

Prologue

The last two months of 2016 and the first two months of 2017 in my life could easily be described through a combination of geological and meteorological terms: earthquakes, a Cat 5 hurricane, tsunami... okay, tsunami might be a bit much, but you get the picture. The next six months were equally as noteworthy. Creating a mini-series on The Weather Channel for that period could have been a possibility.

By “my life” I mean the life of Garrett Alexander Devonport. That would be me.

Prior to November 2016 I never expected anything monumental to happen to me. Call me dense or plain stupid, but I didn't see any of them coming. Some were horrific and painful, both physically and emotionally. My career and my love life—meaning any romantic relationship that was almost non-existent in the previous decade—both exploded in ways that made my head spin. By *exploded* I mean in a good way, beautiful fireworks that dazzled and delighted me.

One painful event was getting beaten up by a group of fag bashers, resulting in me being hospitalized for several days, followed by weeks of recovery at home. A gorgeous nurse, Chad, who helped take care of me in the hospital appeared to be a bit of a stalker after my release from the hospital. Chad turned out to be a decent person, though perhaps a bit immature.

My mid-sized airline, where I'd worked as a flight attendant for fourteen years, blossomed into a hyperdrive growth spurt. My job duties changed which caused a move across country and put me back in the life of the only man I'd ever loved—my straight, hunky, best friend since middle school, Nic, whose life and mine had diverged for nearly fifteen years.

As if that wasn't enough—I sure as hell thought it was—I was thrown into the world of corporate jets and the people who flew in them. I grew up in a modest, middle-class family living on the west coast in Santa Barbara, California. My new life included jetting all over the country and becoming my high school, best friend Nic's roommate in Philadelphia... who wasn't acting nearly as straight as he purported to be. Was he over-wrought with emotion that he was finally back in touch with his childhood buddy, or was there more to the gay life he was slight too well acquainted with in Philly? Then there was the extended hugs and occasional kiss that I enjoyed more than I thought prudent to do so.

My last conversation with Nic had ended abruptly, as he was off to Europe with a client, Michael. Nic was in charge of the European operations of his bank, Bell International Bank and Trust, while Michael, aka Marquis Sébastien Michel von Gantenbein, was one of the sons of the owner of Gantenbein Industries Limited, Duke Helmut von Gantenbein. The conversation which got cut short was the one where Nic blurted out that he was gay, had known he was gay from about the time I came out, and had fought it for over twenty years.

My hopes of ever having Nic as my husband, however, were destroyed as he explained he felt more for me than a brother, but less than a lover. The revelation was as disappointing as it was conciliatory. Everything I'd hoped for all those years would never to come to pass. The upside,

though, was that I finally had resolution. Acceptance of the facts allowed me to get on with my life, a life I'd willingly put on hold forever hoping Nic and I would live happily ever after.

Talk about confused. The final surprise was discovering that the chance meeting I had with a wealthy, extremely handsome man on a flight from Philadelphia to Paris was not by happenstance in any sense of the word. What started as a set up turned into a whirlwind romance. Sure, I'd been hot for Nic even before I knew what being hot for someone meant, but this was so, so different. The surreal part was that the person who set us up was the man's mother, and the wife of Duke von Gantenbein, the Duchess Helena.

The man on that flight, Étienne GianFranco von Gantenbein, wasn't just some hot guy that I wanted to bed. He was truly the first man for whom I'd experienced "love at first sight." Not *lust* at first sight. Love. Pure, unconditional, romantic, and intensely spiritual love. Perhaps my unrequited adolescent infatuation with my childhood best friend blinded me to what true love was for me, at least up until I met Étienne. My love for Nic was never in question. Though the type of love I previously had for Nic was over, it continued in a new and ever-evolving form. What had changed was my appreciation for the deep, emotional attachment I could form with another man, as well as the difference between loving a man and being in love with him.

