

# On the Razor's Edge of Paradise

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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# Chapter One

"And now, thanks to you, my breath would knock a buzzard off a shit wagon," I was saying to my best friend, looking behind me at her rather than the direction in which I was barreling forward.

And, of course, I ended up walking into the very person I'd spent the evening desperately trying to avoid.

He was tall, so much so that it was hard to avoid commenting on it, which I refused to do because I'd heard—not that I was paying attention, mind you—almost everyone who spoke to him tonight mention it. He must've been damned sick of hearing about something he couldn't control in any way, short of digging a six-inch trench ahead of him as he went through life. It wasn't as if he was NBA tall, either. He was probably six-three or four. Tall, yes, but not gigantic.

And although he was hardly the brick shithouse build I usually went for, he was damned solid enough to stop me in my tracks and then send me reeling backwards.

Of course, the bastard was athletic enough—unlike me—to reach out and catch hold of my forearm in a vice like grip before I topped backwards onto my friend, starting what would certainly have been a very ungainly, undignified human domino effect.

"Thank you," I murmured under my breath, deliberately not looking up at him, subtly trying to reclaim my arm, although he appeared to be in no hurry to relinquish it as people poured out of the kitchen from behind me, forcing me back up against him. Not that he seemed to mind or even take a step back—which would have been the polite thing to do. Instead, he just stood there, gazing down at me with that angelic look he apparently bestowed on everyone and, at the same time, not looking in the least flustered, while I was coming apart at the seams.

Too much tequila. It was definitely too much tequila—even though I'd actually consumed very little—and not his nearness that was getting under my skin.

Wasn't it?

Instead, his big hand traveled down to my own, and instead of shaking it, as I would have expected, he clasped my fingers and brought the back of my hand to his lips in a very soft, tender kiss that my body somehow interpreted as something much more intimate.

"I think you're the only person I haven't met here this evening, although you're the one I'm most interested in meeting, Ms. Sterling. I've heard so many wonderful things about you. I'm Dan Hayden. It's truly a pleasure to finally meet you."

I frowned. Son of a bitch, who had been talking to him about me? I would wring their necks, whoever they were! I was not on the market and that was it, but none of my friends agreed with my decision. They tended to like to try to set me up with men they thought I might be interested in. This was far from the first time I'd heard of them doing this—but this *was* the first time that I agreed with their assessment of the man they'd chosen for me.

This man was sex on a stick. Sex on two very long, slim, yet definitively muscled legs. He wasn't classically handsome, but he didn't need to be, either, with a voice that just slightly hinted at English—or was that Irish—accent and those impeccable manners, not to mention the artfully messy mop top of black curls. And it wasn't as if he wasn't nice looking. He had all the right features—full lips, strong jaw line, aquiline nose—but somehow, they didn't quite fit

together. The mismatch only managed to make him seem just that much more attractive—more approachable to everyone but me—than someone who was drop dead gorgeous.

And worse than all of that, as far as I was concerned, he seemed to be a genuinely nice person. I'd watched him—covertly—making his rounds of the party that was being thrown in his honor. He'd greeted everyone effusively, hugging most of them, even if he'd just met them, generously distributing earnest compliments that had me cringing in second-hand embarrassment and—unlike most men in my unfortunate experience—in particular the one I'd just broken up with after a very long time—actually listening to them as they spoke to him. Even the midst of the inanities of their small talk, his posture and open, inviting expression left them with no doubt that he was interested in what they had to say.

Yet, there was that something in him, that spark I had immediately recognized as a kindred spirit.

He was a Dom. I'd be willing to bet my life on it. His amiable personality did nothing to hide it, if that was what you were attuned to, and I, unfortunately, had been all my life. There was a steeliness to him—a backbone—that all good Doms had. He would know—innately—how to make his sub feel safe—and yet, somehow, uneasily, acutely aware of him at the same time—while in his presence.

It was a very potent combination.

Yes, he was downright dangerous, this one—I could feel it in my bones the moment I saw him. I had very carefully circled around the party a few steps ahead of him, ducking out when he'd gotten a bit too close for my comfort and into the kitchen, where I knew my friend—the hostess of said party—would be.

She was the reason why I was making the comment about my breath that I'd been saying as I'd so rudely run into him. She'd let me sample a roasted garlic, parmesan and caramelized onion dip she was making, which was proving to be a bad idea. A very bad idea.

So now, I had to cover my mouth and do my best not to breathe noxious fumes on the most attractive man in the room, while also trying not to look at him but not seeming impolite while doing so. He was just too potent for the likes of me, and despite his friendly persona, and those continental manners, all I wanted to do was to get away from him as quickly as was humanly possible.

What does a woman do when a man has just kissed her hand? Does she turn it in his and force him to shake it instead? I had absolutely no idea, so I simply let my hand hang loosely in his, expecting that any moment he was going to let me go.

"It's very nice to meet you, too, Mr. Hayden," I lied, still not looking at him, still counting the seconds until I could have my hand back.

"Dan, please," he offered.

