

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K.M. Jackson

How  
to Marry  
Keanu Reeves  
in 90 Days



I ♥ KEANU

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FOREVER

*New York Boston*

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*For Will*

*These years with you have been the  
most excellent adventure.*

*\* \* \**

*And*

*for Keanu & crew:*

*some mentioned here, and many more in my heart,  
thank you for bringing much needed smiles when at times all we could see  
were our masks.*

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FOREVER

# Cyber Punked

## Bethany Lu

People always looked at me like I was half crazy. Made me feel like the odd girl out, but not True. Never True.

I guess that was why when he'd said I'd gone mad—or maybe the word he'd used was *insane*—this time I took it to heart. Sort of. Okay, fine. So I may have only briefly paused to give his reaction to my plan a smidge of consideration before continuing my full-steam-ahead charge.

But he had to understand, life was happening. The world was still spinning, even if it felt like mine had stopped. Once again.

Or maybe I wanted it to stop. I didn't know. But that part didn't matter, did it? Does it?

What mattered was that True got me. That he had me. That he understood, that he'd still be there for me, be my friend. Bring me back from the edge. Like before. Like always.

Besides, True always knew it was Keanu or nothing for me.

# Chapter 1

## Break Point

## Bethany Lu

*89 days ago*

**BREAKING: The sky isn't falling, but prepare for the storm!  
Keanu Reeves is tying the knot in 90 days! America's favorite  
boyfriend is a boyfriend no more...**

I heard something go *pop* in my ear, like a burst balloon, and suddenly felt dizzy. Time seemed to stop and do a weird sort of axis shift. It was almost as if I was floating—and not in the good “I don’t want this buzz to wear off” way, but the “Crap! Somebody stop this ride. I’m about to throw up, so let me the hell off. Now!” way.

I could see myself in the spot where it all was happening, strangely outside my body, looking in like a spectator on the drama that was my life. There was me, Dawn and, of course, True—the three of us gathered as was usual for a Saturday in my West Harlem loft. On my worktable, lit by the sun streaming through the skylight, was my latest not-quite masterpiece, still in its rough form on canvas. Faint washes of color and fabric swatches with torn news clippings waited to be set into place. But the project was currently pushed to the side to make room for the fresh bagels True had brought in with him after his morning run.

Moments before, everything had been normal, each of us talking over one another as we stuffed our faces with carbs and cream cheesy goodness and drank enough coffee to keep a triple shift of ER interns alert.

But now here I was, clutching the edge of the worktable with one hand while holding tight to my phone with the other as I stared at the screen in disbelief. This had to be a joke. Probably a stunt or a promo tweet. I swallowed. Well, I attempted to, but the dry lump that had materialized out of nowhere wouldn't go down my throat. I scanned the nonsensical tweet again and told myself it was just that: No. Sense. Nonsense. Clickbait. It had to be. Keanu was the bait, but I wasn't going in for the click. No freaking way.

Sweat popped out along my brow, defying the comfortable air-conditioned temperature in my loft as I tried to resist the temptation of those three dots at the end of the tweet. Clicky little enticements, just messing my head up with silent little whispers of *Come on, you know you wanna know*.

My fingers practically twitched. I think maybe my hand was even slightly shaking. But I couldn't click. Clicking would only lead to doom.

If I clicked, I'd either (a) look like an ass and have my feed clogged with ads for whatever these evildoers were pushing for the next month—most likely some dating app or other such crap to highlight why I shouldn't be happy in my current perfect singledom status. Or (b) it would lead me to the supremely unlikely realization that the story was true and—horrors—Keanu was actually getting married, which also meant that life as we knew it to be would essentially cease to exist in ninety days.

Either outcome would be a disaster, and it seemed the only mentally stabilizing way out was smashing my phone to bits.

It was then I heard a clap, followed by the snap of fingers way too close to my face.

Wait. Was someone shaking me? And now they were hitting me on the back. Holy roughness! The hell?!

I blinked. True was standing in front of me.



Sweet, sweet True. My anchor and life preserver all in one.

He was wiping at my mouth. Shit, had I been drooling? Still, a napkin would have been nice in this moment because (a) germs, and (b) his thumb swiping across my bottom lip was hitting too hard on my sexual sensory buttons, even through my shocked stupor.

I scrunched up my face and pulled back a notch, still not enough to get out of his close range. Eep, his face was practically on top of mine. His big brown eyes clouded with worry. And I couldn't help noticing his full lips were drawn tight to the point of looking pained. Oddly, though, all these facial expressions made him somehow even more handsome, with the scruff on his chin extra scruffy, not hiding his dimples. It was quite unnerving, and slightly panty quivering. Not that I'd ever tell him that.

“Lu! Lu! Bethany Lu!”

Oh, damn. True was going in with my full government name. Something he only did when really riled up. He snapped his fingers again and reached out, putting his hands on my forearms, like he was about to give me another shake. Time to bring the brain back to earth. Lucky for me, Morphie did most of my heavy lifting and broke the scene apart with an ear-piercing, squeaky bark.

I glared at True as I pushed down on his hands, and he immediately backed up a step. “What are you doing?” I snapped at the same time Morphie nipped at True's worn New Balances. *Good dog*. It was so unlike my mini beagle to come off his lazy little high horse and put effort into anything that I got a swell of pride seeing those brown ears flop around on account of me.

