



Love Me If You Dare Preview

selected excerpt

Camille Thompson tugged her suit jacket into place and smoothed down her skirt. She was overdressed for the occasion and she knew it. But it was by design, a weapon. In her line of work, a woman *needed* weapons, both direct and more subtle, like a crisp red suit that showed confidence and authority before she ever even spoke a word.

She stood before an old fifties-era row motel in a little Florida beach town named Coral Cove. The long white building sporting a red roof was well-kept and tidy, but the parking lot empty. The latter was definitely in her favor-another weapon. And when a glance up at the kitschy sign – sporting a large, smiling red crab outlined in a tube of red neon – shot a tiny twinge of something like sadness through her veins, she efficiently pushed it right back down from wherever it had sprung. In her line of work, there was also no room for sentimentality – or for being the least bit charmed by a gigantic smiling crab. She had a job to do – time to get started.

The heels of her black pumps clicked across the asphalt as she headed for the motel’s front office, and she used the short walk to put on her game face. Another day, another dollar.

She opened the plate glass door and stepped inside from the midday tropical heat, ready to face her opponent, but the only thing that greeted her was the old song, “Signs Signs Everywhere Signs” blaring from unseen speakers –it was the only indication of life in the paneled room that sported a tall counter, some random wooden cabinets behind it, and a few large potted palms that had seen better days. She tapped the old fashioned bell on the check-in desk, but when no one came, she figured the music made it impossible to hear. “Hello?” she called. “Anyone here? I’m looking for Reece Donovan. Hello?”

The instant the second hello was leaving her mouth, the music went silent and a dark-haired beach bum type appeared in an open doorway behind the counter. He smiled. And Camille’s heart skipped a beat. She had no idea why. Well, other than that smile. And his eyes. Which happened to be brown and deep and gorgeous. But it usually took more than a pretty face to knock her off balance.

“Sorry about that,” he said, disarming grin still in place. “Business is a little slow, so afraid you caught me rockin’ out.” He ended with a wink that was just as endearing. And he had that unshaven thing going. She usually didn’t like that – she liked her men well-groomed, the way she was. But on him ... well, it was probably still just the smile and the eyes drawing her attention. Possibly the wink.

But quit noticing that stuff, for heaven’s sake. It’s completely trivial. What’s important is what you came here to accomplish.

“What can I do for you?” he asked. Though that was when she sensed him taking in her appearance as well. Realizing that she didn’t look like a typical customer at the Happy Crab Motel.

“Reece Donovan?” she inquired.

“One and the same.” He still grinned. It was hard not to like him. But maybe that would make this less confrontational than it sometimes was.

And with that in mind, she got straight to the point. “You can sell me your motel,” she told him with a smile of her own.

At this, his mouth dropped open slightly and his eyebrows rose into a critical arch.

Since he was clearly now tuning in to where she’d come from, she went on, confirming it. “I’m Camille Thompson and I represent the Vanderhook Company, developer for Windchime Resorts.”

“Oh,” he replied pointedly. His tone said, You again.

She continued undaunted, though, smile still in place, ready to help him see reason. “I know my associates have approached you with several offers to buy the property on numerous occasions over the past six months, and that you’ve declined all those offers. Clearly this place means a lot to you – understandable for any business owner.” She nodded perfunctorily, letting him know she related. “I’m sure you’ve put a lot of yourself into this place and I can appreciate its charm. But I’m also sure you’ll be pleased to know that Vanderhook is adding an additional one hundred thousand dollars to our offering price. Given that our previous offers were already considerably more than the property is worth, I’m certain you’ll agree that accepting this one is the only wise decision you can make.”

Reece Donovan cocked his head slightly, an unmistakable glint of self-assurance in his gaze. “On the other hand, I’d say property is worth whatever somebody’s willing to pay for it. So it looks like I’ve got myself quite a valuable little motel here suddenly.”

“Touché, Mr. Donovan,” she said, at once admiring his attitude but not looking forward to the work she now knew it would require to wear him down. Even though she would. She always did. She’d just hoped it might not take a lot of time. Often that was how it went – a property owner was a hard sell, but she showed up, sweetened the pot appreciably, appealed to his or her good senses, and closed the deal verbally in ten minutes or less.

She was Vanderhook’s secret weapon and though no one knew exactly what made her so effective, she attributed her many victories to pairing a large sum of money with her sense of confidence and authority. Whatever the secret to her success, though, she’d earned the title of Special Acquisitions Negotiator with years of convincing resistant property owners to sell.