His fingers finally relaxed their hold and I fairly snatched my hand away from him, certain that Miss Manners herself would have endorsed that smooth move.

Before I had a chance to do the awkward thing and tell him that he should call me Isa, a gorgeous, statuesque woman who looked as if she could—and would—devour him for breakfast descended on us—completely ignoring little ole insignificant, perfectly happy to be invisible to her type me, and I was—thank the Gods—finally able to shirk and shrink my way back into the crowd.

To become anonymous once again. Well, as anonymous as one could get in a crowd of people, the majority of which knew you all too well.

But even they—most of who professed to love me, in their own ways—were too much for me. I wasn't a crowd or, for that matter, even a party person at all. More than three or four people grouped together was already skirting the edges of too many bodies for me, and Sharon's place was packed.

I hazarded a furtive glance at my watch—yes, I still wear one—with a face and everything, rather than digital. My parents had given it to me when I graduated from grammar school, and I'd worn it ever since. They weren't around now, but the watch served as a reminder of them and their love every time I looked at it.

Except now, when it lightened my heart, not because of my memories of them, but because I had been here for well over the time I had decided to require myself to stay before I'd even gotten here—hell, before I'd even accepted the invite. At normal parties—ones not thrown by people I knew well or—God forbid—business functions at which I was even more withdrawn—I forced myself to have at least one drink, and to stay for at least half an hour.

But this party was different from that kind of awkward affair. It was worse. Much, much worse. Familiarity was not necessarily advantage to someone who was as socially awkward—in crowds of people and out—as I am. I was perfectly fine in a small group—girls' nights, sleepovers when I was younger—passed out drunk on the hostess's guest bed being the adult equivalent—that kind of thing was fine. I was even somewhat outgoing in that setting, my friends would tell you.

But not in a situation like this, which made me anxious, make me feel like I wanted to crawl out of my skin, to do nearly anything to get away from all of these damned *people*.

"I saw that."

I heard the accusing refrain from behind me and knew who it was without turning around.

"You're leaving." She came around to stand in front of me, a shot glass in either hand, one of which she gave to me—then retracted. "How much have you already had?"

"Very little, actually," I replied, always scrupulously honest about something like that, since I intended to be driving home in a matter of minutes. I put my hand out, and she gave me the shot glass, which I then emptied and handed back to her.

"You look like you would prefer to be facing a firing squad than to be here." She wasn't whining, there was no rancor in her tone. Sharon understood my peculiarities and, even in the midst of what was sure to be another epic party in which I would not be partaking any further, she supported me.

That was what best friends did.

Lord knows, I'd held her hand through enough atrocious relationships and the inevitable, subsequent breakups, which often went hand in hand with bad career choices and fights with other friends—she could damned well accommodate my, well, more than occasional social phobias.

"Pretty much," I agreed, more blithely than I was feeling.

Sharon sighed. "Did you at least get to meet Dan?"

"I did."

"What'd you think? Gorgeous, isn't he?"

Sharon wanted him. Probably every other woman—and a generous handful of the men—in the room wanted him.

I was used to being the odd man out, although I knew there was something to him, something I could grow to...more than like, if I allowed it. My wet panties voted with the majority, but luckily, it had been a long time since I let their opinion rule.

I wasn't about to give in to their cave woman lack of sensibility. Dan was the type of man to whom women were drawn without him having to do much to make it happen.

I was taking the high road, doing myself the favor of avoiding all of what would most probably become an agonizing heartache in not allowing myself to get sucked into his already estrogen filled orbit, to become just another hanger on in a crowd of hangers-on who were probably much nicer and were almost definitely prettier than I am.

"He's all right," I answered noncommittally.

Another, more exasperated sigh. "I give up. You're incorrigible. Okay, you want to be alone. I'll stop trying to match make."

I raised an eyebrow. "I'll believe it when I don't see it. When I'm not invited to it. When I don't have it arranged for me—"

"All right, all right. I've been trying too hard, I know." She shifted the empty shot glasses into one hand and used the other to cup my cheek as she pouted those glossy red lips at me. "It's been too long, Isa. I just want you to get back on the horse or at least the stud, anyway. I want you to be happy again."

"Believe it or not, honey, not all of us need a man to make us happy. Some of us are just as happy—maybe even happier—by ourselves."

Sharon leaned closer to me, and I could still smell the dip—as well as tequila—on her breath, as she patted my cheek like the condescending bitch she could sometimes be. "You keep telling yourself that, cupcake. Maybe one day, you'll actually believe it."

Before she managed to make the dramatic exit I knew she had planned in her head, I said, perhaps a bit too pointedly, enough so that it stopped her retreat, "So I'm free to go, without recriminations? Without your childish sulking for weeks on end—not returning my texts except with frowny faced or weeping emoticons or sending all of my calls to voicemail, etc., etc., etc.?"

There was the resentful glare I was used to. "Yeah, fine. You look so damned uncomfortable that you're going to infect everyone. Go—get into your flannel jammies with a cup of hot marshmallows and a teaspoon of cocoa and watch *I Love Lucy* for the gazillionth time, if you think that's what's going to make you happy."