But True being True and those old sneakers being damn near bulletproof, it seemed he'd hardly felt a thing from Morph's valiant efforts. Instead, he ignored poor Morphie and his spectacular show of chivalry and kept his

focus on me. “What am I doing?” His voice mimicked the disbelief in his eyes. “That’s what I should be asking you. At first, I thought you were choking on a piece of bagel, the way it looked like you lost your breath, but then you started zoning out, looking at your phone like one of the Walking Dead, mumbling about ninety days.”

Well shit, I hadn’t even realized I was thinking out loud. I coughed, then attempted something between a laugh and a growl. “Grrr.”

True stared at me deadpan.

“You and your zombies,” I said. “Don’t worry, I’m not gonna eat your brain. It’s probably unseasoned anyways.”

His only reaction to my joke was a blink and the tiniest nostril flare letting me know the comment didn’t pass his hearing.

I felt my lips twist. Bet he wouldn’t have been all stoic and unreactive if I had licked his damn thumb like I’d been contemplating a moment before. Bet that would have gotten more than the flare of a nostril. I sighed, knowing I’d keep all thoughts of tongue licking to myself. I could joke and tease about a lot, but licking True’s um...extremities...that was definitely off-limits. Forever.

Besides, the impulse was probably just a direct result of being cooped up in my loft too long and letting my double-A battery supply run low. “And speaking of,” I said, though no one was speaking of anything of the sort, but I had to get my mind off licking and batteries. “What’s with you and those old sneakers? Didn’t I give you a new pair not long ago?” I pointed at his feet. “How those are still functioning I’ll never know. They’re so worn and dirty you could give my dog an infection. The least you could have done is changed them before you came upstairs from your apartment.”

True lived in the same building, down in 4B. My father owned the property and had given us both a nice deal.

He looked down, then back at me like I'd grown another head. "So now my sneakers aren't good enough for your little penthouse, Ms. 10A? Should I have showered before I came or just dropped off your brunch at the door?"

"You know I didn't mean it like that."

True's left brow quirked. "Sure. Besides, these are fine. They still have some miles left in them."

I snorted. "Miles? They're practically running by themselves at this point."

He stared at me. I stared back. This was us. Standing off. Doing what we do.

"So you're good?" This question came from Dawn, breaking our little stare down and leaving us in a draw. "Can I take my finger off the 911 speed dial because for a minute there you had a sister damn near fretting, but since we're only talking sneakers and the Walking Dead, I'll cancel the red alert." Dawn was looking at me with a high level of impatience. She waved her phone in my direction and then across my worktable. "I don't know what gets into you, Lu. One minute you're normal"—she let a heavy pause rest here before continuing—"ish, talking business, schedules and your work, and the next you're who knows where."

"I'm fine! It's no big deal. Well, probably no big deal," I said, looking back at my phone.

Dawn raised an eyebrow while I shot back with narrowed eyes plus a "seriously, stand down" silent gesture. This only caused her to grimace at me more intensely, in that moment flipping between her dual roles of my art agent and best friend since high school.

Actually, me, Dawn and True have been connected since high school. Not the trio we are now but more of a clunky quartet, brought together by time and circumstance.

Dawn shrugged and traded her phone for a cheese bagel with extra cream cheese. The handmade bagels from the place on Broadway and 94th were her weekly carb indulgence. Even with my near freak-out she wasn't missing out on this. Hell, I should be thankful she even slowed down. Dawn despised deprivation, so my manic panic would have to get put on hold. "You sure, you're fine?" she asked through a mouthful of dough and cream cheese. Her eyes shifting from my artwork laid out on the table then back to my face.

I nodded, then looked back at my work. The mass of color, torn paper and fabric now hardly made any sense to me.

I felt my lips go tight. I wasn't fine. Not by a long shot.

*Keanu Reeves was getting married.*

## Chapter 2

# Silver Spoons

## Bethany Lu

This is fake, right? There's no way it can be true." I pushed my phone toward Dawn. She had been going on about my upcoming schedule and asking when I thought my next batch of canvases would be done.

"What?" Dawn took the phone from my hand, her touch surprisingly gentle. Not the brisk way she usually had. Not that I'm saying my friend was in any way rude or snatchy, but gentle wasn't generally her style either. Between Dawn going in with the soft touch and True with my full name, I must have put them both in a panic for a minute there.

Dawn glanced at my phone, and her eyes went wide. There was a brief flash of alarm, and I could guess exactly how she felt. Was she cold? Did her insides recoil and twist inside themselves?

"No way. And in ninety days? This is bullshit. It sounds like they are pulling from that reality show."

"Right?" I said, agreeing with her. Thank goodness for Dawn. I could always count on her when it came to seeing things my way. "That's what I thought." I laughed. It may have come out slightly hysterical. "He'd never do that. Not to us. Not to me. Not to the world. Also, that show is crazy pants."

"In the best way," Dawn interjected. She shook her head and handed me back my phone. "Nah. Definitely not. This really is bullshit. Keanu wouldn't do it, hon." She went from riled back down to soft and gentle again, amping my anxiety. It was as if she were talking to a small child or someone praying in the waiting area of an ICU surgery center. Fuck. Could it be Dawn thought there was some truth to this tweet?

