

Change of Heart

The Flanagan Sisters # 2

Claire Boston



First published by Bantilly Publishing in 2016

Copyright © Claire Boston 2016

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. This publication (or any part of it) may not be reproduced or transmitted, copied, stored, distributed or otherwise made available by any person or entity (including Google, Amazon or similar organizations), in any form (electronic, digital, optical, mechanical) or by any means (photocopying, recording, scanning or otherwise) without prior written permission from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Change of Heart: The Flanagan Sisters 2

EPUB format: 978-0-9945528-3-9

Mobi format: 978-0-9945528-4-6

Print format: 978-0-9945528-5-3

Cover design by Amygdala Design

Edited by Dianne Blacklock

Proofread by Grammar Smith Editing Services

DEDICATION

To my sister-in-law, Shelby

Chapter 1

Carly Flanagan really couldn't appreciate what accounted for modern art these days. She stared at the canvas in front of her, keeping her expression blank. There were several splotches of color, as if the artist had flicked his paintbrush at it haphazardly. The price tag was in the four figures. She suppressed a sigh and moved on to the next painting, which was more of the same. She didn't know why she'd agreed to sponsor the exhibition.

That wasn't true. She knew exactly why – her younger sister Zita had asked her to. The problem was, Zita was too kind-hearted and people took advantage of her. As soon as they discovered she was Carly's sister, the requests started coming and Zita could never say no. Carly needed to start vetting some of Zita's requests – if she could find the time.

Taking a glass of sparkling water from a passing waiter, she moved to the next piece. She didn't check her watch, but figured she had about another hour before she could gracefully depart.

"It looks like someone vomited on the canvas." The deep voice was close to her ear and Carly looked up.

He wore a dark brown pinstriped suit that molded to his body, the jacket accentuating his broad shoulders. It was an odd choice for an exhibition opening where most people were wearing tuxedos and evening dresses. Her gaze reached his face.

He was around her age – late twenties, early thirties – and his longish black hair had been smoothed back, with the occasional hair resisting the gel. Carly met his eyes – green, clear, and with a definite spark of mischief in them. Her heart stuttered and she refocused to recall what he had said.

“Art is in the eye of the beholder,” she replied, losing her fight not to smile at him. She had to be careful. She’d learned early in this business not to trust what people said. He could be a reporter baiting her, or an artist looking to curry favor.

“I’d rather not behold that, especially at that price.”

She agreed with him, but kept that to herself. “Then why are you here?”

“I like art,” he said, gesturing to a different painting.

Carly followed the direction of his hand and her breath caught. It was a forest scene, with huge trees soaring to the sky, and a tiny cottage nestled below them, a puff of smoke coming from the chimney. She wandered closer and details jumped out at her. The chipmunk on a branch, the mountain lion almost hidden by some bushes, the small white flowers of a creeper twining its way across the porch. She could practically smell the forest.

It was peaceful, secluded, comfortable. It was a home.

The longing swept through her. She wanted it. Not just the painting, but the place. It whispered peace to her. She wanted to reach out and touch it, and had stretched her hand out before she stopped herself.

“What do you see?” the man asked.

Carly shook her head absently, still caught up in the painting. “Not see,” she said. “Feel.” She blinked and snapped out of her trance. Would he judge her?

The man’s eyes were guarded. He raised his eyebrow and nodded for her to continue.

The temptation to tell him was strong. The way he looked at her, his full attention on her, waiting for her next words, made her want to trust him.

Then he smiled, a small, but knowing smile. Her whole body heated, and the shock of her reaction brought reality back into sharp focus.

No. She wouldn’t expose herself further. Anything she said

CHANGE OF HEART

could be on the pages of a glossy magazine next week.

“Excuse me.” Not waiting for his response, she strode across the room to the gallery owner, trying to get her heart rate under control. It was probably just her reaction to the painting. Men didn’t affect her that way, not since Andrew. She shook her head. She’d put him behind her.

“Carolina, thank you for coming tonight and for your support.” Stewart Williams was an older man with salt and pepper hair and impeccable posture.