“Of course you’re right,” she went on, pointedly meeting his eyes with hers, still smiling. “It’s definitely valuable or I wouldn’t be here. But as it stands, you have no business, as sorry as I am to have to point that out. The property isn’t being put to best use, and we can both rest easy once you allow Vanderhook to change that.”

He never broke the gaze. Most people did. Most people found that kind of direct eye contact with a stranger a little unnerving. “Maybe I’d have more business if there wasn’t a big ‘Windchime Resorts Coming Soon’ sign in the lot next door. Kinda makes the motel look closed. And I think you kinda know that.” He finished with a short nod.

And she didn’t know about the sign. But she did know the use of such signs on already acquired adjoining properties was often helpful in the very way he’d stated. “Actually, no – that’s a surprise to me,” she said.

“Well, here’s another surprise. I’m not selling,” he told her, his expression still pleasant even if a little arrogant now – he clearly took satisfaction in shooting her down. Then he added, “At any price.”

Now it was Camille who let her eyebrows raise – in challenge. A part of her was enjoying this, too. Yes, she wanted to close the deal and move on with her life, but she also couldn’t help respecting a worthy adversary. “At any price?” came her retort. “That’s a very bold statement.”

Yet Reece Donovan simply answered with a shrug. In khaki cargo shorts and a faded yellow t-shirt sporting a surfboard emblem, he was clearly a man comfortable in his own body.

But quit noticing that. In fact, quit noticing things you like about him at all. Stick to work. Time to take a new approach. “You clearly love the business you’ve built here, and I respect that. However, I’m trying to make you a wealthy man, Mr. Donovan. With what we’re offering, you could buy five places like this. Just think, five brand new Happy Crab Motels – smiling crab signs could dot the Gulf Coast. Or …” Now she shrugged easily, too. “You could invest – do it smartly and you could live off the income. Regardless of what you do with the money, I’m offering you a future full of options, any of which leave you far better than you’re starting out.” Then she added, “No offense.”

“None taken,” he answered smoothly. “But you’re assuming I don’t like where I am. You’re assuming I want more than I have. Thing is, I like it just fine. And I don’t need five Happy Crabs – just the one I’ve already got.”

She prepared to barrel forward anyway. Sometimes it was about forcing the issue. And putting the actual dollar signs in front of someone’s eyes. Just in case they weren’t quite getting the full impact.

The truth was, she was a little taken aback. Vanderhook intended to have this property. The amount they were offering was enormous – the kind of money few people would be able to pass up. She couldn’t help wondering exactly what made Reece Donovan tick. But mostly it just made her want to win. So she lifted her leather briefcase onto the check-in counter and opened it.

“I’ve already had a contract drawn up with the new terms and amount.” She withdrew the document from a manila folder and turned it to face him on the counter. “Look it over. Think about how much we’re offering here. That kind of money will go a long way. Perhaps you have someone else you’d like to run the offer past – a wife or significant other? Additional family members?”

He gave his head a short shake as he let his eyes drop coolly to the papers before him. “Nope, not married. I make all my own decisions.”

Hmm. Why did that please her? Especially since the input of a spouse would have potentially strengthened her position.

She used the index finger of one well-manicured hand to point to the dollar amount, just to make sure he focused on it. "Surely this is an offer you can't refuse," she suggested.

His eyes held a hint of amusement when he lifted them to her. "Isn't that what the Mafia says? Are you gonna make me sleep with the fishes, too?"

She just smiled. She did like his sense of fight. It was almost a shame she knew how futile it would ultimately be. "Sign on the dotted line," she told him, "and I'll be happy to take you out to a celebratory dinner at Coral Cove's finest restaurant."

It surprised her when the proposition met with a laugh.

"That would be The Hungry Fisherman next door," he said, giving her another small grin.

"Perfect," she said. "You can eat the fish rather than sleep with them."

"But I'm thinking it's not your style," he added. "You're dressed a little too fancy for the seafood buffet. In fact, you're dressed a little too fancy for Coral Cove period." Then he stopped, shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and – cocking his head – for the first time looked a little distrustful. "I'm not sure you really get what we're about here."

She remained undisturbed. It was her job, after all. Even if it had been awhile since someone put her through her paces. "I'd be happy to go wherever you'd like, overdressed or not, once we close this deal, and then you can tell me exactly what Coral Cove is about over dinner." She used the opportunity to push the document on the counter a little closer to him. "Take a look at the contract, Mr. Donovan. Consider what we're offering here instead of just turning it down out of hand."

