"Aha," she replied. "Gregory, listen to Ron. He's been around this business a lot longer than you have. You do excellent work, but there are times you just need to listen to other people's thoughts. That's one thing you haven't learned yet. In this business, sometimes two heads are better than one. Now, you don't have to even let Ron know I was here. Take it from here and work it out. I want to see the mock-up in my email before lunch. Are we okay here?"

"You bet, thanks," Gregory replied.

She took the back stairs, instead of the elevator, to avoid running into Ron. Those two were like oil and water, both excellent graphic artists, but they couldn't agree on anything. Camille was determined to see that she didn't have to let either of them go. Both valuable employees, they just needed to learn how to blend their ideas, something neither of them had mastered yet.

Finally back in the sanctuary of her own plush, private office, Camille poured a cup of coffee, flavored it with cinnamon apple creamer, and sat down once more. This time, when she looked at the email staring back at her from the screen, she actually read it. She replied to it and moved on the next, and the next one after that, until she'd read and replied to the thirty she'd received that morning.

That done, she picked up the snail mail her assistant had placed on her desk and began going through it.

"That's odd," she said, ripping open one of the envelopes. She began to read the letter addressed to her. "Oh," she said as she read on.

Her reading was interrupted by the shrill sound of the phone on her desk, begging to be answered. Absentmindedly, she put the letter down and picked up the receiver.

"Good morning, Camille Robertson speaking."

"Camille, are you free for lunch?" a deep male voice asked.

"Cody, uh, let me get back to you on that, okay?" she replied. Normally, she would have immediately accepted his invitation, but the letter on her desk was responsible for today's hesitation. On second thought, perhaps he should be told about it. "Oh, what the heck?" she added. "Work can wait an hour. I'll meet you at the deli, say twelve-thirty?"

"Atta girl, you're learning," he said with a chuckle. "I'll see you then."

Picking the letter up, she read on. When she'd finished, she closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the headrest on her chair. *Poor Caroline, poor, poor baby*, she thought. Caroline was the eldest of Cody's four children. At sixteen, she'd tried to assume the responsibility for her younger siblings when her mother had died. She helped Cody with everything, from housework, to laundry, to meal planning and cooking. He'd hired a housekeeper to do those things, but Caroline insisted on helping anyway. Even when her dad encouraged her to go out with her friends and have a good time, she fought him tooth and nail. "Mom would want me to help" was the answer she always gave. It was as if the young girl had taken over as the matriarch of the family. No wonder she felt threatened by Camille.

When Cody's wife had been on her deathbed, she had told Cody to look up Camille. Had she known about the relationship her husband had shared with the other woman years ago?

Apparently, she had, because she had emphatically encouraged him to seek her out. When Camille had attended the funeral, she talked with a grieving Cody briefly, but she had no idea at the time that he would contact her soon after.

About the time her marriage to Joe began to unravel, Cody had called her to talk. He needed a friend, he'd said. They met for lunch that day, and after that for other lunches and occasional dinners. They weren't actually dating. They were two old friends, lonely and in need of someone to confide in.

Caroline wasn't happy with the situation and, apparently, was reading more into it. The letter was a friendly warning of sorts, explaining that Cody didn't need a new wife, and she and her siblings certainly didn't need a new mom. They were all doing splendidly on their own. Caroline was lashing out, and Cody needed to be told.

Camille couldn't blame the girl, but she could see that there were some deep scars there from losing her beloved mama.

The email from Gregory arrived just before she was to meet Cody. She was relieved as she sent the reply giving her approval on the new mock-up. Now, to send it on to Rhonda for her approval, and they were one step closer to publication on what would, hopefully, be the next best seller.

Hurriedly, she walked out of the building and down the street, mingling with the crowds on the busy New York street. When she reached the deli a few blocks away, Cody was already there, waiting for her with a smile on his handsome face. Still that same good-looking man, with the windblown brown hair and sparkling brown eyes, his face now showed signs of worry and stress. How she would love to take all that away for him, to be the one to share the worries with him, the one to comfort him.

"Hey, pretty lady, how was your morning?" he asked as he opened the door for her.

