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Opening Extract from...

The House on Sunset Lake

Written by Tasmina Perry

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TASMINA PERRY

THE HOUSE ON SUNSET LAKE

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Prologue

No one forgets a summer spent at Casa D'Or. You remember them so clearly you don't even need to close your eyes to recall the heavy warm breeze, the smell of azaleas, and the air that sticks to your sun-kissed skin.

People wonder why we stay here when it gets so hot, so humid from June through to September. When the afternoon storms turn the sky as black as a starling's wing and the rain can drench the house in a heartbeat. People ask why we don't leave for the cooler beaches of the north or the cosmopolitan cities of Europe – Paris, London, Rome. But those who ask have never been to Casa D'Or. They have never felt its magic.

But if every summer at Casa D'Or is special, some sparkle just a little brighter than the others. Your memories of them remain just a little more vivid. Like the summer when we built the tiki swing down by the lake and spent the whole of July drinking peach iced tea and jumping into the water. Or when

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we sailed down the Moon River at dusk and the sunset was so brilliant that it was as if we were surrounded by fire.

But I know, even now, that this summer will outshine them all. For this is the summer that I met you. It's the summer that I felt alive, when I finally understood how love can make you feel: happy, heady, oblivious to the world except the bits that have you in it. How can I ever forget that time you kissed me by the lake, or when you first took my hand in yours, and the way it seemed to slot perfectly into place?

A song is floating through my head – a song from the Summer of Love – and I wonder if this is what they felt like in San Francisco in '67. Drunk on a sense of newness, heady from sex and freedom.

Except I'm not like the hippy chicks or the stoners. I can't parade my feelings for you on a placard outside City Hall. For this is not just a summer of special memories, it is a summer of secrets, which I know makes it fizz with a certain dangerous brand of sparkle.

In my heart I know that it won't end well. The cream always sours, the sun always sets.

I can feel a storm in the air, and dark clouds are gathering over the lake. The light in your room is on – I spot it twinkling across the water, and if I narrow my eyes I can make out your outline tempting me with your forbidden promise. I want to see you before it rains.

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Chapter One

Scottish Highlands, New Year's Eve

On the crowded castle ramparts, there was a moment of quiet. Conversation halted, heads tilted, breath was held. And then there it was: a soft chime as the church clock in Munroe village struck twelve.

Whooosh!

The first rocket hissed into the sky, followed by a swell of cheering and shrieks of delight. Scarlet fireworks popped in the black sky, spidery tendrils floating back to earth as 'Auld Lang Syne' rang out from hidden speakers. The New Year.

All along the stone parapet, people were embracing and kissing, each sharing this moment with a loved one or a handy stranger, each exchanging whispered words or wishes of hope for the future. Everyone except Jim Johnson. He looked down at his watch, then up at the sky. Eighteen and a half minutes, that was how long the pyrotechnics were due to last,

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and by then the band in the ballroom needed to be in full swing.

'Hey, Jim, amazing party.'

He looked up and shook the proffered hand. Douglas Strand, a big noise in oil and gas, prominent in Scottish politics. The fact that Strand was here for New Year and not on a balcony overlooking Princes Street brought a smile to Jim's face.

'Thanks, Doug,' he said patting Strand on the back. 'Spread the word, huh?'

The man gestured with his tumbler, indicating the crowds of movers and shakers whooping and laughing along the castle roof.

'Doubt I'll need to after tonight,' he said. 'I think everyone who needs to know is already here.'

Jim shook more hands and accepted tipsy hugs as he made his way back down the stairs towards the Great Hall, Munroe's crowning glory, a stunning lobby atrium formed from what had been until only weeks before the castle's cobbled courtyard. Now it was the elegant entrance to the hotel, the cobbles covered with oak and rugs, the ancient walls softened and warmed by drapes, art and concealed lighting. It was a breathtaking introduction to Europe's new destination hotel – and Jim had seen the impact it had on the faces of the guests as they had arrived. The launch had been a success in every way.

So far anyway, he thought, rolling his neck and feeling a little of the tension there ease.

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'Celine,' he said, spotting a woman in a red ball gown by the bar. 'Thanks for coming.'