"No thanks," he said as comfortably as if she'd asked him to buy a box of Girl Scout cookies. "The Happy Crab isn't for sale. And by the way, you're a little formal for my taste, too. Nobody around here calls me Mr. Donovan. I'm Reece."

"Okay," she said pleasantly, but she was only affirming the part about his name, not about the motel. "I should warn you, though, Reece, that I don't take no for an answer."

In response, he lowered his chin ever so slightly and pursed his lips, looking like he was trying to figure out how to deal with a misbehaving child. "That's too bad ... Cami. You don't mind if I call you Cami, do you?"

She let her gaze narrow slightly. The tone between them had begun to change and he was baiting her now – she could feel it. “Actually, I do,” she said.

“Your name is too fancy, too,” he informed her. “So ... sorry, Cami, but the answer is still no.” Then he hiked his thumb over his shoulder to the right. “But if you want some seafood on your way out of town, the Hungry Fisherman isn’t half bad and they could use the business. I’m sure you’re all for supporting ailing, locally-owned establishments because it’s the nice thing to do, right?”

“Touché again, Mr. ... Reece.” She didn’t manage to hide her smirk, though –which was a mistake, even if small. It was like revealing a chink in her armor, something she didn’t usually let happen. But now he was subtly insulting her, questioning her moral grounds. And she didn’t like the way he was shortening her name, trying to minimize her, make her sound like some simpering young girl when she was likely the most capable woman he’d ever met. Not that she’d never been insulted before while doing business. Some property owners were actually much ruder than Reece Donovan had been so far. So why was this guy having even an infinitesimal effect on her?

“On the contrary,” she went on, “selling your motel to Vanderhook would benefit Coral Cove – including the restaurant next door – far more than hanging onto it ever will. I’m trying to help you take the first step in reviving the part of town that’s obviously fallen into decay.”

When his whole body stiffened, she could tell that last part hadn’t gone over well. “Decay?” he shot back at her. “You’re calling my place decayed?”

Her spine went a little more rigid, as well. “No,” she said sharply. “I’m saying that when other establishments around you have gone out of business and are left empty, as many have, that in real estate and public affair it’s commonly referred to as a state of decay. Don’t take anything I say personally, Mr. –” She stopped, blinked – she didn’t usually call property owners by their first name and wasn’t sure it was a good idea. “... Reece. This is business. But make no mistake that part of my business is rebuilding areas that need it, and you can’t deny that this older part of Coral Cove is in trouble.”

“And you think tearing down my place and putting up a generic high rise resort hotel is gonna fix it all, huh?”

She gave one succinct nod. “I do. Though I promise you that nothing about Windchime Resorts is generic. And I’m sorry that your business has to be the one to go in order to start progress here. But the land has to come from somewhere. And we have indeed already purchased the small lot next door. And as I keep reminding you, you’re being more than fairly compensated, and you can do anything you want after that.”

He leaned slightly closer over the counter, his gaze sharp and penetrating now. “You’re talking as if I’ve sold you something. I haven’t. And I won’t.”

Her heartbeat kicked up a notch at his very intensity, and without quite planning it, she leaned forward a bit, too, her focus never leaving those big brown eyes of his. “Everyone has a price. Everyone.”

As she waited for his reply, she heard the beat of her own heart in her ears now.

“Not me,” he said, voice low, bordering on gruff.

And now her chest heaved slightly beneath her suit. “We’ll see about that.”

She’d never handled a negotiation that she’d felt so very ... physically. Almost – dare she think – sexually? There was something strangely conflicting about arguing with a man whom she, at the very same time, couldn’t stop feeling drawn to. Ugh, those damn eyes of his. And that stubble on his chin. She kind of wanted to touch it.

“Yep, we sure will,” he said. “And in the end, you’ll be sorry you wasted so much of what I’m sure is your precious time, Cami.”

She drew in her breath at his use of the shortened name again. She usually never suffered that kind of response and she didn’t like feeling off her game. How had he managed to unnerve her that way? Her heart still beat too fast, and it seemed to echo through her whole body – in a few particularly sensitive places more than others.