I was certain beyond any doubt whatsoever that I loved Étienne from the moment I set eyes on him in an airport bar, not even an hour before we formally introduced ourselves to each other on the plane. I'd never felt so comfortable with such an attractive and obviously high-class man. My casual West Coast upbringing and lifestyle didn't deter me from keeping up our conversation in three different languages, impressing him in the process.

There was nothing wrong with a rich boyfriend, of course. But that wasn't my attraction to Étienne. If anything, the disparity between our financial portfolios, and ways of life, was more than a little concerning to me. I was used to working with wealthy people in the first-class section of our aircraft. I'd served celebrities, CEOs, and other executives, as well as senators and congresspersons. The keyword there being that I *served* them. I didn't live in their world, which I most assuredly didn't feel comfortable in for more than a brief minute or two. In other words, I believed I had every reason to feel I was an imposter.

That brings you up to date, though more will be revealed, both to you and to me, as my life continues to change since meeting the guy who turned out to be the man of my dreams. Or is he?

Chapter One

My handsome, new boyfriend and I traveled by corporate jet from Paris to Lausanne. Just the day before, I'd phoned my boss, Donna, to ask for her permission to take a few personal days after my work in Paris. Donna Michaels was the Executive Vice President of Flight Crew Service Operations for our airline, now doing business as Bell Intercontinental Airways. She didn't bat a fake eyelash at my request. In fact, she completely cut me off before I'd even finished asking her.

“Oh my God, Garrett! Do you think you even need to ask after what you just did for us in Paris? I called you less than a week ago to leave immediately for France to clean up that shitshow I'd been fretting about, and you flew over there without question. Then, instead of staying there at least a week as I'd expected, you had everything wrapped up with a gold bow on top in less than two days. You even had Chef Bernard and Maria exchanging recipes and giggling together.”

Chef Bernard was the relatively young, but exceedingly talented, head chef we'd hired to provide the French cuisine influence on our flights to Paris. Maria Gutierrez Nuñez, the woman Donna had mentioned, was my long-time gal pal. Nic, Maria, and I knew each other from before high school. She was not only the only woman I'd ever slept with, but she had also been the lover of my late aunt, Lottie Devonport.

It was Aunt Lottie who helped Maria fulfill her dream of owning and operating her own catering company in Santa Barbara, California. The firm had done well—very well—and was sought out by the Montecito and Hope Ranch elite families in the area for their upscale, special events. What propelled her into national and now international recognition was being contracted by Bell to re-vamp our entire meal services for all classes of service, both domestic and international.

The old adage of “too many chefs in the kitchen” took on all new meaning with Chef Bernard and Maria. Egos were flying like knives at Benihana on a Saturday night, but my diplomacy smoothed that over. I'd also solved the issues of hotel accommodations and ground transportation for our flight and cabin crews by empowering the Paris staff. I wasn't sure if it was a cultural difference in the way I handled it or if the people were scared out of their wits at the monumental tasks they had been handed. In any event, I helped them take a stand for their professionalism with the vendors, and I displayed confidence in their abilities to get the issues resolved—and they did.

“I'm coming to Philly in a week or so.” Donna's strident tone brought me back to our call. “We'll talk more then. My next meeting started without me, so I'm gonna run. Take as many days as you want!”

The call disconnected. I took that as her approval to leave for Étienne's summer home. The chateau-like home had been in the family for generations, located in the mountains just north of the city. We left that same evening.

Étienne and I arrived in Lausanne to find the family chauffeur, Maximillian, awaiting us with the blue and silver Bentley. I thought it was the same Bentley we'd used in Paris, making me

wonder how he got the car there so quickly. That was until we got into the limo and I realized the seats were tungsten in color, not white. How incredibly ordinary of me to think the von Gantenbeins would have only one limousine. By the way Maximillian greeted me, you'd have thought we were lifelong friends.

“Herr Devonport! Welcome to Switzerland! I trust your flight was satisfactory?”