Heads turned as the striking brunette kissed him on the cheek. Celine Wood was pushing forty but she was still one of the most famous models in the world, so it had been a real coup dragging her up to Scotland for the opening.

'Happy New Year. Are you not going out to watch the fireworks?'

'I've come in for a drink. Here, take this, you look as if you need one,' she said, handing him a flute of champagne.

'Cheers,' he said, taking a quick sip. 'I've not slept for forty-eight hours.'

'Well you still look as gorgeous as ever,' she said, wiping a smudge of lipstick from the corner of his mouth. 'Even more gorgeous than Munroe.'

Jim smiled nervously, wondering if Celine Wood was coming on to him. They'd met and possibly flirted before, but Jim was never sure, whenever he met these showbiz sorts, what was standard-issue interaction and what was the green light for something else. He certainly didn't want to make a fool of himself tonight trying to find out.

'Mr Johnson, could I have a word?'

He frowned as the concierge approached.

'There's a rumpus at the front gates.'

'A rumpus?' he said, quickly getting rid of his drink.

Celine didn't take her eyes off him.

'A security issue, sir. I think you should come and deal with it.'

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Jim glanced at Celine, who pulled her famously sultry lips into a downwards curve.

'I've got to go,' he said, touching her shoulder.

'You might be needing this later,' she whispered as she pushed something into his pocket. 'Come and find me if you do.'

Pressing his lips together, he buttoned his dinner jacket, and followed the concierge to the manager's office across the hall, allowing himself a quick backwards glance towards Celine. She was already gone from her spot at the bar. Just as well.

He was ushered in front of a TV monitor, all eyes in the room upon him.

'What's wrong?' he asked, looking at the flickering black and white camera footage.

'Problem at the front gate,' said Munroe's head of security. 'This gentleman is a little excitable, shall we say. Says his name is Lord Brodie. Says he wants to come in.'

'Oh God,' muttered Jim, watching the monitor with a sinking feeling.

'Do you know him?' asked the concierge.

'Yes.'

'Should we let him in?'

'Not in that state.'

'So what should we do?'

Jim had spent the past forty-eight hours with people looking to him for answers. Munroe's newly minted general manager, the PR company, the marketing director, communi-

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cations director and CEO of Omari Hotels, his employers – everyone wanted a little piece of him, and having had so little sleep since he arrived in Scotland two days earlier, he felt as if he was about to snap.

'Call him a taxi, then go to the gate and make sure the cab takes him wherever he wants to go,' he said, already halfway out of the office. 'As long as it's not up here.'

He checked his watch: still six minutes left of the fireworks display. He crossed to the ballroom and checked on the buffet. It had been replenished, the duck, venison, trout all glistening in the candlelight. Good.

He knew he should go and look for the piper who was due to play from the ramparts after the crowds had gone – but no, that could wait a few minutes.

Grabbing an open bottle of champagne, he slipped down a passageway, weaving his way through the castle until he reached a wrought-iron gate that led into Munroe's walled garden. He pushed open the door and stepped inside, grateful to note that he was alone.

'Happy New Year, Jim,' he muttered to himself as he perched on a cold stone bench and saluted the popping fireworks with the bottle before taking a swig. Most people, he knew, would have balked at working over New Year, but Jim had to admit he loved it. The castle was the star tonight, of course, but he had revelled in the attention too, the admiring glances, the back-slapping.

After all, it had only been eighteen months earlier that he'd found this place. He'd been on his way to a grouse shoot,

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taken a wrong fork in the road, and stumbled across the tumbledown Scottish pile belonging to the elderly lord. As a hotel investment manager with over fifteen years' experience, he had seen Munroe's potential immediately – the picture-perfect position on the edge of a heather-fringed loch – and wasted no time contacting Brodie to see if he would sell. At first the old man had been reluctant to negotiate, but Jim had won him around eventually. And now here it was, just over a year later, the hottest new resort in Europe and the crowning glory of the company's hotel collection.

Drinking champagne from the half-empty bottle, he felt a pang of guilt at turning Richard Brodie away from the party. He resolved to call him tomorrow, invite him to spend a complimentary evening at Munroe. He would even throw in a round of golf, he decided, not quite able to shake the sense that he had not behaved entirely honourably.