I tried hard to look beyond her wall of defense. Through to the bond of our almost thirty-year friendship. We connected, she and I, in a way that no one else on the planet ever had and I suspected ever would. Well, all except True, but he was different. You know, given he had a penis and all, and the fact that he was, I don't know, just...True.

Dawn tapped at her phone, then looked at me, the placating tone now laced with an edge of anger. "Actually, I'm low-key pissed at whoever on the PR team thought it was a good idea to release this news. Ninety days my ass. Are they putting us all on some sort of fan-flail doomsday countdown clock? Just do it if you're ready, or get engaged and be quiet about it. We'll find out when they are on the cover of *People* like everybody else or when *TMZ* releases the telephoto shots. It's not like he's a royal. Damn!" She shook her head as she turned up her lip and placed her phone back on the edge of the worktable, careful not to put it where it would get paint or glue on it.

She glared at the phone. "Keanu is never getting married. He'd never settle down and make just one woman, man, person...ferret, that happy while ruining the lives of the rest of the world. I have a right mind to make a complaint."

"I agree with you, but where would you even start?"

She shook her head and gave me slightly overconfident "trust me" eyes, which I'd learned from all our years of near misses, whoops and almost-had-its not to trust all that much. But with the glint she had going on, I half expected her to go protesting at some PR firm in a stunning vintage '70s designer outfit, signage in hand, shouting about how someone must pay for these grievous misdeeds.

True let out a groan, as Dawn and I swiveled toward him in unison.



“Seriously? This is what your whole zone-out was about? Damned Keanu Reeves?” He took a step back. Lucky for him, just out of my arm’s reach.

“Watch it with the blasphemy, mister.”

He hit me with an eye roll and a sigh before rubbing his short nails over his close-cropped curls. “I can’t with you, Lu,” he said, before shifting to Dawn. “You either. The fact that you fall right in, entertaining her mess, makes you just as bad.”

Dawn gasped. “Bad? The hell you say!” She scrunched up her nose and her mouth went wide with feigned shock. “I don’t know what you’re getting on me for, Truman Erickson, you giant soggy blanket.”

“That part,” I added. “Just because you’re grown, don’t think you’re grown-grown.”

True’s eyes went back and forth between the two of us in silent irritation. I could almost see words being swallowed back down his throat, and I opened my mouth to argue against them. But this wasn’t the time to fall into one of our bickering spirals. This was serious.

The fear had my stomach knotting up. I reached for my phone, then paused. True was right. As much as I hated to admit it. Dammit, True was right.

What the hell was I panicking for? And Dawn was right too. It had to be fake. Keanu would never be tied down. He was a free spirit. He was *the* free spirit.

And so was I—grown-ass, forty-plus fangirl that I was. There was no reason to be afraid. I was fine. I smiled and fought to slow my heart rate.

*Quick Lu, think of something calming!* But shit, the meditation app I’d sworn I’d listen to every day had lasted less than a week. The pressure of daily relaxation was too stressful. Now all I had was a monthly bill because

I kept forgetting to cancel the stupid subscription in the app store. Besides, if I did cancel, that would mean giving up on meditating and therefore admitting defeat. *And Carlises don't give up. We see things through. Till the end.*

I looked over to the far corner of the loft and sighed. I had set up the perfect tranquil space with a cool-ass altar and tufted pillow to get my meditation on. So what if Morphie had co-opted it?

“Look, you’ve got to relax. There is no need for you to get all worked up over a bit of poorly placed celebrity gossip,” Dawn said.

True let out a grunt as if agreeing to this as his phone buzzed low from his pocket, indicating a text.

“Hey, tell your T and Ai-meeee, you’re busy. We have a crisis over here,” Dawn continued.

“Is that what you’re calling it?” True quipped back.

The inner twelve-year-old in me had to suppress a chuckle over Dawn’s jibe as I piled on top. “Yeah, isn’t the semester over, Professor Hottie McHottieson? Can’t she ease up a bit now?”

True frowned at his phone, but I’m sure the face was really meant for me.

His teacher’s assistant Aimee was into him big-time. Though he liked to annoyingly put on as if he didn’t know it. Fact was, True acted as if he didn’t know a good percentage of the students who took his economics and world studies class were into him. As if. For all his brilliance, at times the man didn’t have a clue about how sexy his “I don’t have the time to be concerned about mundane things like metro male grooming because I’m too busy thinking on higher pursuits” vibe made him.

“I swear you two have a combined age of twenty-four,” he grit out as he tapped at his phone.

Dawn and I looked at each other and shrugged. “I would have accepted anything under fifty combined, so this is a win in my book,” she said.

True shook his head as he picked up his mug. It was the one he usually used at my place, simple white on which I’d painted a bent spoon and the words *THERE IS NO SPOON* in block letters. He knew good and well it was a homage to a scene from *The Matrix*, and if he had trouble with my fangirling or bouts of immaturity, he could have just as easily brought one of his own plain mugs up from his place.

True took his Matrix mug and his text convo with Ai-meee and headed to the far side of the kitchen island. I guess out of firing distance of me and Dawn for a little privacy. I didn’t blame him, but still, it grated a bit. His nimble thumbs tapped along his screen before he paused, placed the phone down and picked up another bagel from the bag of leftovers on the island.