She smiled up at him as she pushed her shoulder length hair out of her face. The New York wind was strong that day.

They were lucky enough to find an empty table and quickly grabbed it. After ordering drinks, she took a deep breath. "You asked about my morning. It was very eventful. There was a disagreement about a book cover, tons of emails to answer, and one very disturbing letter."

He gave her a quizzical look as she took Caroline's letter out of her bag and handed it to him, her hand brushing his slightly in the exchange. "Cody, I'm really beginning to understand why you're so concerned about Caroline's state of mind these days. Have you spoken to her counselor lately?"

"What's this?" he asked as he took the envelope from her and looked at the handwriting. "Caroline wrote you a letter?"

"Read it. If that's not a cry for help, I don't know what is. That poor child is hurting, Cody. She's determined to take care of her sister and her brothers and to care for you and run the household, without help from anyone. She's sixteen years old. She needs to enjoy her teen years."

"She doesn't want me to see anyone, is that what she said?" he asked. "She is worried that you're trying to take her mother's place in our lives, is that it?"

"I'm afraid so. It's understandable. Even though we are friends, she is afraid it will develop into more."

"What do you suggest we do about it?" he asked.

"I think the question needs to be, what are *you* going to do? In my opinion, and I don't know much about children, let alone teenagers, you need to make an appointment to speak with her counselor. I know you said all four kids are in grief therapy. Caroline is the oldest; she seems to be having the hardest time dealing with everything."

"Camille, I want you in my life. Now that I've found you again, I don't want to lose you."

She took a deep breath before answering him. "Cody, I treasure our newfound friendship too. Right now, though, your four babies should be your top priority. I know having an adult to talk

to is important, but focus on the kids. There will be time for us. I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise?" he asked as the waitress returned to take their food order.

When the girl had gone to put in the order for their lunch, Camille said quietly, "I promise."

His hand reached across the table to touch hers briefly. Funny, how neither of them thought of another promise made, years ago, at that same table.

Camille returned to her office a short time later, after giving Cody a goodbye hug and promising to stay in touch. She sat down at her desk and put her head in her hands. After all this time, the mere sight of Cody Larkin created butterflies in her stomach, his sexy swagger, the eyes that sent a rush of heat through her veins as they seemingly looked at her very soul. Years had passed; he'd married someone else, so had she. Now, suddenly, they both were free, and it appeared they had been given a second chance to get it right, only to be stopped abruptly by the disapproval of his oldest child. She felt sympathy for the children, all four of them, but could she ever win over Caroline? The girl felt responsible for taking over her mother's role as cook, housekeeper and mother. She didn't want an outsider sticking her nose in their business. And to the young, grieving girl, Camille was an outsider. She didn't know the history between Camille and Cody, and even if she did, would she care?

She thought back again to the time the two of them were an item. They were young, professional adults, living in the Big Apple. They both had promising careers and a zest for life. They partied, took in Broadway shows, ate at all the posh restaurants and made love passionately. Who would have ever guessed it would end? Certainly not Camille and probably not Cody. But it had, and not a day had gone by that, even with all her success, she hadn't wondered what might have been. Cody had been dominant, demanding her respect and obedience. She'd not

taken well to that, asserting her independence right up until the day she ended things.

And then there was Joe, the New York businessman who loved the New York social scene. A family wasn't in his plans, and that suited Camille just fine. Truth be told, she'd never loved Joe the way she adored Cody. Cody had helped her through the divorce process, just as she had provided a sympathetic ear to his woes of becoming a single father of four. Just when she'd thought things might progress in their relationship, with the finalization of her divorce, Caroline had thrown a wrench into the works. Her timing had been impeccable.

The shrill sound of her desk phone ringing brought her back to the present. She cleared her throat, wiped her eyes and picked up the receiver. "Good afternoon, Camille Robertson here. How may I help you?"

"Camille, sweetie, it's Cora. I just wanted to check in on you. I tried your cell, but you didn't answer. Wasn't the divorce final yesterday?"

"Oh, Cora, thank you so much for thinking of me. It's final. That chapter of my life is over."

