



Heat Wave of Desire (California Desert Dreams)

By Yahrah St. John

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Heir to a powerful financial dynasty, Jaxon Dunham knows he can't hide out at the luxurious desert resort forever. Even if his passionate nights with Kimberly are the closest thing to paradise he's ever known. Then Jaxon finds himself the focus of scandalous headlines. Risking exposure, he has to make the decision to trust his heart or walk away from a promising love...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Yahrah St. John is the author of seventeen published books and won the 2013 Best Kimani Romance from RT Book Reviews for ***A CHANCE WITH YOU***. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Northwestern University. St. John is a member of Romance Writers of America, is an avid reader, enjoys the arts, cooking, traveling and adventure sports, but her true passion is writing. Visit: www.yahrahstjohn.com

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"I want it."

Kimberly Parker, general manager of the Belleza Resort and Spa, didn't wait long after her two best friends sat down to breakfast at one of the resort's three luxurious pools on Monday morning. She started in on resort business. Located in the town of Belleza, the resort was a hundred or so miles east of Los Angeles. Though it was considered a desert town, Kimberly would never tire of the breathtaking mountain views surrounding the resort's luscious grounds.

"Want what?" Robyn Henderson asked. As the event planner for the resort, she managed special events for their private guests and corporate clients.

Gabrielle Royce, the executive chef, looked equally confused. "I'm with Robyn on this one. What is it you want?" She glanced longingly at the sumptuous egg-white veggie soufflé she'd prepared for their breakfast, which they hadn't yet touched. But Kimberly had business not breakfast on her mind.

"I want the Dunham Foundation gala," she explained, reaching for the glass of orange juice Jessica, their waitress, had placed on the table for her. She didn't have to ask because Jessica knew the ladies' morning ritual. They always sat down to a health-conscious breakfast after an intense workout and Pilates at the Belleza's three-thousand-square-foot gym.

Kimberly had changed into her usual attire for the day—a lavender silk shirt, cream pantsuit and pumps—and had pulled her hair back in a sleek ponytail. Robyn had donned a simple black pencil skirt with an orange cap-sleeved shirt and low sling-back heels. While Gabrielle opted for distressed jeans and a graphic T-shirt under her chef coat and her ubiquitous PUMAs. They each had such different styles, but they'd been thick as thieves for years.

Robyn was the tallest of the bunch, with creamy tapioca skin and hazel eyes. She wore her hair in a sophisticated updo. Gabrielle was short, five foot three to be exact, and had a mass of unruly auburn curls and brown eyes. She had a fairer complexion than Robyn's, while Kimberly was the odd man out with her broad nose, almond-shaped brown eyes and dark caramel skin.

"Ah." Robyn nodded her head in understanding. "I'd heard the illustrious Dunham family was in the market for a venue for their annual gala, but I didn't know the Belleza was in the running."

Kimberly nodded. "Not that I wish anyone ill, but the Beverly Wilshire, where they normally hold the Dunham gala, had a major flood a week ago. The damage was so extensive that the remediation and repairs

will take months. Their misfortune is our gain. Which is why we can't let it slip through our fingers." She practically rubbed her hands together in glee.

"And we won't," Gabrielle responded. "The Dunhams aren't our first high-profile client. We've had scads of celebrities come here in recent years. Isn't that R & B singer Cole on-site now?" She patted Kimberly's arm. "Don't worry. We've got this, Kim."

Gabrielle was right. The resort had hosted innumerable big-time guests. Surely the Dunhams would be just as satisfied. And she remembered that though her friend didn't know them personally, Gabrielle's parents had been acquainted with the Dunhams for years.

She smiled at her friends whom she'd known since meeting them at the Merriweather Academy boarding school when she was fourteen. She didn't know why she was letting this event get her worked up. Hadn't she been the one to help her parents oversee the renovation that had revitalized the resort? Now people were flocking from all over the world to stay at the Belleza. But all her success had come at a price. She'd lost both her brothers in the process.

"Kim!"

"Hmm?" Kimberly blinked, bringing herself back to the conversation. "What was that?" She turned to Robyn.

"I asked you when the Dunhams are coming."

"Hayley Dunham is coming at the end of the week and we need to be prepared."

"That isn't much notice," Gabrielle stated.

"True," Kimberly replied, "but this golden goose has just come to roost and we can't pass up this opportunity."

"And you want to go all out for a consult, I presume?" Robyn inquired.