Like Dawn, he always had at least two bagels, and with all his running he didn’t even have to worry about the carbs. And unlike me, True claimed his runs were a form of daily stress relief and enjoyment. The concept seemed ridiculous, no matter how many times he’d tried to explain it. He’d do better trying to get me to understand market conversions by country and rates of fluctuations. It didn’t matter, though. True’s tall, lanky but muscular frame could support one bagel or three.

Still, by the almost beastly way he tore into the poor everything bagel, I had a feeling that he was stuffing his mouth to clamp down on comments to Dawn and me he thought were better left unsaid. It was one of the deflection tactics he’d honed after years of being caught in the crossfire of our mini rants. At least that was what my WHET app had taught me—aka Women’s Health Empowerment Therapy—which was the app I *did* more religiously keep up with, not only for its cutting-edge sex talk and vibrator discounts but the fact that they had certified therapists writing pretty solid

takes on their blog. But here it was again; I was going off the rails and the topic. Maybe I needed to check in on the app a little more frequently.

“Oh, let the soggy blanket sulk,” Dawn said, as if she could see inside my head.

Dawn and I have been arm-in-arm BFFs since we first met as freshmen at Forresters Academy, an exclusive private high school just outside of Manhattan. Forresters was and still is a who’s who of New York’s second-tier rich progressives’ kids. Those who were not A-listers, old money, ultra-wealthy, library donor types. We were the class of new money, the start-ups or perhaps second cousins of the A-listers who had to work management that kept the old money moving.

My father happened to be one of the new money movers. And he was so good as a private equity investor that the name Carlisle could just about open any A-list door. Money was funny like that.

But lucky us—not—we were C-list all day. Sure, on a good day we could pull off B-list, on account of being upwardly mobile and, in many folks’ eyes, uppity Black and not where we belonged—a myth my mother loved to clap back on whenever she got the chance.

That myth is part of how we’d ended up at Forresters. My mother getting “mistaken” for a nanny at my old school’s pickup one time too many. There were only so many straws before a camel’s back broke or a Black mother had had enough with the bullshit and went off. And that was what happened at my private middle school before I was sent to Forresters.

I remember the day clearly, coming out of the exit on the quiet, tree-lined Upper East Side street just off Fifth Avenue where our school was. Right off Museum Mile. We were supposed to be the elites. Tourists even stopped to get glimpses of us looking so unbothered and upper-class New York chic in our navy, burgundy and tan uniforms. But there was my

mother, blaring at Trishna Greenberg's mom, "You think I'm the nanny? What nanny wears Patrick Kelly and Chanel to a pickup?"

I was mortified. Though she had a point. Still, it didn't stop me from wanting one of the sidewalk cracks to open up and devour me whole. All the kids were staring like we were some sort of aberration, a strange wonder to behold. They always looked at her like that. The same way they looked at me when they spared me a glance. Once again, I wondered why couldn't she just blend. Why couldn't she be inconspicuous like the other moms in the latest Ralph Lauren getup? Or better yet, not pick me up at all?

God. I was a shit daughter even back then.

But it wasn't the slights to my mom or my secondhand embarrassment that got me to Forresters. It was the incident. The one where the new math teacher swore that I cheated off Felicity Mathis instead of the other way around. That was the final straw.

My mother could take a lot, explode and then move on, but my father wouldn't give a penny to an institution that questioned our honor. Even though I was never a math whiz like my brother, Dad never questioned me or asked if I'd cheated. He never asked for an explanation. He only said that my overpriced school would miss our money and be sorry when another school had it.

I was glad to be done of it, already on my four-year countdown to graduation and art school in Paris or London and all the things I dreamt about when I wasn't trying to disappear into the wall cracks.

But once I got to Forresters and after meeting Dawn, I lost that rush to fly away, and even the need to fade into the paint started to dissipate. Suddenly I wasn't so alone. Finally, I wasn't the only brown girl in my class. Of course, Forresters was still expensive (i.e., exclusive; i.e., pretty damned white), but the Forrester founders seemed to have had some sort of

come-to-Jesus moment or maybe they were low-key class shaded too, so they liked to consider themselves woke before being woke was a thing. Ignore the fact that it still cost approximately \$48K to give a kid their form of progressive wokeness.

Still, they were highly philanthropic and had a 15 percent diversity rate, but made sure to show at least 30 percent of the students in all their promotional brochures and literature were people of color. But I wasn't mad. I was happy to be out of my old school and even happier when I met Dawn on the first day.

“Bobby Brown is sooo cute. Right, Bethany?” Kaitlyn Smith, the upperclassman assigned to giving us our tour of the campus chirped by way of bonding with the Black girls. My Spidey sense went up immediately and I was getting Felicity Mathis (I'll use you till I abuse you) vibes out the gate with this one, but I stayed chill. Better to not rock the boat.

“And you look a little like Whitney Houston, but way prettier. I think she's great, but Madonna sings better,” Kaitlyn continued. Dawn and I gave each other immediate wide eyes because (a) blasphemy on that Whitney/Madonna comment, and (b) what the hell was with this chick?

It went on from there—new school, same stupidity, but whatever. It was high school. At least now I had a friend to vibe with and one who understood when these not-so-micro aggressions came up. Dawn and I had something in common, and even better, we were equally silly in our immaturity and over-the-top love of '80s punk and '90s pop. B-boys were an obsession, and foreign romance drama heartthrobs were our ultimate crushes.