“Quite satisfactory, thank you, Maximillian.”

I noticed that while the man was equally capable of speaking English, French, and German, Étienne and he switched languages regularly depending on their surroundings. When it was just the two of them speaking together, they used Swiss German, unless I was around since I hadn't quite gotten the hang of that dialect. While we were in Paris, they spoke French. Maximillian was delighted to find out I also spoke all three languages, though more than once I noticed a twinkle in his eye as he threw an uncommon word at me in a non-English conversation. Only once had he stumped me, something he gloated about for quite a while afterwards.

The drive was lovely, but I must have looked like a real American tourist. I'd never been to the French-speaking part of Switzerland before, though I was familiar with Zurich, in which German is more commonly spoken. We moved off the main road and onto a smaller, two-lane affair, lined every so often with driveways leading back to grand homes off in the distance. Eventually, Maximillian turned into a gated driveway.

“Ah, we have arrived,” announced Étienne, as wrought-iron gates, both with the von Gantenbein coat of arms, slowly opened to a winding drive which led up into the mountain, eventually culminating at Chateau von Gantenbein.

Right. I expected the *chateau* to be a home larger than I was used to. I mean, it was just a vacation home after all, so I wasn't expecting it to be all *that* massive. I was so wrong.

Chateau von Gantenbein was more of a gigantic Tudor mansion. If this is the vacation home, I wonder what Castle von Gantenbein—or whatever they call it—outside of Bern must look like!

In spite of the size of the structure we were met by only two staff—the butler and the cook. I found out later local housekeeping staff came in a couple times a week, as most of the rooms were closed off when the family and guests were not in residence. The foyer—no, entry hall, as it was hardly a mere foyer—was more suited to a cathedral, not a home.

“This place is huge!”

“Wait until you see Schloss von Gantenbein,” Étienne promised, rolling his eyes.

Ah, so I was right. It *was* called Castle von Gantenbein!

“I didn't mean to sound... I mean it's ... beautiful. Honestly, Étienne, as huge as it is the place still... I dunno... it seems to feel homey to me.”

Étienne chuckled and put his arm around me, which the staff seemed completely non-plussed by.

“You’re not the first person to express that feeling. The chateau is far more than we need. But in spite of its size—as you already noted—it feels less like a mansion and more like a country cottage.”

“I think country cottage is a stretch, but I can see it. Do all your guests feel as if they’ve come home when they arrive?”

“Some, but not all. There are some which I would much prefer did *not* think of this as their home, though I’m pleased you do.”

“I didn’t mean...”

“Garrett... stop,” he whispered, kissing me on my forehead. “I want you to feel at home here. I want *us* to feel at home wherever we visit together.”

“I think I just fell a tad deeper into what it is I’m feeling for you,” I confessed.

I was being extremely careful not to use the “L” word that neither of us had yet spoken aloud.

“That’s a good thing, right? Are you hungry?”

“Famished! What is that wonderful aroma?”

“Excellent. Unless I’m mistaken, our cook, Frau Heinsberg, has chosen one of my favorite Swiss dishes for our dinner this evening. Let’s get you settled in your room. Then we can both freshen up before we eat.”

We walked inside, through the two-story hall to a grand staircase. I’d seen ballrooms smaller than the massive room we entered. Étienne led me up the wide stairs from the ground floor to the first floor. The room selected for me was larger than my massive suite in Nic’s condo, with heavy, dark wood, velvet curtains, and antiques everywhere. There was an en suite bath and sizable sitting area, along with a small library. The bed was a four-poster with a canopy, that spoke loudly of a masculine, not feminine, influence.

“These rooms were my grandfather’s when he was still living. I requested Frau Heinsberg have the housekeepers ready them for you. I trust you’ll be comfortable?”

I eyed the bed which was more than ample enough for two.