Carly straightened at her full name, remembering who she was supposed to be. “You’re welcome,” she said, smiling. “It’s a wonderful exhibition. In actual fact, I’d like to buy a painting.”

Stewart blinked, but quickly recovered his composure, taking her by the elbow and leading her over to his desk. “Which one are you interested in?”

She hadn’t noticed the name of the piece, or the price, so she pointed to it, relieved to see that the man she’d been talking with had moved on.

“An excellent choice,” Stewart said, and excused himself to go and place a sold sticker below the artwork.

“Are you enjoying yourself, Carly?”

She turned to find Zita, looking gorgeous in a canary yellow evening dress with ruffles down the split like a flamenco dress. Her sister had inherited the height and strawberry blonde hair from their Irish father, whereas Carly was the spitting image of her Salvadoran mother.

“I’ve bought a painting,” she said, not quite believing it.

“Cool. Which one?”

Carly gestured toward it.

“That’s one of Evan’s,” said Zita. “Have you met him yet?”

“Your neighbor?” He was the reason Zita had asked Carly to support the exhibition.

“Yeah.” Zita scanned the area. “He’s over there.”

She took Carly’s hand and dragged her across the room before Carly could refuse. She never knew what to say to artistic types, and certainly didn’t want to discuss why she’d bought one of his pieces. She was still trying to figure out a way to get out of it when Zita stopped in front of the man in the brown suit.

“Evan Hayes, meet my sister, Carly,” Zita said, dropping her

hand and beaming at him. “She bought one of your paintings.”

He was the artist? This man who had scoffed at other artists’ work and asked her what she thought of his? What game was he playing?

“We met, though we didn’t exchange names.” He smiled a little sardonically at her. “I hope you enjoy the painting.”

Carly nodded, not trusting her voice. She had a feeling she’d been played.

“Evan not only paints, but he also draws and does graphic design. I don’t think there’s a medium yet invented that he can’t work with.” Zita was clearly oblivious to the tension between them.

“I imagine each medium has its own challenges,” Carly said.

Before Evan could answer, Zita said, “Oh, there’s Rebecca. I have to catch her.” She hurried away.

Carly wanted to throttle her sister for leaving her with this man. She had to extricate herself.

“It’s all just putting an image down on canvas,” Evan said, and she realized he was responding to her previous comment.

Curious in spite of herself, she asked, “Isn’t it easier getting the color you want using paint rather than pencils?”

“Sure, but there are always workarounds.”

“Like what?”

“You can layer color, and darken or lighten it using white and graphite. There are heaps of techniques.” He shrugged. “It just takes practice and patience.”

He didn’t speak like a lot of artists she’d met. Most of them liked to wax lyrical about their method and the difficulties of getting the right depth of color so the image came off the page. He made it sound like it was just part of the job. She moved over to another of his paintings on the wall. “What was the hardest thing about this one?”

He gave her a half smile, and then faced the painting. “Getting the idea.”

Her heart beat a little faster at his smile. She frowned, ignoring her physical reaction. “The idea?” Didn’t he paint what he saw? “Did you make it up?” She’d always assumed landscape artists looked at a setting and then recorded it.

“I wanted to paint something fun, but not frivolous.” He

CHANGE OF HEART

stepped next to her, not touching, but close enough for her to be very aware of his body heat.

She crossed her arms and examined the painting. It was a beach scene in the height of summer. People were gathered in groups along the sand; some were young families with children building sand castles, others were teenagers trying to look cool, and there were a few older couples reading books or people watching. At the edge of the water, people waded, a father helped his young daughter to swim, some kids splashed about, and further out, there were surfers waiting for the next wave. Carly could almost smell the salt air, and feel the heat from the sun and the sand beneath her toes. Many people would look at the painting and see fun, but it reminded her too much of El Salvador when her father was still alive, and the time he took the whole family to the beach for a special day out. All she saw were days that would never be again.

“You don’t feel it,” Evan said. “You feel something else.”

She didn’t like him being able to read her so well. She had spent years sculpting her public persona. She’d thought she had perfected the confident, polished lie.

“Old memories,” she said, and looked for a way to escape.

He took hold of her hand. “Don’t run away again.”