Always a little quirky, I had done my quirking in relative quiet. Dawn, who was a bit bolder and innately perceptive, picked up on my inner wild child and coaxed her out. There were SoHo shopping trips, sunbathing

layouts on her West Village rooftop when we were out of school on the weekends. The best were our long sessions of Fuck, Marry, Kill—Comic Edition. The fact that thirty years later we could still pass time pretty much doing the same things, playing the same games, well, I didn't know if it was a good or a bad thing.

*If Keanu was getting his shit together and settling down, then what did that mean for me and my life?*

## Chapter 3



## Between Two Ferns

## Bethany Lu

It doesn't mean shit," Dawn said, surprising me by answering the question I thought I'd only asked silently. Maybe I was a touch too transparent.

"Dawn's right. Keanu getting married doesn't mean anything. And you need to stop with the overthinking," True chimed in from the kitchen. He was eyeing me with that worried expression again.

Jeez, the two of them. And they were getting on me about overthinking? Part of me was starting to feel like these Saturday get-togethers were just excuses to check up on me, but I tried not to go there and just keep us in the friend zone where I was comfortable and not feel like I was being managed.

I stuck out my tongue and True responded by taking a nonchalant sip of his coffee. Infuriating-ass man. "I'm not one of your students, True. You don't have to worry about me. Maybe you're the one who's overthinking. Or overanalyzing as is the case when it comes to you."

"I highly doubt that," he drawled out.

Sure, this little spat seemed ridiculous for fully grown New Yorkers on a beautiful Saturday afternoon, and there was probably no reason I should have put up with it, but there was also no reason in the world I could see myself not.

Dawn and True were pretty much the only constants I could count on after the world flipped and changed direction on me when I was eighteen.

When our quartet had been suddenly downgraded to a trio.

But I couldn't bear to think about that. Not now. Not in conjunction with the almost, maybe very real, possibility of Keanu getting married.

I looked back over at Dawn. She and I were opposite in many ways but statistically so similar. A couple of Black women staring down our midforties and successful-ish, thanks to being Black one-percenters with family funds to fall back on. We were both happily single and getting perhaps a little too content with being so after running over the river and through the city with dating. Still, anyone would tell us that because of our ages we should be looking for Mr. Right. Like real hard. Not blissfully binge-watching Netflix series, fangirling over our old crushes and drooling over the younger up-and-comers. We drove our parents nuts and our married friends even nuttier.

Over forty, single AF and okay with it. It didn't mesh for some.

I remember the night our friend CeCe announced she was getting married to her longtime boyfriend, Bruce, over sangrias at our favorite Mexican restaurant. Icky Bruce is what we called him, on account of us always making the ick face whenever his name came up. But CeCe had been with him since college, and we were long over accompanying her on recon missions to see who Bruce was cheating on her with at the moment. And now there she was, telling us about some fantasy she had of seeing us squeeze into mauve bridesmaid dresses and traveling to a destination wedding in Grand Rapids. As if Grand Rapids was an actual destination for a wedding. But it was what Bruce had wanted.

Of course, to hear her tell it, Bruce was no longer a philandering sonofabitch. Nope. According to CeCe, he'd transformed, or hell, was always the perfect sweep-you-off-your-feet type of boyfriend who bought flowers no less than once a week and served homemade breakfast in bed every Sunday after making you come four times and didn't even expect a hand job in return. For her, that was worth putting her friends in mauve

dresses, matching shoes and then asking them to pay hotel and travel on top of that to stay at an airport-adjacent hotel.

After CeCe floated out of La Cantina, Dawn and I ordered up another pitcher of drinks and declared there was no way we were settling for a Kay Jewelers moment and revisionist history to tie us to a forever mistake.

Better to stick with flying solo and loving the perfect and perfectly unattainable guys in our heads than get tied down in the real world.

Sidebar: Bruce and CeCe were currently separated.

“Stop with that look,” Dawn said. “You know I know what it means. That Gemini mind of yours is already off and running in some wayward direction. What you need to do is finish your coffee, eat your bagel and then get back to this piece, which looks like it’s going to be fabulous BTW.”

She uncrossed her arms and slipped out of her blazer, revealing a sundress in an abstract fruit print with a Shirred top that flowed to about midcalf. Her strappy sandals had the cutest back bow. Though her outfit was cute and held a bit of whimsy, Dawn was pointing at my unfinished project and had on her “so what do you have to say about this?” serious look.

So that was that. Dawn was done with my games and now back to being a full-on adult career woman and my manager. Though she may have totally understood my immediate despair when it came to the shocking Keanu announcement, nothing came between Dawn and her business, and I had a show coming up in a few months at her gallery. Dawn liked what I had done so far, but I still wanted to add to the collection, so there’d be more options.

I looked back at the unfinished work, trying hard to focus and get into adulting mode again. I stared. Not long before, the mixed-media piece had been on its way to being a sublime postmodern representation of the

missing stillness in the chaotic current domestic world, blah blah blah... Suddenly these were just words droning in my head. Yeah, I had the art speak down pat. But now the canvas—with its wash of blue and the delicate fabrics I'd painstakingly chosen and wanted to incorporate with black-and-white prints, color photographs and ripped newspaper clippings—all looked like it came straight out of a scene from *Hoarders: HGTV Edition* dumped in my space.

