

# SUSAN MALLERY

chasing perfect



# CHASING PERFECT

## *CHAPTER ONE*

CHARITY JONES LOVED a good disaster movie as much as the next person—she would simply prefer the disaster in question not be about her life.

The sharp crack of an electrical short, followed by a burning smell, filled the conference room on the third floor of City Hall. A thin wisp of smoke rose from her laptop, ending any hope of her PowerPoint presentation going smoothly. The presentation she'd stayed up nearly all night perfecting.

It was her first day on the job, she thought, breathing deeply to ward off panic. The first official hour of her first official day. Didn't she get at least a sixteenth of a break? Some small sign of mercy from the universe?

Apparently not.

She glanced from her still smoldering computer to the ten-member board from California University, Fool's Gold campus, and they did not look happy. Part of the reason was that they'd been working with the previous city planner for nearly a year and still hadn't come up with a contract for the new research facility. A contract she was now responsible for bringing to life. She would guess the unpleasant burny smell was the other reason they were shifting in their seats.

"Perhaps we should reschedule the meeting," Mr. Berman said. He was tall, with graying hair and glasses. "When

you're more—" he motioned to the smoldering computer "—prepared."

Charity smiled warmly when what she really wanted to do was throw something. She was prepared. She'd been on the job all of—she glanced at the clock on the wall—eight minutes, but she'd been prepping since she accepted the position as city planner nearly two weeks ago. She understood what the university wanted and what the town had to offer. She might be new, but she was still damned good at her job.

Her boss, the mayor, had warned her about this group and had offered to put off the meeting, but Charity had wanted to prove herself. Something she refused to let be a mistake.

"We're all here," she said, still smiling as confidently as possible. "We can do this the old-fashioned way."

She unplugged her computer and took it out into the hall where it would no doubt stink up the rest of the building, but her first priority had to be the meeting. She was determined to start her new job with a win and that meant getting California University at Fool's Gold to sign on the bottom line.

When she stepped back into the conference room, she walked over to the dry erase board and picked up a thick blue pen from the small rack attached to the board.

"The way I see it," she began, writing the number one and circling it, "there are three sticking points. First, the length of the lease." She wrote a number two. "Second, the reversion of improvements on the land. Namely the building itself. And three, the freeway off-ramp signal." She turned back to the ten well-dressed people watching her. "Do you agree?"

They all looked to Mr. Berman, who nodded slowly.

"Good." Charity had reviewed all the notes on the pre-

vious meetings and talked to the mayor of Fool's Gold over the weekend. What Charity couldn't figure out was why the negotiating process was taking so long. Apparently the previous city planner had wanted to be right more than he wanted the research facility in town. But Mayor Marsha Tilson had been very clear when she'd offered Charity the job—bring businesses to Fool's Gold, and fast.

“Here's what I'm prepared to offer,” she said, making a second column. She went through all three problems and listed solutions, including an extra five seconds of left-turn time on the signal at the top of the off-ramp.

The board members listened and when she was done, they once again looked at Mr. Berman.

“That does sound good,” he began.

Sound good? It was better than good. It was a once-in-a-lifetime deal. It was everything the university had asked for. It was zero calorie brownie with ice cream.

“There's still one problem,” Mr. Berman said.

“Which is?” she asked.

“Four acres on the county line.” The voice came from the doorway.

Charity turned and saw a man entering the conference room. He was tall and blond, good-looking to the point of being almost another species, and he moved with an easy athletic grace that made her feel instantly awkward. He looked vaguely familiar, but she was sure they'd never met before.

He gave her a quick smile. The flash of teeth, the millisecond of attention, nearly knocked her into the wall. Who was this guy?

“Bernie,” the stranger said, turning the megawatt grin on the group leader. “I heard you were in town. You didn't call me for dinner.”

Mr. Berman actually looked interested. "I thought you'd be busy with your latest conquest."

Blond guy shrugged modestly. "I always have time for anyone from the university. Sharon. Martin." He greeted everyone else at the table, shook a few hands, winked at the old lady at the end, then turned back to Charity.

"Sorry to interrupt. I'm sure under normal circumstances you could deal with this problem without breaking a sweat. But the reason we don't have a deal isn't the lease reversion or the traffic light." He moved close and took the pen from her hand. "It's the four acres the university has been offered by a very wealthy alumni family. They want their name on the building and they're willing to pay for that privilege."

He flashed another smile at Charity, then turned back to the board. "I'm going to explain why that's a bad idea."

And then he started talking. She had no idea who he was and probably should have told him to leave, but she couldn't seem to move or speak. It was as if he projected some space-alien force field that kept her immobilized.

Maybe it was his eyes, she thought, gazing into their hazel-green depths. Or his sun-bleached lashes. It might have been the way he moved or the heat she felt every time he walked by her. Or maybe she'd simply inhaled some weird gas when her computer had sparked, flamed out and died.