Carly faced him, the warmth from his hand moving through her body. He was watching her, calmly waiting to see how she was going to react. Part of her wanted to step toward him and draw comfort from his touch, but her sense of self-preservation kicked in, warning her not to trust. He hadn’t actually lied earlier, but he also hadn’t been upfront.

“I need to keep mingling.” She withdrew her hand from his. “I enjoy your work, Evan.”

She moved away before he could say anything else, and was promptly approached by a woman wearing a brightly colored dress that was very much like the vomit painting, only on fabric.

“Carolina, let me introduce myself. My name is Isobella Carmichael. I wanted to thank you so much for sponsoring *my* exhibition.”

This was the woman who’d done the paintings with all the splotches. Carly grinned, remembering Evan’s comments. “Lovely to meet you.”

“You bought one of Evan’s paintings tonight. It’s so very kind of you to support the arts. Now, let me show you my works and explain the meanings behind them.” She led Carly toward the wall of horror.

“I’d dearly love to, Isobella, but I’m afraid there are a few more people I need to talk to before I leave. You know how it is – responsibilities.”

Isobella frowned. “But you spent all that time with Evan.”

“Yes.” Carly had learned not to explain herself. “Excuse me.” Spotting someone she knew, she made a beeline for him.

“How are you, David?” Even with her four-inch heels, she had to crane her neck to look him in the eye. He was over six foot with blond hair and blue eyes, and was as stylish as ever in his tuxedo.

“Carolina, so great to see you.” He shook her hand and kissed her cheek. “I hear you had something to do with this exhibition?”

“Only a minor part,” she said.

Carly had a soft spot for David Randall. He’d shown her the ropes when she’d first started going to charity events, helped her navigate through the deluge of requests that poured in after making her fortune in the IT industry. She could always rely on him to make accurate, if slightly inappropriate observations, which kept her amused. Plus, his family was wealthier than her, so she didn’t have to worry about him hitting her up to support some cause or another.

“I hope you didn’t choose the artists,” he said, glancing toward Isobella’s paintings.

Carly swallowed her smile. “Not at all. The artists are all from an arts center near where my sister Zita lives.”

“Speaking of sisters, your other sister, Bridget, was the heroine during Dionysus’s oil refinery incident last month. I didn’t realize you were sisters.”

“I never thought to mention it.” She could hardly have told the son of the CEO how frustrated Bridget had been with his company.

“So,” David said, glancing around, “do you think there are any available ladies here tonight?”

She laughed. “Always on the lookout.” Though never one to

CHANGE OF HEART

commit. He always had a different woman on his arm.

He shrugged. "One day I might find someone who isn't interested in my money."

Carly understood completely. "There's probably a few. Zita's around somewhere with her friend."

"You'll have to introduce me later. I might go mingle over there. I'll see you later." He headed for a tall blonde woman in a red dress.

Carly would have found it funny if Isobella hadn't immediately started walking over to her. But someone else arrived first.

"Carolina!" the man declared. "You don't mind if I call you Carolina? Such a beautiful name. I'm not so fortunate – my name is Desmond. Have you had a chance to view my paintings yet?" He gripped her arm.

Carly gave him a pointed look and he relaxed his hold. "I haven't made it all the way around the gallery yet."

"Then let me show you."

She let him lead her over to a wall of abstract paintings, all gray and drab, and struggled not to cringe.

"This is my interpretation of the way industry is ruining the environment," Desmond began.

Isobella moved alongside Carly. "I have a similarly themed piece, if you're interested."

Desmond glared at her. "I'm sure you know, Carolina, that it's difficult for artists to get exposure, and we have such important messages to spread. So few people frequent art galleries these days." He tutted.

"That's why it's so wonderful that you've given local artists this opportunity to show their work to the wider community," Isobella said.

This was getting a little too much. It was definitely time for her to go.

"What we really need is a patron," Desmond added, appearing to have decided they had a better chance working together. "Someone who understands the importance of art."

Carly knew what was coming next. At least Evan hadn't been after anything.

Isobella nodded. "It's so difficult to earn a living from

painting. One cannot simply dash out a canvas every other day. So much thought and emotion must go into it.”