I reached for my initial sketch and felt no connection there either. The two female figures now felt off, and the man in the photograph? What the hell was he representing? Nothing quite fit.

I looked at Dawn again, busily tapping on her phone, then at True over in the kitchen doing the same. Even within our usual connected space, today there was a disconnect.

Dammit. The stupid tweet kept flashing through my mind. *Ninety days*. It felt like a countdown to doom. How could Keanu—a public figure, a celebrity I'd never met—have that kind of power after all these years?

Shaking my head, I tried to force myself to think objectively. It had to be the work. That was it. I just had to finish it. But even without the beads and paint I'd planned to add, I knew this one was a lost cause. The original lightness and harmony I'd wanted wasn't there. The hope I had when I'd started it had faded away, and I knew I wouldn't be able to get it back. Gone was gone.

"This isn't working," I said. "It's not going to work."

Dawn's fingers stilled. "What? I mean, why?" she asked. "This is great. I mean I can already see it's going to be amazing. Don't give up now. You are the one who still insists on adding more pieces to the show, and your commissions are starting to line up too."

*Great? Amazing? Commissions?* All positive words that were giving me minor heart palpitations. Not that the idea of more work and paying customers at the ready wasn't good. It's just that I felt my potential for letting someone down in this case was disastrous.

Dawn continued, "There are big things happening for you, woman, including your dinner with Daniel Lim. You can't lose focus."

I sighed. The dinner tonight was one of the last things I wanted to think about. I wanted to focus on my art and on developing it as much as I could. Not dressing up to schmooze about it. Dawn knew this.

"Don't start," she warned, most likely picking up on my skittishness. "You agreed. Now you have to wow him." She gave me a quick up and down, taking in my loose cotton overalls and white tank. "None of your shapeless black sacks even if they are vintage. Daniel Lim is used to sitting front row at New York Fashion Week." She gave a saucy smirk. "And often leaving with the show's ending model."

I rolled my eyes. "If you're so into this dinner and who he ends up going home with, then you should go in my place," I said.

"Yes, you should go, Ms. Agent," True suddenly chimed in from by the kitchen sink.

Dawn and I pivoted his way, surprised by his sudden outburst.

"Really, Professor?" Dawn started. "Not that my business is your business, and not that I wouldn't go, but he particularly wants to meet the artist to see if they get on."

True snorted, letting loose with the uncharacteristic show of emotion. "Yeah, I bet."

Dawn sighed. "Oh, come on. I know you and Daniel went to the same university and I know you didn't get on with him, but who do you ever get on with?"

True's brow wrinkled, but he didn't argue. Probably because Dawn had a point.

"Besides, this is business," she added with finality.

He shrugged, then went back to his phone. What the hell were T and Aimee talking about that was so interesting?

"I said my piece," True stated as he continued to tap away.

I could tell he was doing his best to hold on to his control, though. He was holding something back. But he stopped texting then and looked up at me and smiled. Not a full-on one, but still it was enough to get me. Like a mosquito bite. Unexpected and a total pain when it flared up later.

"Hey, Dawn's right, business is business," he said. "Besides, none of us are the same as when we were back in school, yeah?"

It took everything for me to crack a smile in return at that one. I gave him a weak half nod to let him know I agreed while my mind raced with stagnant thoughts of "speak for yourself."

True's phone buzzed again. "Listen, I've got to go," he said. "There are still some things I need to finish up, thanks to being a little too generous with some student extensions. I'll have to catch you two later."

I pouted. "So soon. No fair. This is supposed to be our fun day."

He shrugged.

There was no use arguing against that. I knew him, and, T and Aimee aside, he wouldn't shirk responsibility. I sighed. "Well, before you go, take that box off the foyer table. I got you something."

True glared. "What did you do now, Lu? I don't need anything."

My gaze went to his feet. "I beg to differ. And don't let these get thrown in a corner somewhere like the rest of the things I get you. You are doing a lot of running if those sneakers are any indication. Your feet must be

suffering. They're just socks, but they have moisture-wicking technology for runners."

He sauntered my way and gave me a long stare, coming oh so close to my face once again before tapping my worktable firmly three times.

"So they're cotton socks?"

I tried my best not to back up. "Just shut it and say thank you, smartass. What do you know about high-tech material?"

He grinned, and it was another of those little shots. "Thank you, smartass." He looked from me to Dawn, then back to me. "And don't forget, your agent here does have a point," he said, his voice all serious and deep.

"Don't I always?" Dawn blurted.

For a moment I forgot about True, the boy who used to gawk at me on the sly as he hung around with my brother all those years ago. That True's voice was nothing like this man's. Hell, that True barely had a voice at all.

He tapped the table again and I blinked.

"You need to focus," he said. "Don't let this Keanu crap distract you. It's you and your art. Everything else is just noise. Even investors like Lim."

"Um, that wasn't my point, Nutty Professor!" Dawn snapped.

True ignored her and continued. "But you have your meeting and make your own decision." He glanced Dawn's way, then back at me. "Hell, he may have changed from when I knew him, and you're an excellent judge of character, so don't listen to any voice but your own with this."



## Chapter 4

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“I don’t know about this, Mish,” Essie said into her cell as the cab made its way down the highway in the early-morning hours. The air was crisp and still gray, the sun only being hinted at as it glinted off the mirrored chrome of the New York skyscrapers.