While she enjoyed a boy-girl encounter as much as the next woman, she'd never been mesmerized by a man before. Certainly not during a professional meeting that she was supposed to be running.

She knew the type, though. Had seen the power of the havoc they brought with them everywhere they went. Self-

preservation stated she should stay far, far away. And she would...just as soon as the meeting was over.

She squared her shoulders, determined to regain control of herself and the meeting. Then her mystery invader's words sunk in. A gift of prime real estate would be hard for any university to refuse. No wonder Mr. Berman hadn't been interested in her solution. It didn't address the problem.

"The research you're talking about is important to all of us," blond guy concluded. "Which is why the city's offer is the best one on the table."

Charity forced her attention to Mr. Berman, who was nodding slowly. "You've made some good points, Josh."

"Just showing you a few things you might not have thought of," blond guy said modestly. Blond guy who was apparently named Josh. "Charity's done all the work."

She frowned. He was taking over her nervous system and her meeting and trying to give her credit?

"Not at all," she said, relieved the power of speech had returned. "Who could compete with your excellent points?"

Josh actually winked at her, then reached for the folder on the table. "This is the letter of intent. I think the signing has been put off long enough, don't you, Bernie?"

Mr. Berman nodded slowly, then pulled a pen out of his suit jacket pocket. "You're right, Josh." Then, just like that, he signed the paper, giving Charity the victory she'd so desperately wanted.

Somehow she'd hoped it would be a tiny bit sweeter.

In a matter of minutes, everyone had shaken hands, murmured about setting up the next meeting to get the planning going and left. Charity was alone in the conference room, only the lingering smell of burned plastic and a signed document proof that anything had happened at all. She glanced at the clock. It was 9:17 a.m. At the rate things were happen-

ing around here, she could cure several diseases and solve world hunger by noon. Well, not her. So far her accomplishments seemed limited to frying innocent electronics.

She collected the paperwork, went out into the hall and picked up her cold, dead computer. Had it really happened? Had some guy blown into her meeting, saved the day, then disappeared? Like a local super hero or something? And if he was so in the loop, why hadn't he taken care of the problem weeks ago?

There was no way she could have known about a private donation—no matter how much research and prep work she had done. But Charity still had a vague sense of dissatisfaction. She preferred to win through her own actions. Not because of a rescue.

She made her way to her new office on the second floor. She hadn't had much time to get settled, what with moving to Fool's Gold over the weekend and the presentation preparation taking up all her free time. She'd brought in a box of personal items and dumped it on her desk shortly before six that morning. By one minute after six, she'd been in the conference room, going over her presentation, wanting it to be perfect. A complete waste of time, she told herself as she entered the second floor. Between the computer death and the mystery guy, she need not have bothered.

That morning, the open space in the old building had been empty and quiet. Now half a dozen women worked at desks. Doors to offices stood open and the sound of conversation spilled out to create murmured background noise.

She turned toward her office. Her assistant should have arrived, so they could meet face-to-face for the first time. Technically they'd been working together for a couple of weeks now, with Sheryl faxing and e-mailing information to Charity in Nevada.

Charity had visited Fool's Gold during her interview process. She'd met with the mayor and a few members of the city council, and toured the area. She'd never lived in a small town before. The closest she'd come was Stars Hollow, from watching *Gilmore Girls* while still in college. She'd liked everything about Fool's Gold and had been able to imagine herself putting down roots in the lakeside town. She had even been in this building, had looked around. But apparently she hadn't noticed the giant poster on the wall.

Now she stared into a larger-than-life-size picture of her mystery guy. He smiled down at her, a bicycle helmet under one arm, a tight shirt and bike shorts leaving very little to the imagination. The print underneath the picture proclaimed Josh Golden—Fool's Gold's favorite son.

She blinked, then blinked again. Josh Golden as in the celebrated cyclist Josh Golden? Second youngest winner of the Tour de France and possibly hundreds of other bike races? She'd never followed the bike racing circuit or whatever it was called. She didn't follow any sports. But even she had heard of him. He'd been married to somebody famous—she couldn't remember who—and was now divorced. He endorsed energy drinks and a major athletic brand. He lived here? He'd come to her meeting and had saved the day?

Not possible, she told herself. Maybe she'd fallen and hit her head and now couldn't remember the event. Maybe she was in a coma somewhere, imagining all this.

She walked past the poster and moved toward her office. Just outside the open door, she saw a thirty-something woman on the phone. The woman, dark-haired and pretty, looked up and smiled. "She's here. I gotta go. Love you." The woman stood. "I'm Sheryl, your assistant. You're Charity Jones. Nice to finally meet you, Ms. Jones."