“I’m sure it’s more than I need. In fact, there’s probably enough room for two,” I murmured as coyly as I thought I could without giggling.

“Indeed, though I suspect it will not be tonight we will be testing that theory.”

“No?”

“No. But I trust what I have in mind for tomorrow will suffice.”

Étienne had an almost dreamy quality to his voice and facial expression when he informed me of something he had planned for us.

“I look forward to finding out more about that.”

“I thought you might,” he responded with a smile and a most satisfied expression.

Étienne familiarized me with some of the nuances of the plumbing in the bathroom, a product of decades old fixtures which were sometimes temperamental. Convinced that I could manage without any additional assistance, he made his way out of my rooms and to his, though not before holding me close to him and passionately kissing me.

“I’ll meet you downstairs in the drawing room off the foyer in about an hour.”

“I’ll be there.”

He smiled and quietly closed the door on his way out.

Our meal turned out to be a traditional Swiss raclette dinner. Raclette was a semi-hard Swiss cheese melted over boiled potatoes, other vegetables, and small sausages. Frau Heinsberg’s idea of an intimate dinner for two could have fed three or four couples. She was almost giddy at my compliments, enjoying the expressions on my face as much as the yummy sounds I couldn’t help making.

Besides having enough food for an army, we had dinner in the formal dining room—at a table designed to accommodate twenty-four guests. The walls of the room were decorated with the same dark wood found in my suite. Displayed in the dining room was the von Gantenbein coat of arms, various pieces of medieval armor, and three flags.

“What was it like growing up here?” I asked Étienne.

“We didn’t. I mean, the chateau is more a retreat for the adults, so as children we weren’t included, with the exception of Christmastime, which we often spent here. You must remember that Sébastien and I were off to boarding school a good part of each year from a young age. Most of our childhood memories are of the Schloss and schools, not the chateau.”

“So much history. How old is the chateau?”

“Parts of it date back to the seventeenth century, though back then, it was truly only a lodge of sorts. Over the centuries it’s grown to what you see today. I’ll give you a proper tour tomorrow. I hope it will be warm enough for us to walk around the grounds as well.”

“That sounds great. I don’t think I’ve ever had a personal tour guide before.”

“I promise to do my best.”

“Similar to the way you’ve already done? Geez, Étienne! Our dinner across from the Eiffel Tower my first night in Paris, our first kiss at the top—the *only* couple up there!—and then having that huge flower arrangement *and* my tuxedo and accessories for a night at the ballet?”

“I’m pleased you are pleased, Garrett.”

I put my fork down, wiped my mouth, and glared at him.

“Seriously. That’s your response?”

“What?”

“This is way out of my league, Étienne, *way* out. Everything you’ve done with me may be life as usual in your family, but it isn’t in mine. As I’ve acknowledged before—it’s overwhelming at times.”

With that, he put down his fork, wiped his mouth, and took my hands in his.

“I’m pleased because I want you to be glad to be here... to be with me... for us to be together. I appreciate that what I consider to be, as you say, ‘life as usual,’ is not what you’ve become accustomed to. But I hope, if we continue in each other’s lives, you will eventually come to accept this lifestyle while still keeping the wonderment of life about you that I find intoxicating.”

“I’m doing my best. Please be patient with me. Maria, Mum, maybe even Nic... this is way out of our comfort zones. Nic told me to expect to be entering a world beyond our upbringing, but I had no idea it would be so all-encompassing as you’ve made it.”

I glanced down as I paused and fought back the lump in my throat.

“I didn’t have any idea you’d be part of the deal,” I continued. “Oh God, that sounded awful. I don’t think of you as another business perk. I’m such an idiot sometimes. No wonder you said *if* we continue in each other’s lives. I’m so ill-suited to all of this.”

Étienne stood up and raised me to my feet. He tipped my chin up, kissed me gently, and then held me tightly. Pulling away, he soothingly brushed my hair back from my forehead, tipping my chin up again so I wasn’t gazing down and away from him.