"Of course," Kimberly stated. "We can give them a preview of what we can do from the music, the flowers, the food, the ambience. Show them there's no place better than the Belleza."

"You don't have to convince me," Robyn responded. "Or Gabby for that matter. We've drunk the Belleza Kool-Aid and absolutely love this place. Whatever we can do to convince the Dunhams," she said as she pointed her nose upward, "that we are worthy of them, we'll do."

"Fabulous." Kimberly beamed at them. "I knew you wouldn't let me down."

"The Dunhams aren't the only clients to express interest in holding an event at Belleza," Robyn replied. She pulled a manila folder out of her oversize Louis Vuitton tote and opened it.

Robyn updated them on other potential event prospects, but Kimberly's attention was momentarily distracted when she saw extended-stay guest Jack Scott sit across from them. The quiet, handsome guest had been at the Belleza for the past three weeks. It was somewhat unusual for a guest to stay so long, especially when it didn't appear that he was conducting any business. Then again she'd often seen his head buried in a tablet.

"I have some great ideas about changes to the spring menu that I'm sure your prospect might enjoy," Gabrielle enthused. "I'm thinking of doing a chilled corn soup with bacon jam, and a seared scallop and braised pork belly with a polenta cake. And for dessert—" she paused for effect—"a lemon vanilla crème with mint puree and hazelnut sable crumbles."

"That sounds delicious, Gabby." Robyn licked her lips in anticipation. "Doesn't it, Kim?"

"Oh, yes," Kimberly replied, turning her gaze back to her friends. "Those are all wonderful selections and we'll need it to compete against The Pinnacle." Several travel magazines had already done features on the new resort opening up about thirty minutes away.

"Do you really think we'll have some competition?" Gabrielle inquired. "The Belleza has been a staple in this community for years."

"Which is why we can't rest on our laurels," Kimberly pointed out. "We have to keep up with the ever-changing market. We don't want to appear boring or old or stale."

We want to be fresh, innovative and cutting-edge. We must constantly reinvent the resort."

"That's exactly how I describe the Belleza to corporate clients," Robyn added.

"Good," Kimberly said. "With our long-standing reputation for class and quality, we have a step up over The Pinnacle, which is just a start-up. But they will be looking at ways to eat up the market share, so we have to be diligent in our efforts. I think all three of us should present during your corporate client consults, Robyn. Show them why the Belleza is a step above the rest."

"Agreed," Robyn said. "I'll send everyone invites. But if you don't mind, I'd like to eat my soufflé before it gets cold."

"Dig in." But instead of looking down at her breakfast, Kimberly's eyes darted across the pool and connected with Jack Scott's dark brown ones.

He'd been caught staring.

Jaxon Dunham had been watching the three women from across the pool as they ate, laughed and talked. It was pretty hard not to stare when they'd had the same routine each morning since nearly three weeks ago when he'd first caught sight of *her*. He'd been unable to stop himself from coming down here to watch them.

The one who'd caught his eye was about five foot seven inches tall, had caramel-colored skin and long silky black hair. Despite the pantsuit she was wearing, which he'd seen in a variety of different colors over the past three weeks, it was evident she was shapely and toned underneath. But what sparked his interest even more was the confident aura with which she carried herself.

He suspected she was in a position of power given the way she disseminated orders to the staff around her, but it wasn't in a harsh way. From where he was sitting, he could see she treated her employees fairly and with respect. It went a long way in his book. The problem was he wasn't supposed to be looking at *any* woman. He'd come to Belleza for a vacation from his family and had sworn off women, all because of Stephanie Sawyer.

He'd been casually dating Stephanie for the past few months because he'd been trying to stop his parents from pushing him toward the altar. His parents expected Jaxon to do as they'd done. When he'd reached thirty, his father, Charles Dunham, had agreed to an arranged marriage with Claire Butler, who was of his same class. Since Jaxon was now thirty-two years old, his parents wanted him to do the same. *Stephanie's from a good family*, his mother had said, *and you need to settle down and start a family*.

So at his mother's constant urging, Jaxon had finally agreed to start seeing Stephanie. From the outset, he'd explained to Stephanie that he had no intention of marrying, but he'd thought if they dated, his family would get off his back. He'd thought Stephanie had been cool with the no-strings-attached arrangement. At least until two months ago.

Over dinner with both the Dunham and Sawyer families present, his mother had announced their engagement. Jaxon had been furious and he'd thought Stephanie had been, too. He'd been wrong. The next morning, when their engagement was announced in the society pages, Jaxon had gone to Stephanie's place to figure out damage control. And that was when he discovered that Stephanie was in on the whole thing.