"And Cody, are you still talking to him?" her former coworker asked.

"Ah, Cody," she replied. "I had lunch with him today. Cora, I'll be honest with you, there is a lot of baggage there. He has four children, you know."

"I thought you were okay with that," her friend answered.

"I thought I was too. You know, I have always had a lot of regrets where Cody is concerned, and I never forgot him, but it seems the oldest child has problems with a new woman in her father's life."

"I see," Cora said. "That's to be expected, don't you think? Have you met the kids?"

"N-no, not yet, we aren't ready for that. I received a letter in today's mail from Caroline, asking me to stay away. I, of course,

told Cody. He needs to concentrate on those four babies right now. Caroline seems to be having the hardest time of all. She feels she owes it to her mother to care for Cody and the younger children, do the cooking and the housework. Cody doesn't expect her to do that. He's hired a housekeeper, but Caroline insists on doing most things herself. She's literally giving up her teen years."

"And she doesn't want another woman taking her mom's place. I can understand that, can't you? Poor little girl, it's so sad. But, I hope this doesn't change things for you and Cody. I know you would love a second chance to make things right. I get the impression that's what he wants too. Am I wrong?"

"You're absolutely right. We both want that, and I think we were getting there, slowly, until today."

"Give it some time, my friend. Have you spoken to Joe?"

"We had dinner last week. He's doing fine. He and his new friend have signed a lease on a loft."

"Oh, sorry, I've got to run. Audrey just walked into the office, so I've got to go over some things with her. Don't be a stranger. We miss you."

"Give my love to Audrey and to your precious family. You and Dale are living proof things can work out the second time around. I keep telling myself that."

"Absolutely!"

They ended the call, and Camille smiled as she remembered the day she'd confessed to Cora the story of her own lost love. Cora was having a hard time coming to the realization that she belonged in Texas with the love of her life, rather than in New York, alone. She knew that day that if she were ever to be lucky enough to win Cody back, she would take the chance in a heartbeat—even the dominance.

Alas, the two of them weren't the only people to be affected by a reunion between the two lovers, though. There were four young people to consider. Caroline was the oldest, sixteen, and beautiful from the pictures Camille had seen. Blonde, like her

late mother, she was tall and thin. Camille had thought she would make a perfect model. Cameron was next. At fourteen, he was an accomplished athlete, playing basketball for his high school team. Ten-year-old Cayden enjoyed video games. Not quite the athlete his older brother was, he preferred the technical type of games to physical ones. And then there was the baby, seven-year-old Colleen. Blonde-haired and blue-eyed, like her mama and her sister, she was a tiny bundle of energy and cuteness. Cody had told her many stories about all of his children, and she felt like she knew them all already. She knew about their different personalities, their likes and dislikes, and even about the problems Cameron sometimes had with keeping his grades up. The Larkins had done a wonderful job with them, and it was sad their family had been made to suffer the devastating loss of their mother. Life does go on, though, and Cody had every right to move on. Camille had been prepared to love the children, never dreaming they would have a problem accepting her. She should have anticipated it wouldn't be a walk in the park, at least not at first.

Picking up the first contract in the stack on her desk, she resigned herself to get back to work. She had a job to do. She couldn't spend all day worrying about Caroline. Perhaps she was learning what it was like to be a mother already, always thinking of the children. She knew Cameron had a big game that weekend, and she wished she could be there to watch him play. What was happening to her, levelheaded, all-business Camille Robertson?

When she finally locked the door to her office hours later, after wading through the pile of work on her desk, she sighed. It was to be another night of dining alone. Cody would be at home by now, in his house in the suburbs, enjoying the sounds of his children playing. They would sit around the dinner table and each would tell him about his or her day. Would he mention the letter to Caroline?

Resigning herself to another lonely night on her own, she drove home and ordered a pizza. She couldn't bear to sit in another restaurant at a table for one, watching couples and families enjoying their meal together. Yes, she had been fine with granting Joe a divorce so he could be happy. She just hadn't thought it would be quite this lonely. All her old friends from her single days were now busy with their own lives. Kayla was planning her wedding to Zane, Cora and Audrey were both in Texas, getting on with their lives. The office wasn't even the same with those two gone. She and Kayla remained close, but who knew how long that would last, once she and Zane were married.