“It’s taken centuries for my family to rise to the station in life we hold. In the process, some people in the family became pretentious, arrogant, and heartless morons whose only objectives in life appear to me to be subjugating anyone they can. In other words, my twin brother.”

He gently stroked my cheek and fixed his eyes on mine.

“Instead of taking what I have to share with you for granted, you are delighted with the opulence, fit in with me as if you were always a part of my life, and retain the kindness for others that I’ve mentioned before when we were in Paris. Garrett, I will be as patient as you need me to be. I make only one request of you.”

“And what,” I sighed, “would that be?”

“That you never again think of yourself as less than anyone, and in particular, me or my family. My parents will be here in two days. I hope you’ll see how down... oh, I forget the phrase... *down something...*”

“Down to earth?”

“Yes, that’s it. Down-to-earth. How down-to-earth they both are, kind, full of life, and comfortable with what has been granted them.”

“That’s not the way the duke was described to me. Nic sorta put the fear of God into me about him.”

“Oh, Father has his moments, that’s for certain. I’ve never been on the opposite side of the table from him in negotiations, nor would I care to be. The duke you will meet will not be the head of an international, multi-billion-dollar conglomerate. He’ll be my father. I hope I can eventually become half the man he is. And the duchess? I think you’ll come to love her as much as I do.”

“How can I not love her?” I asked, smiling as I laid my head on his shoulder. “She’s the whole reason we’re in each other’s lives.”

“True that. I shall be showering her with affection she’s not seen in quite some time, even from me. If you’re done eating, may I suggest we take the rest of the wine into the study? I happen to have the feeling Frau Heinsberg has taken the time to prepare her delicious Swiss meringues and caracs for our dessert.”

“I’m not sure what those are exactly, but from the way you’re drooling I can’t wait. Yes... let’s.”

I grabbed our wine glasses off the table. Étienne took the bottle and walked us toward the study, his arm draped around me, his hand firmly gripping my shoulder.

“Before we leave,” I added, stopping us, “I meant to ask you, what do the flags represent in the dining room? I recognize the red flag with the white cross as the Swiss national flag, but what are the other two?”

“Ah, yes.” He grinned, turning back to gesture toward the flags. “That is a Swiss tradition in our cities, towns, and villages, and at most formal events. You are correct about the Swiss national flag. The one next to it, the white and green flag, is the flag of our canton, the Canton of Vaud.”

“Canton? What is that?”

“Yes. Well... let me see. How to explain this to you... Cantons designate areas or regions of the country. You could think of them as states, and our districts within them as counties, which in one aspect they are, but none of that would be a fair comparison. Our cantons often have more independence than states in the U.S.

“How so?”

“Mmmm... this is why I paused earlier. Americans often think that all allied countries are democratic. They are not. Several are socialist governments. Switzerland is a semi-direct democratic federal republic. Therefore, each canton is sovereign.”

“You lost me at *semi-direct*.”

“My point is that in the U.S., individual states cannot enact laws which conflict with federal regulations. In our government, citizens have more control by virtue of the sovereignty of the canton. They can control the laws of the canton through referendums or other mechanisms.”

“We create referendums in California extensively, so what’s the difference?”

“Because, again, Americans cannot overturn the federal laws in their individual states by any means, other than having the law changed at the federal level through legislation or overturned by the Supreme Court. Passing a referendum in California that was in violation of a federal law would make the referendum invalid in practice. It would publicly express the desires of the majority of the people in the state, but that’s about it. On the other hand, in Switzerland, the people can overturn laws of Parliament as it pertains to their canton if the majority of the canton doesn’t agree with Parliament.”

“Wow,” I exclaimed, snickering. “What you just described about Switzerland is exactly the way radicals on the left *and* the right in the U.S. *think* our constitution works... but it doesn’t.”