“You can tell the whole Vanderhook Company that it’s just not happening,” he said, then began shaking his head. “Man, something about that place just sounds unscrupulous.” After which he snapped his fingers, adding, “I know. It makes me think of Captain Hook. And I guess you think you’re some kind of Tinkerbell – you think it’s as easy as swooping in here to wave your magic money wand and sprinkle your fairy dust on me – but it’s not gonna work, honey.”

Inside, she prickled, but rather than let it show this time, she instead forced a hard smile to say, “First of all, I’m not anybody’s honey. And second, I’m a hell of a lot tougher than Tinkerbell ever was.”

This produced the first hint of a grin she’d seen from him in a few minutes, even if this one came out looking colder. “I don’t doubt that. But I’m still not selling my motel.”

Their gazes remained locked. Though now she found herself trying to somehow see behind his eyes, understand what he was about. Because this didn’t add up.

She lowered her chin slightly, truly wanting to know the answer when she asked, “Why? Why on earth would any sane man hold onto a dying old motel when selling it will make you rich? What am I missing here?”

Once again, Reece Donovan leaned a little closer and every molecule of her body tightened a bit more as he calmly, deeply replied, “None of your business.”

Really? You’re getting all hot and bothered over, “None of your business”?

And did he feel it too? This rush of heated energy between them? He had to.

But it didn’t matter. They shared nothing but a little fiery chemistry, and that aside, this was just another typical work day for her.

So Camille paused to regroup, take a deep breath.

And then she answered just as calmly. “Fine. I’d like a room.”

He balked. “You’re not serious.”

But she was. “Look, I flew down here from our corporate offices in Atlanta to meet with you, and I could use a little rest before I fly back.”

His eyes bolted open wide. “You flew here? For this? A phone call would have been cheaper.”

“Regardless,” she said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes, “I have to spend the night somewhere. So I’d like to check in.”

Reece gave her a look she’d have deemed critical if she’d cared.

But she didn’t. Starting now. Starting now, this guy had zero effect on her, like every other property owner she’d had to strategize her way around over the years.

“I think the resorts up the road might be more your style,” he said. “You know, the resorts like the one you want to build here.”

“Probably so,” she agreed, “but ... maybe I’d like to see what’s so special about this place.”

“I never said anything was special,” he pointed out, “only that I’m not selling.” He narrowed his gaze on her. “Seems to me more like you just want to stick around and get under my skin.”

He was right, more or less. But she couldn't decide whether to be insulted by the remark or ... to think there was something sexual in it. Just because of the mention of his skin.

If anyone else had said that you wouldn't think it was about sex. But she felt it between her legs – even as she decided not to respond to it, instead saying, “Nonetheless, I'd like a room, and from the look of the parking lot, I'd think you would welcome the business.”

As before, the man across from her shifted his weight from one foot to the other, but then he got more agreeable. “You're right,” he replied. “You want a room, Cami? You got it. I'm more than happy to take your money in return for the annoyance.”

And as she handed over her credit card a few seconds later, their fingers brushing during the exchange, two notable things struck her. That Reece Donovan's business was so archaic he didn't even use a computer. And that-oh crap – she had, that quickly, forgotten her resolve and let herself be affected.

But what does it matter? Soon enough she'd secure his signature, attaining the property for Vanderhook, and then she'd never see him again.

Camille unloaded her small roller bag from the trunk of her rental car and pulled it behind her across the blacktop toward the slightly cracked sidewalk that led to her room. Reece was right – the Happy Crab wouldn't be her first choice in accommodations. But she wasn't going back to Atlanta until she figured out how to procure this property from him. She'd never failed in a negotiation and she had no intention of messing up her perfect record now. Occasionally someone played hardball. It only meant she had to stick around a little while, until she beat them at the game.

Given the entire lack of cars in the parking lot other than her own, she was mildly surprised to see an old man ambling up the walk at the other end of the long, narrow, one-story building, but she didn't give him much thought, instead taking in more details about the place than she'd noticed a few minutes ago.

Its tidiness showed her that Reece took good care of the place. The crisp red-and-white color scheme suited the retro feel of the establishment. And though she spotted the white paint beginning to crack and peel in one spot, being baked in relentless Florida sun tended to do that, and given the dearth of customers, she couldn't blame the guy for not wanting to put the money into new paint. Soon enough the building would be bulldozed anyway.

When she reached door number 11, she lifted the old-fashioned key Reece Donovan had given her – and for the first time noticed it was attached to a red plastic keychain shaped like a crab and sporting the same happy face as the big sign out front. It made her smile a little in spite of herself.