While she waited for the pizza to arrive, she went into the bedroom and changed into a pair of lounging pants and a T-shirt. She checked her cell to see if there had been any messages from Cody. Nothing. She had told him to concentrate on his family, and he must be taking her at her word.

Loneliness and despair crept in, leaving the ever-confident, successful woman a bit less confident that night. She'd been on cloud nine since Cody had reentered her life, but now she felt worse than she'd felt in a very long time. She couldn't bear to lose him a second time, not when she'd just gotten him back. *I have to be strong. If it's meant to be, somehow it will all work out.*

After sending the other three children to finish their homework, Cody asked Caroline to help him in the kitchen.

"Sure, Dad," the girl replied as she stood to clear the table.

When the others were out of earshot, he calmly stated, "Sweetheart, I think you know we have to have a chat. I had lunch with my friend Camille today."

"I see."

"Honey, there is something you have to understand. Camille is an old friend. We go way back. Sometimes, I need some adult

time. I love you guys, and you know I'm here for you, for all of you, but there are times I just need to wind down, have some adult company. You really hurt Camille's feelings. She isn't trying to take your mother's place."

"We don't need her. You don't need her." Caroline continued rinsing the dishes, not looking at her father as she spoke.

"Caroline, look at me." Cody placed his hands on his daughter's shoulders gently and turned her around to face him.

"What?" the girl asked.

"Camille is a friend. I want her to be a part of our lives. Your mother told me to find her, just before she passed. As it turned out, she found me, when she attended your mother's funeral. I don't know where this is going, but I do know Camille is an important person in my life. She could be an important person in yours, if you'd give her half a chance."

"She isn't my mother."

"No, she isn't. She knows that, and so do I. Your mama will always hold a special place in your heart. But isn't there room in your heart for someone who only wants to help us through the bad times and maybe share a few of the good times with us?"

"I don't need some other woman taking over."

"That isn't what's happening here, Caroline. Camille and I are friends. She would like to be your friend too. Won't you at least consent to reserving judgment until you've met her?"

"Dad, I just don't understand how you can forget about Mom."

"Caroline, I will never forget about your mother. It nearly destroyed me to lose her, to know that she wouldn't see the four of you grow up, to know she wouldn't be a part of your lives. We can honor her memory; it doesn't mean we can't go on with our lives. She wouldn't want you to be this upset."

"What you're trying to say is, she wouldn't want you to be alone." Caroline threw down the dishtowel in her hand.

"Caroline, she would want all of us to be happy, including you."

"I don't know, Dad. I just don't know if I *can* give her a chance."

"Why don't I make an appointment for the two of us to talk to your grief counselor? Do you think that might help?" he asked. "In the meantime, I won't bring Camille around the house, at least not until I feel you're ready to meet her."

"You're going to continue to see her?" Caroline asked.

"An occasional lunch or dinner with a dear friend isn't hurting anyone, Caroline."

"Okay, I'll accept that you are still going to see her, as long as you don't push her on us kids."

"I guess I'll have to take that, for now. I'll call and make an appointment with the counselor tomorrow, though. Of all the kids, I think you're having the hardest time of it. I want to understand, and I want to help you in any way I can." Cody walked over to his oldest child and hugged her tightly.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I just... can't deal with it," the girl sobbed as she buried her head in his chest.

"Let it out, baby. Cry, scream, kick," he said as he held her close. "You lost your mom. It's okay to cry."

A short time later, Caroline pulled away and wiped her face. "I'm going up to take a shower. I'll check on the kids."

"You will take some time for yourself. I'll check on the younger kids. Now, scoot."

He watched as she ran out of the room and up the stairs. He'd known becoming a single dad wasn't going to be easy; he'd just never imagined it would be this hard. After he'd checked homework, made sure baths were taken, and listened to prayers, he turned out the lights and went down to the kitchen, where he poured himself a stiff drink.