“Exactly. Switzerland is made up of twenty-six sovereign cantons. Vaud is one of the French-speaking cantons. Now... Garrett... may our Swiss civics class be over for now?”

“Okay, okay. I do find it fascinating, though. Besides, I want to learn more about your history and that of your country.”

“Then you and Father will have many enjoyable discussions.”

“I await that opportunity. There’s one more flag—the white-and-red one—what is that for?”

“The flag of Lausanne. We are proud of our country, our canton, and our city. Of course, the Schloss reflects a different French-speaking canton and city.”

“I’ve noticed that. The various regions are French, German, or Italian.”

“And the Canton of Graubünden, where both German and Romansh are spoken.”

“Right. Romansh is one of the languages you probably speak that I don’t.”

“Correct. I do speak Romansh, as well as Flemish, which I doubt you speak, not that I’m keeping score.”

“We’re quite a pair.”

“Indeed, we are, Garrett. Indeed, we are.”

We stood there smiling at one another resembling two lovesick fourteen-year-olds, finally breaking apart to proceed into the study. A fire was blazing in a fireplace large enough to fit the car I drove back home.

“We still heat most of the chateau with woodburning fireplaces. It’s one of the things I enjoy most about this place.”

“It’s extraordinarily romantic.”

“I agree. I plan on exploring more of that with you, with your permission, of course.”

“You needn’t even ask, but then you already knew that... didn't you?”

Étienne only smiled, then winked.

The desserts were just as delectable as I expected them to be from what Étienne had promised. The Swiss meringues were melt-in-your-mouth delicious and the caracs were something completely new to me. Popular in the French-speaking parts of Switzerland, the small tart-like dessert was made out of shortbread pie crust, filled with chocolate and cream, and topped with green icing.

“Frau Heinsberg only makes caracs for special occasions,” Étienne informed me, beaming.

“And what would that be? Did I miss your birthday?”

“To answer your second question first, no. My birthday is the twenty-seventh September, so you still have time to plan,” he announced, attempting to be authoritative, though the operative word was being *attempting*. “You seriously can’t guess what the special occasion is?”

“I have no idea. Though the butler... what was his name? Gunther? And Frau Heinsberg both kept grinning at me.”

“Yes. They were.”

“What were they laughing about? I’m sure it had something to do with me, but they were not speaking any type of German I understand.”

“*Das Schweizerdeutsch*. Swiss German.”

“Ah, right. I’ve seen it mentioned somewhere in my studies but have never heard it spoken, until I overheard Maximillian and you using it. I was almost certain I was the subject of Gunter and Frau Heinsberg’s laughter, but I couldn’t get the gist of what they were talking about.”

“I heard them, but what you are describing as *laughter*, I would call *giggling*. Maximillian, Gunther, and Frau Heinsberg have been in our employ since before Seb and I were born. I believe they see clearly how I have been beaming since we met. That happiness has much to do with your being in my life.”

“I wish my mom and Maria could see me with you. I believe they would be giggling as well, though I’m sure they’d both question how quickly our relationship has taken root.”

“Oh! So... we have a relationship now in your mind? Excellent. I’m glad you’re catching up.”

I punched his shoulder playfully. Our desserts finished, we sat together on the settee, cuddled together finishing our wine and watching the flames dance through the logs.

“Thank you,” I murmured as I stared into Étienne’s eyes.

“For what, Garrett?”

I moved even closer in his embrace.

“For allowing me to be part of your life, this life, everything. You’ve informed me, and I realized, how careful you and Seb have had to be over the years about who you dated. I don’t take your openness and vulnerability for granted.”

“I appreciate that, though the thought of you taking advantage of me or my family has never crossed my mind. It’s getting late. Unless I’m mistaken, you’re as tired out as I am. Shall we call it a night?”

“Yes, I believe so, too. But with one condition, please?”

“And what would that be?”

“Will you tuck me in?”

He smiled, nodded, and kissed me.