“What’s not to know? You should be thanking me,” Misha replied. “I know you didn’t plan to work during the holiday, but with Cam hitting the wind and you needing extra money, this is perfect. Besides, it will be good for you.”

Essie could feel Misha scheming through the phone and her eyes rolled skyward. “Good for me how? Cam and I have only been broken up for less than a week.”

Misha let out an impatient snort. “Oh, please. You and Cam were broken up the moment he screwed his assistant, and I’d bet that was at least two months ago, if not more. The moment you hit the road to work with the band, you two were done.”

“Ouch, leave it to you not to pull any punches.”

“What good would it do? Life is too short. Now you remember that while you’re sailing with Ross. He’ll be a tough client, but I’ve known him a long time, and he’s a good guy underneath.”

It was Essie’s turn to snort. “Underneath what? The latest supermodel? Let Google tell it. He’s got a deli number-counter at the foot of his bed.”

Now Misha laughed. “You, more than anyone, should know that outside appearances can be deceiving. I know you’re not totally the ‘Little Miss Zen’ you want the world to see. Now go

and whip my friend into shape. Tell him I want great numbers on his next visit. And from you, I want a report that you had a fabulous time. Doctor's orders."

"Yeah, whatever you say," Essie said before switching off.

The taxi began to slow as it turned by the piers, and the most beautiful boat Essie had ever seen came into her view.

"Oh, my freaking God," she whispered as she got out of the cab, pulling her carryall in one hand and her cooking supplies in the other. Essie knew the galley would more than likely be fully stocked, and she had sent over a list of what she wanted available. But she wouldn't assume it would be stocked with her favorite organic oils, not to mention her homemade spice blends and whenever possible, she never did a job without her old faithful set of stainless pans and, of course, her knives. She paused as two crewmembers in white pants and long-sleeved black shirts appeared, their hands behind their backs, sunglasses on, watching her as she made her way.

When she was finally in front of them, the one that looked a little older, but only because of the light graying at his temples, gave a little nod and a small smile. "And I'm guessing you are Ms. Bradford. Welcome to *Serenity*."

"Thank you, and please call me Essie." She looked up at the ship and its impressive height. "So, *Serenity*? A ship this size I expect to be called the *Enterprise*."

The man grinned and stepped forward. "I'm Jeff Grayson, the ship's captain, and this guy right here is Cooper Westport, our chief engineer."

Cooper smiled next to Captain Grayson, and though his sunglasses covered a good portion of his face, Essie could still tell from his thick blond hair, chiseled jaw, and his blindingly white smile that he was a good-looking man.

"Great to meet you, Essie," Cooper said with a cute Aussie accent.

More tall men in the same uniform came out and stood along the deck as Cooper made the introductions.

“That right there is my second, Ethan Chambers.” Ethan gave a nod and smile. “And next to him is our deckhand Jayce Spencer.” Jayce gave a slight bow and then came forward to take Essie’s bags from her. “And then we have Quincy Bell, our head steward. He’ll help with any personal needs you may have.”

“Very nice to meet you,” Quincy said. Another man with a lovely accent, this time it was from the United Kingdom.

Essie smiled and shook hands.

“You all are being so kind. I’m sure I won’t need anything. I’ll try and not be too much of a bother.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” came another new, slightly gruffer voice.

“And finally,” Cooper said, his own voice now slightly apologetic, “we have Chef Simon Scott. I guess you and he will be working pretty closely together.”

Essie looked toward Chef Scott, who wore shades just as the rest of the crew was, but unlike the others, his were pushed up onto the top of his clean-shaven head to reveal his sharp, assessing eyes and stern brow. And though she bestowed on him her easy smile, he countered back with nothing but a slight nod.

*Fine, that’s how you want to play?* Essie had been in the cooking game for a long time. Chef Scott was surely not the first, and he wouldn’t be the last, temperamental chef she’d come across. She’d give it a day, and she was sure they’d be getting along just fine. If not, it didn’t matter. This job was only temporary. “It’s very nice to meet you, Chef. I’ll be in and out of your hair in no time flat,” she said.

“Is that a promise, little lady?” Chef Scott stated more than asked.

Essie looked at him dead-on and stepped onto *Serenity*. “It’s a statement, nothing more. I’ve learned early on that promises are worth no more than the breath it takes to make them.”

Quincy finished giving Essie a quick tour of the ship and she was officially in awe. *Serenity* was 130 feet, four levels, and no

luxury spared. There was a formal and informal salon, a gym, two hot tubs, jet skis, a diving plank, a formal dining room, as well as an informal one. By the time she got to the galley, her mouth hung open. Hell, she was thinking she should be paying Ross for this trip, but she knew she could never afford it. Not in a million years.

Quincy showed her the crew's quarters and lead her to her own room. She turned a corner too quickly and walked into a solid wall that was Ross Montgomery's chest. "Oh, my goodness, um, I'm sorry, excuse me."

"Please don't apologize, Ms. Bradford," Ross said. His large warm hands righted her, steady in the most unsteady way. "Things can get a little tight on this ship."

At his words his and Essie's eyes met, and if she were still fourteen and believed in such a thing, she'd swear fireworks went off. Essie quickly lowered her eyes and stepped back, but not before catching the laughter in Ross's eyes. *Damn.*

"I was just giving Ms. Bradford a tour, sir, and leading her to her quarters," Quincy said, breaking the unspoken tension.