Pushing his hand into his pocket, he burrowed around to find what Celine Wood has deposited in there a few minutes earlier. He was half expecting, half hoping that it would be her phone number – on reflection, the way she'd wiped her lipstick from the edge of his mouth had been very suggestive. Instead he held out his palm and looked at the wrap of cocaine nestled in its centre.

It tempted him for a moment, but then he gave a soft snort, thinking better of it. Class A drugs were definitely not the answer.

'I thought it was you disappearing into the darkness,' said a deep, accented voice.

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'Simon,' said Jim, standing up and pushing the wrap quickly back into his pocket as he spotted his boss. 'Sorry, just wanted a breather for a moment.'

'Sit back down,' said Simon Desai, waving an impatient hand.

The chairman of the Mumbai-based global conglomerate that owned Omari Hotels unfastened the single button on his dinner jacket and took a seat next to Jim on the bench. Jim couldn't resist a smile of quiet validation. Here he was, on New Year's Eve, shooting the breeze with one of the world's richest men. Admittedly he was only the hired help, but it wasn't a bad place to find yourself the year you were turning forty.

'So you did it,' said Simon finally.

'*We* did it. Without your commitment, we'd still be draining the moat about now.' Although he had spent almost every waking hour on the renovation of Munroe, Jim knew that he had only managed to deliver a fully working luxury hotel because of Simon's willingness to pour money into the project.

He'd often wondered why Simon bothered with boutique hotels. His empire was vast, spanning every industry from steel to fizzy drinks, and Jim was sure that every single one of his other companies was more profitable and less risk than Omari. But as a shower of golden light sprayed across the black sky like an iridescent willow tree, a babble of laughter playing as its backdrop, Jim knew exactly why he did.

'Hotels are magic, Jim,' said Simon, as if he were reading his thoughts. 'Growing up, I slept on a mattress on the floor

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with my two brothers. There was no running water in our house, no glass in the windows. But the view – you should have seen it.' He sighed softly. 'From our front step you could see the turrets of the Jaipur Palace, the most beautiful hotel in the province, and every night I wondered what it would be like to step inside, how soft the beds would be, what they ate for supper. But after a while it wasn't enough to wonder. I decided to find out for myself what it was like, so I worked for two whole years to afford a night in the smallest room.'

'And was it everything you'd hoped?' smiled Jim.

'It was. I felt like a king. I thought, "What if anyone could have this? What if living like a king was available to everyone, if only for one night?" That's where it all started. Within ten years, I'd bought the Jaipur Palace.'

'You're such an old romantic,' grinned Jim, finishing off the last of the champagne.

'I was a shrewd businessman.' Simon shrugged nostalgically. 'So where next?' he asked a little more brusquely.

Jim cleared his throat. 'Well, there's an excellent property coming on the market in Hvar. Personally, I think it's the new Saint-Tropez. It's beachfront, a twenty-five-acre site . . .'

Simon shook his head. 'We have four of the top properties in Europe, Jim, all within two hours of one another. Where we need to expand is in North America.'

'America's a saturated market.'

'It's a mature market for sure,' said Simon, 'but it's still the biggest travel market in the world.'

'So where were *you* thinking?'

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'Somewhere it's warm all year round. When it's five degrees on the Hudson, we want somewhere people from New York and DC can escape to that doesn't involve putting on a goose-down parka.'

'Florida?' suggested Jim. 'Though most of the interesting properties in Miami have been sold, and we'd be paying top dollar for any strip of coast.'

Simon put a hand on his shoulder. 'I'm not interested in those beachfront carbuncles. Look at this,' he said, nodding towards the ramparts. 'Omari properties have history. They are properties of significance.

'I was thinking the Deep South,' he said after another moment. 'Wide terraces, iced tea and linen suits. The things I used to dream about when I was a child. The things that made me feel like a king.'

Jim rubbed his chin, an uncomfortable memory stirring, but Simon was still talking.

'I'm thinking of a grand Deep South plantation house with a mile-long driveway flanked with trees covered with those plants that look like cobwebs.'

'Spanish moss,' said Jim, glancing across.

'So you know exactly the type of property I am looking for,' said Simon, reaching in his pocket for his phone.