"Getting married is a great idea," she'd said. "Haven't I shown you how good we can be together?"

When he'd disagreed, she'd attempted to entice him into the engagement by getting him into bed. When that didn't work, she'd threatened to sully his reputation in the media. Stephanie knew how important the Dunham family image was. They'd been a long-standing family in the Beverly Hills community for half a century and he wasn't about to let her ruin that. Jaxon had pointed out that blackmail was no way to begin a partnership and he wouldn't let *her*, his family or anyone force him into marriage. When he was ready, he'd choose his own wife. He wouldn't have an arranged marriage like his parents. Instead, it would be one of mutual love, passion and respect. Stephanie had vowed revenge, but he hadn't cared.

Furious with his parents for getting him into this debacle, he'd packed his bags and left the family estate in Beverly Hills. At first, he'd thought about leaving the country, but then had thought better of it. Why not hide in plain sight? He'd been hearing great things about the Belleza from research his family had done for an upcoming gala, so he'd decided to give it a try.

He'd been at the Belleza for the past three weeks under a false name. Everyone at the resort believed him to be Jack Scott. They had no idea he was really Jaxon Dunham, member of the über rich and powerful Dunham family of Beverly Hills. He was glad they didn't, because they treated him like a regular person instead of someone born to privilege.

Even though he was wealthy and considered by some to be born with a silver spoon in his mouth, Jaxon didn't shirk his duties to the family business. The Dunhams had made the bulk of their money in financial investing through Dunham Investments, and forty-five years ago, his grandparents had formed the Dunham Foundation to help those less fortunate.

Finance was Jaxon's specialty at Dunham Investments and the Foundation, which coincidentally allowed him the chance to work remotely instead of having to work on-site at the corporate offices in Beverly Hills. He could conduct business from his laptop or iPad and lay low with no one being the wiser. Until the brunette!

Thinking about how those cream-colored pants hugged the caramel beauty's toned behind stopped Jaxon from focusing on his iPad and the society page of the *Beverly Hills Times*. Stephanie had been airing their dirty laundry to whomever she could get to listen to her rants. Couldn't they see *she* was a jilted woman? No, they wanted to sell newspapers and the Dunham name made for good fodder. He could easily sling the hash

back at Stephanie, but what would that accomplish except fuel the flame?

He would stay here at the Belleza until the dust settled. But something told him he wouldn't be alone for long.

Kimberly tried focusing on the girls' conversation, but her mind kept wandering back to Jack Scott. There was something about the mysterious stranger that was appealing.

She looked in his direction again and once more her gaze collided with his and she quickly looked away. She hadn't expected to be caught checking him out again.

"Looks like someone's got it bad," Robyn teased.

"Who?" Her eyes grew large with wonder.

"You." Robyn laughed. "I saw the way you were looking at Jack Scott like you wanted to sop him up with a biscuit."

"Robyn!"

"You're talking about the superhot guy who checked in a few weeks ago, but has been primarily keeping to himself?" Gabrielle asked.

"The very same," Robyn said. "And Kim here has been unable to stop staring at him since we sat down."

"That's not true." But her denial sounded weak. "Is too," Robyn countered.

"A girl can look, right? Given our no-dating-guests policy, there's nothing to worry about." Kimberly attempted to act as if she was unaffected by the handsome and mysterious guest. The truth was, he was by far the most attractive man she'd seen in ages. In her position as general manager, she rarely had time to date, if at all.

"Are you sure about that?" Robyn asked. "Because you're not the only one doing the admiring."

"What do you mean?" Kimberly was afraid to hazard another glance in Jack's direction for fear he would find her out.

"He's not looking at me or Gabby," Robyn responded. "He hasn't been able to take his eyes off *you!*"

A flurry of butterflies swarmed in Kimberly's belly. He *had* been looking at her. She hadn't imagined it.

Kimberly cocked her head to one side. "Well, he can look all he wants, but you know I don't fraternize with the clientele."

"I agree. The rules are in place for a reason," Gabrielle said. "They prevent us from being put in a bad spot."

"I don't know, Gabby," Robyn replied. "If any rule was made to be broken, it would be for a date with that fine specimen of a man."

"You needn't worry," Kimberly replied, "because I will not be breaking that rule. The policy is in place to preserve our reputation and I'm not just talking about the resort. People come on vacation looking for a fling and I won't be another notch on the bedpost."

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