When she attempted to slide the key in the lock, however, it stuck. So she pulled it out and tried again, this time getting it in all the way, but it still wouldn't turn.

"Pardon me, miss – can I help with that? All the locks are due for some lubrication – just haven't got to it yet."

She looked up to see the older gentleman she'd spotted a minute ago, now realizing that he carried a bucket. His gray hair could have used a trim, his beard was a little spotty, and his dirty shorts and golf shirt made him the least tidy thing she'd seen here so far – but his eyes were kind and she felt instantly at ease with him. "Are you the maintenance man?" she asked.

He hesitated only slightly. "Somethin' like that. I help Reece out. He's been real good to me." He pointed to the key still jammed in the lock. "May I?"

"Sure."

She stood back from the door and watched as the man lowered his bucket to the concrete and stepped in, jiggling the key a bit, then using his other hand to turn the doorknob – and the lock clicked open.

Withdrawing the key, he pressed it back into her hand. "There ya go, miss. Hope you enjoy your stay. It's a real nice place for sure. And now that Reece has a guest, I'll put a little graphite in this lock next thing and it'll work like a charm for ya."

Something in his manner warmed her heart, even if his sweet nature left her feeling a little melancholy in a way she couldn't quite understand. "Thank you very much, Mr. ..."

"Name's Riley, miss," he said, retrieving his bucket.

"Thank you, Mr. Riley."

"Happy to help," he assured her, and as she wheeled her suitcase into the room, she found herself feeling just as curious about him, in ways, as she was about his employer.

The room was much like she would have expected: clean, simple but friendly, a softer pastel beach décor than the exterior of the building. The one surprise was the window in the rear of the room that looked out on the bay.

She'd known a natural bay edged the rear of the property – it was a key component of Windchime's interest, although the waterfront area would probably be reconfigured to suit the resort's needs. But she hadn't expected a room with a view, the small window revealing a planked dock with a few sizable boats tied up to it. The white sails and riggings against a blue, cloud-dotted sky were like a painting come to life.

Were the boats connected to the Happy Crab in any way? Did Reece own one of them? All of them? Seemed unlikely.

But what did it matter anyway? Soon they'd all be relocated elsewhere so that progress could march forward in Coral Cove, and she'd be on the road to some other waterside destination to secure the next sale for Vanderhook and Windchime.

The digital clock next to the king size bed informed her it was just past three. Her next order of business: take a shower, put on more comfortable clothes, and start getting Reece Donovan to like her. At this stage of the game, it would be necessary to piece together a plan based on the individual seller, but the one thing she sensed already was that he would need to like her before she'd get anywhere.

And despite her qualms about getting too comfy with a property owner, she had to concede that it was time to bring things down to his level – if he didn't like her formality, she would have to cease being so formal, that simple. So changing into some shorts and a more weather-appropriate top seemed in order. And as it was already over eighty degrees on this spring day, a cool shower sounded nice.

Stripping off her clothes, she tossed her jacket and skirt on the bed, then let her bra and panties drop in a heap next to the pumps she'd taken off. Stepping into the small bathroom naked, she retrieved a pastel green towel from the rack above the toilet to have handy for afterward, then she pushed back the shower curtain – and let out a blood curdling scream at the sight of the monster in her bathtub!

She nearly tripped, stumbling backward as the huge, scaly creature with tiny legs began scrambling around the old porcelain tub! As it scrambled, she screamed some more, even though she couldn't see much of it as she clumsily retreated farther – she could only see part of its horrible head and a humongous tail that was now whipping about, slamming into the wall this way and that!

What the hell was it? And God, what if it got out and chased her?

Her first instinct was to flee the room.

But I'm naked!

She still held the towel, so she threw it around her as she moved toward the door.

But I'm still naked.

Then – ugh – she heard the thing scrambling some more! It was clearly on the verge of exiting the tub – so she screamed again, only slightly aware that she'd begun hopping from foot to foot as if it might suddenly be slithering around on the floor beneath her – even though it was in the next room.

But then again, if there was something like that in there, how did she know there wasn't another one out here, under the bed or something? Oh Lord.

She hopped some more and whimpered.

The bed. Get on the bed.

She leapt up on it, the towel still loosely circling her body, held together in front by one tightly-clenched fist.

That was when the door to her room burst open and Reece Donovan rushed in.

And – uh oh – she was still naked.

Order Love Me If You Dare