Still amazed at how well she knew me, I leaned forward to kiss her cheek noisily. "Excruciatingly. Enjoy your party, Sharon. I'm sure everyone will rave about it. I'm sorry I can't be more of a social butterfly for you."

"Good thing I love you anyway," she spat out, as if it was a curse as she drew me in for a hug anyway.

"I love you, too," I said, meaning it more than she did at the moment, I think.

It wasn't until I was finally out of that loud, hot, oppressive room and taking a deep, calming breath that I felt the very door I was leaning against moving out from under me.

Who else would be leaving such a great party so early?

Of course, just the person I didn't want to see as I was trying to make my escape unnoticed.

Mr. Dan Hayden.

"I'm so sorry," he said immediately, upon noticing that I had to try to recover from suddenly falling backwards when he opened the door, his fingers on my elbow.

Right, like that was going to stop me from falling.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, thank you," I threw over my shoulder as I swiftly recovered and took several steps down the hall, away from him.

"Stop!"

Yeah. Definitely a Dom.

Unfortunately, I had been—somewhat—well trained, and I did exactly what he said.

Damnit.

But I also did my level best to hide what I'd done—or at least not give him any hint that that was why I had done it. So, I whirled around to face him, and my, "Yes?" was a tad less than welcoming.

I saw that tiny smile he hid very quickly, though, as if he was amused at my efforts to conceal my inner self from him. He didn't seem insulted in the least by my attitude, taking only about a stride and a half to catch up to me and stuffing his hands into his pockets as he looked down at his shoes.

I was amazed. Those unconscious actions betrayed a nervousness—a certain level of insecurity, even—for which I couldn't imagine I could be the inspiration.

But then he looked up and right directly *into* my eyes—past any artifice I might try to summon to deflect him.

And then, with a start, I realized that this man saw *exactly* who and what I was—and what's more, he accepted it. He more than accepted it, he appreciated it.

I actually had to shake myself, internally, to take myself firmly in hand and coach myself to straighten the fuck up, to not indulge in flights of fancy about what this man might really be like under his suave exterior.

"I hope you'll forgive me for my forwardness, but I saw you were leaving and I didn't want to let you go without saying how nice it was to meet you."

I notched my chin up a bit higher and pointed out—slightly discourteously—that he'd already said that.

Another smile, this time a little harder, less jovial. "You're right, of course. I must confess that I wish you weren't leaving so soon—we didn't really get any time to talk."

I snorted. "No one in there is really talking."

He nodded slowly. "Quite true. Perhaps we'll have another chance to talk soon?"

I wasn't about to give an inch, murmuring, with just the right tinge of reluctance, "Perhaps."

I would have sworn that the corners of his lips turned up just slightly at that, as if he was amused at my hesitance, but I could have been mistaken, I suppose.

"Well, I mustn't keep you," he said, and I thought I was going to be released from the snare of his all too powerful gaze. But then he did something so wholly endearing—and thus, for me, unbearably intriguing—that I hated him for doing it, despite the fact that I loved that he had the impulse to do so with me—a woman he didn't know. "Are you all right to drive? You haven't had too much to drink, have you? I would be glad to drive you—" When he stopped himself, I could see him take a mental step back, as if he knew he'd been a bit overzealous. "Or I could call you a cab—"

I didn't want to, but I smiled up at him—all that long way, since I—unlike every other woman at the party and probably some of the men—wasn't wearing heels, saying, "No, thank you, though. I've had very little to drink this evening, considering, and I'm fine to drive. If I hadn't been, I would already have called a cab for myself."

He looked a bit uncomfortable and—was that a blush staining those acute cheekbones? "Of course." Somehow, I didn't think he felt awkward very often, which just made him feel that



much more so, and it was quite obvious in his expression. "Have a pleasant rest of your evening, then."

"You, too, Mr. Hayden," I returned, heading back towards the elevators.

"Dan," he corrected immediately—sternly, even—having not taken a step from where we'd been.

With nearly enough distance between us for me to relax a bit, I turned to face him, consciously refusing to repeat his name back to him, as I would have if he had been the one person in my life who was allowed to give me orders that I would make a sincere effort to obey.

"And, if we should ever meet again, you must call me Isa."

Unlike what usually happened in my life, the elevator dinged at the precisely right moment, and I stepped into it—knowing that he was still looking at me intently, a hunch which was confirmed the second I turned around and he was still standing there, hands in his pockets—which pulled the material of his suit pants tight over what was a truly stupendously rounded behind that my palms began to itch to touch and I wished to Heaven I hadn't noticed. Head angled down, just a bit, those all too generous lips curved into a ghost of a smile, the essence of which set me slightly on edge for some reason.

We stood there for the interminable few seconds it took for the elevator doors to close in front of me, just staring at each other, neither of us saying or doing anything else.

Except me.

I was drenching my panties as he watched me silently, and only when I'd seen that I'd descended at least a floor so he wouldn't hear it, I forcibly exhaled the breath that I hadn't, until seconds ago, realized I was holding.