“I’m . . . *we’re* sure you understand,” Desmond said, with a nod to Isobella.

“Indeed,” Carly agreed. “When I started my first business I had a second-hand laptop and a big idea. It’s a hard road.”

“But there are people who can smooth the road,” Isobella said. “People like yourself, who want to give back to the community and help others reach those heights.”

“The Local Artists Center of Houston has been searching for someone to financially support the hopes and dreams of their members,” added Desmond.

“We thought you might be that person,” Isobella finished the spiel, as if she was offering Carly the biggest prize in the world.

Carly debated how she was going to respond. “What would be the terms of the agreement?”

Desmond and Isobella exchanged a glance.

“Terms?” Desmond asked.

She nodded. “I imagine you’ve written a business plan and have calculated how many years you will need a patron before you can sustain yourself? Send it to my office and I’ll review it.”

The eyes of both artists grew wide and Desmond’s mouth moved, but nothing came out. Carly grinned on the inside.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. As she turned, the smile crept onto her face and she suddenly found herself face to face with Evan. He winked at her and her smile widened. “Zita asked me to tell you it’s time for your speech.”

Carly was grateful for the excuse to get away from them. “Of course.” She turned back to the still stunned couple. “Excuse me, I must go.”

Evan fell in step with her as she walked toward Stewart. “I imagine those two were hassling you to be a patron for LACH.”

“They made a request. Are you a member?” Was he letting them do the dirty work so he would appear to be the good guy? She acknowledged the naïve hope that he might be interested in her, before pushing it away. She knew better.

“I joined when I first moved to the area. Some of them are a little too pretentious for me, but meetings can be fun.”

CHANGE OF HEART

Carly understood, but it wasn't particularly professional for him to admit it.

They reached Stewart. "Carolina, we're ready to start. Why don't you come with me?"

She nodded to Evan and then followed Stewart to the small stage set up at the back of the gallery. He ran through the short program with her, and then stood on the stage to get everyone's attention.

Carly stepped to the side, forcing a polite, interested expression onto her face while inside, her stomach was churning. Getting up in front of all of these people was her idea of torture. She hated being the center of attention, and always felt she was being judged. She was too small, too rich, her accent was slightly wrong. It didn't matter that she'd lived in Houston for twenty-two years, she'd never lost the hint of her Salvadoran accent.

Regulating her breathing, she ran through her speech in her head.

"None of this would be possible without our generous sponsor, Carolina Flanagan."

Carly smiled and walked up the steps of the stage, nodding at Stewart before facing the crowd. She placed her hands either side of the lectern to stop them from shaking. "Thank you, Stewart," she said. "Many of you have heard the story of how I started my company with a laptop and an idea, which grew into the billion dollar corporation that it is today." She smiled at an older, blonde woman who nodded her head. "What you possibly don't know is that a lot of my success is due to luck."

There was a murmur through the crowd.

"I was sixteen when I wrote my first software program, but I didn't know if anyone would be interested in it, or how to sell it." She'd been happy coding, and so clueless about the industry. "Then I discovered that a huge software convention was going to be in Houston. My tutor bought me a ticket, because I couldn't afford it, and he went along with me." She'd been so desperately shy. There was no way she would have had the courage to talk with anyone there. "At the lunch break, he chatted to a guy who distributed software and he loved the sound of mine. After the event, I sent him the details and,

before I knew it, the software had taken off.”

Her eyes roamed the room and found Evan. She jolted at the intensity of his gaze and continued. “That’s why I try to pay that luck forward. This exhibition displays some of Houston’s local artists, who haven’t had a chance like this before. There’s always a possibility that an art critic or another gallery owner will see their work and it will be their big break. And so I would like to wish the artists the best of luck and thank you all for coming.”

At the polite applause, Carly descended the stairs, as she worked to control her breathing. It was over.

“Nice speech, Sis,” Zita said, giving her a hug.

“Thanks.” Not even her family realized how much she hated public speaking. She’d been doing it since the beginning of her career, but it never got any easier. “Do you think anyone would notice if I slipped out now? I’m getting a bit of a headache.” Or she would soon if she didn’t get out of there.