Now Jim was really off balance.

'Simon, the fireworks are finishing, I have the bar to check on, I've lost the piper—'

'I'm thinking of a property like this,' Simon said, ignoring Jim's objections and tapping at the screen.

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Jim frowned at the image he had called up. 'That's Tara. The house from *Gone with the Wind*,' he said, recognising the iconic plantation house.

'Tell me what you know about this type of house,' said Simon.

Jim felt himself shiver in the cold Scottish night air. 'Well, it's Greek Revival in style. Early nineteenth century. Graceful proportions, low-gabled. They were built as a backlash against British style, hence the pillars, the nod to Greek architecture. They were popular with wealthy Deep South businessmen, cotton growers, which is why they were known as plantation houses. If you look, you can often see the darker side to these properties – slave cottages in the grounds and so on.'

'You know your stuff.'

'I spent a summer living right by one.'

Simon looked up at him with interest. 'Where was that?'

'Just outside Savannah. Georgia,' said Jim, torn between the discomfort he felt and the desire to impress Simon.

'Was it your family's house?'

'Hardly.' He laughed awkwardly.

'But isn't your father a famous writer?' asked Simon. Three years working side by side and this was the first time he had asked about Jim's private life.

'Writers generally can't afford houses like Casa D'Or,' Jim said, looking down at the cold stone beneath his feet.

'Casa D'Or,' repeated Simon. 'What a beautiful name. What does it mean?'

'The House of Gold.'

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Simon began typing, and another image appeared on the screen, one that made the alcohol residue burn in Jim's throat.

'Is that it?' he asked. Not waiting for Jim's reply, he pointed at the web page he had called up. '"Casa D'Or was the winter home of David Darling, the American railroad magnate and art collector",' he read aloud. '"Alongside Hearst Castle and the Biltmore, it was considered to be one of the great entertaining houses of the twentieth century. It was sold in the 1940s to the Wyatt family, who have owned it ever since."'

He looked up, his face lit by the light of the screen. Jim had seen that look before: desire.

'Do the Wyatts still own it?'

'As far as I know. But it's been a long while since I was there.'

'But you know these people, the Wyatts?'

Jim paused, took a breath. 'I used to,' he said, stiffening in his seat.

'Do you think they would sell?'

'Simon, it's their family home. You know how sentimental people get about places.'

Simon gave him a level look. 'And I've also seen how quickly sentiment fades away when you open a chequebook.'

'Yes, but . . .'

'But what, Jim?' said Simon. 'Is there something about this place you're not telling me?'

You have no idea, Jim thought, getting to his feet.

'All I'm saying is let's not jump the gun. Casa D'Or isn't the only house in the South. Let me put out feelers and see

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what else there is. Omari properties have to be the absolute best in class.'

'Precisely,' said Simon, putting the phone back in his pocket. 'Best in class, and if Casa D'Or is being mentioned in the same breath as Hearst Castle and the Biltmore, that excites me.'

Jim could feel his control slipping away.

'Look, the place has history,' he said cautiously. 'There was an accident there once. Someone died . . .'

Simon looked at the younger man directly, unbothered by the concerns he had just heard, the look in his eyes indicating he was only concerned with getting his own way.

'Where do you see your future in this company, James?' he said evenly. It was a straight question, but one loaded with meaning. Simon was a fair employer, but no billionaire got to the top of that golden pyramid without having a streak of ruthlessness. And while Jim had carved out a personal niche in the Omari property portfolio, the first rule of business was that no one was indispensable.

'I love working for Omari,' he said after a moment. 'It's my life.'

Simon nodded. 'You've been here from the start, grown the Omari business. And I want to reward you for your vision and your loyalty.'

'I'm flattered, but—' began Jim.

'No buts. I want to open the best hotel in the Deep South and I want that hotel to be Casa D'Or. Make it happen and I will make you CEO of Omari Holds.'

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Jim could feel his eyes opening wide.

'CEO?'

Simon looked at him, his gaze intense, and for a moment Jim's own eyes sparkled with desire. Then there was a whoop and a cheer from the terrace and the moment was gone. Simon smiled and raised his glass.

'Well, I think you'd better go and find the piper, don't you?'

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