“Of course, Carly. I’ll give everyone your apologies,” Zita said. “Go home, take some painkillers and hop into bed. Do you want me to call you a cab?”

Carly shook her head. “I’ll be fine.” The gallery wasn’t far from where she lived and the walk would help clear her head. “I’ll see you tomorrow for lunch.” She skirted the crowd, keeping her eyes on the entrance and walking at a pace that showed she had a purpose. People were much less likely to intercept her if it looked like she had somewhere she had to be.

She was almost at the door when someone said, “Going so soon?”

She recognized Evan’s voice before she turned to him. She suppressed a sigh. “Yes. Was there something you wanted?”

“I wanted to spend a little more time with you.” His smile made her body tingle.

“Why?” The question was out before she could stop herself.

“You’re a beautiful woman with great taste in art.”

Even knowing his words weren’t true, a rush of pleasure went through her. Beautiful she was not. Well-groomed, yes – she’d spent a fortune on a stylist, and the makeup and clothes to match her business persona, but it was all smoke and mirrors. “I’m not going to buy more of your work because you compliment me.” Carly moved toward the door again.

CHANGE OF HEART

He followed her out. "That wasn't my intention." He placed a hand on her arm to stop her and when she turned, she saw annoyance in his eyes. "Have I offended you?"

He hadn't, but it was an excuse she could use. "You criticized your fellow artists and then showed me your work without admitting it was your own."

"I tease Isobella about her art all the time." He shrugged. "And I wanted your honest reaction to my paintings."

The confession made her pause. "It's hardly professional."

"You're right. My apologies. I should have been up front."

She nodded curtly to him and continued down the street.

"I meant what I said about wanting to get to know you."

More like her money. She wasn't going to be suckered into anything. "I need to get home," she said without looking back.

Carly strode down the sidewalk, tense, ignoring the twinge of disappointment when she realized he wasn't following. She was being ridiculous. Sure, he was handsome, but he only wanted her money. Andrew had taught her that.

"Wait!"

Her heart jumped. Should she wait for him, or keep going?

His footsteps on the pavement solved that decision as he jogged up next to her. "Are you walking?"

Surprised, she said, "Yes. I only live a couple of blocks away."

"At this time of night? I'm sorry, I can't in good conscience let you go alone. Can I walk with you?"

"Shouldn't you be schmoozing with the people at your exhibition?" She couldn't prevent the annoyance from slipping into her tone. She hadn't allowed anyone to stop her from doing what she wanted. She wouldn't have got where she was if she had.

"They'll be there when I get back. Can I walk you home?" It was a simple request, asked without any guile.

She wanted to say no, but she suspected he'd follow her anyway. She sighed. "If you want. But I'm not in any mood for conversation." There was something about him that made her forget her social graces.

His lips quirked in a smile. "Warning noted."

For the first block they were silent. Her footsteps ate up the

pavement, eager to be away from him.

“I’m amazed how fast you can walk in those heels,” he said as they crossed a road.

“Practice.” Carly lived in her heels. Her height was a constant disadvantage, made people treat her like a child, and she’d quickly discovered that the four extra inches went a long way to gaining more respect. Plus, her stylist had forbidden her to ever wear flats for business.

Her apartment block was just up ahead. “This is me,” she said as they reached the entrance. “Do you want me to call you a cab?”

“I’ll manage.”

She stood there for a second, not sure what else to say. “Thank you for walking me.”

“Thank you for the company.”

She frowned at him, not sure if he was making fun of her.

“Do you prefer Carolina or Carly?” he asked.

She blinked. She was Carolina for all of her business associates and work colleagues. Only close friends and family called her Carly.

“Carly,” she found herself saying.

He nodded and smiled. “Goodnight then, Carly. Sweet dreams.” He turned and walked back the way they had come.

Carly watched him for a minute. He hadn’t tried to kiss her, and hadn’t asked for her number. So much for wanting to get to know her. She’d been right to be cautious. Shaking her head, she stepped into her apartment building.

He was a strange man.

Want to read more?

Buy now on claireboston.com