"I'll take over from here, thank you," Ross said, his voice low, but still definite and commanding.

Essie watched Quincy's retreating back and, for some reason, wanted to follow him down the narrow hallway, but she knew she couldn't, so she stood where she was. "I didn't know you were on board," she said.

"Yet here I am," Ross said matter-of-factly. "I was finishing a work call when you arrived. I'm sorry I couldn't greet you. But now that you are here, we may depart."

She felt a brow shoot up. "But I thought you said this was a business trip and you were taking clients down to Florida."

"This is a business trip, but no, we're picking up clients in Florida. I hope I didn't give you the wrong impression."

*Essie, relax. This isn't a big deal. It's still business and still a trip.*

Just with a lot less passengers on the way down than she anticipated. It didn't matter. She wasn't here for his clients

anyway. She was here to get him on track to good food and a new lifestyle. Essie brought her shoulders up and looked him in the eye. “It’s no matter who is here. It’s you who’s paying me, and you are my client.”

Essie couldn’t help but notice his jaw tighten at this statement. “This is true, I am paying you, but as we discussed, you’re still my guest. So, how about you let me show you to your room?” He put his arm out in a gesture for her to follow him. They climbed a narrow flight of stairs, going from below deck up another level, to where the accommodations were more spacious and, if possible, more luxurious.

Ross took Essie past some of the most sumptuous staterooms she had ever seen, all done up in marble and wood. This was a world of luxury beyond her imagination. At one point he stood outside a room and waved his hand. “These are my quarters, and my office is right next door. Since this is a working trip, I will be in my office quite a bit. Though, per Misha’s orders, I promise to go above deck and get some sun while I work, from time to time.”

Essie smiled. “I’ll hold you to it. Do you mind if I take a look?”  
“Not at all.”

Essie peeked in the door of his stateroom. It was decorated in the same modern way as the rest of the yacht, but here there was a classic twist that was a little bit dressed down so that it was more casual and, somehow, more sexy. The low-profile bed had a utilitarian feel to it, and the artwork that hung over the bed was done in tones of gray, with a splash of red. The gray lamps by the bed added to the coolness of the room. The thick gray carpeting made her want to take off her shoes and sink her toes into it. Everything about the room was sensual and inviting in an ultracool way. So very much like the man himself.

Essie swallowed and looked up at Ross. “It’s a cool space.” *Cool?* She wanted to bang herself in the head. Instead, she swallowed and gave a weak smile.

Ross’s smile threatened to turn her legs to noodles. “Thanks.”

He opened the door next to it to show his office. This was a continuation of his bedroom, sexy, sleek, and modern. With one wall made of all glass windows to take in the sea view.

“I hope I won’t find you always in here. According to our agreement, you have to learn some things from me about food and perhaps cooking?” Essie challenged.

He frowned and closed the office door. “We’ll have to see about that, Ms. Bradford.”

“That we will, Mr. Montgomery.”

Ross turned away from his office door and surprised her by turning to a door right across from his own. “And this will be your accommodations.”

Essie stepped inside and this time she really couldn’t stop her mouth from dropping open. “Oh, Ross, this is too much. I mean, Mr. Montgomery. Really, I can sleep down in the crew’s quarters. They are more than generous.”

She watched as his lip worked a little at the corner in amusement. “You will sleep here, Ms. Bradford, and not insult me. According to our agreement, you’re not one of the crew, and though you are not one of the official guests, you are my guest, and this is your holiday, though a working one it may be. So please enjoy this room with my compliments. I won’t hear any arguments.”

Essie frowned, looking at the ridiculously luxurious accommodations. She had never been in a room so beautiful. It was mahogany and marble like the rest of the ship, but this was designed with a woman in mind as the décor was accented in creams and natural stone. Not to mention the beautiful orchids she spied. And in the bathroom there was both a stand-up shower and a beautiful Jacuzzi tub. After this, how would she ever go back to her small one-bedroom apartment? She looked at Ross and shook her head. “You always make it this hard for a girl to turn you down?”

“I do my very best, Ms. Bradford.”

Essie let out a sigh as she eyed the huge bed. “That’s what I’m afraid of, Mr. Montgomery.”

## Chapter 5



Ross fought the urge to retreat to his office. Instead, he went up to join the captain on the bridge. Not that he wanted to retreat to his office, or that he wanted to join the captain. No, what he really wanted to do was stay with the pretty Ms. Bradford and kiss her on that deliciously large bed until that skeptical look she kept giving him gave way to one of glazed passion.

*Shit. What is wrong with me?* Number one, she was now an employee, at least for the next ten days, so she should technically be off limits if his normal code of ethics applied. And number two, which was the head-scratcher, she was not his type, so he didn't get the intense, almost uncontrollable, physical attraction.

It had been there as soon as he caught a glimpse of her in the restaurant, even before he knew who she was and their eyes locked for the first time. He didn't get it. This type of thing never happened to him. He didn't believe in happenstance or anomalies out of the realm. Ross lived in absolutes. And Essie Bradford was a wild card.

She was nothing like the usual strain of models. She was tall, sure. That fit his bill. But that's where it ended. His usual women had a certain—Ross paused in his thoughts, looking for the right description, and he grimaced when all he could come up with was “body shop shine and polish” to them. It was as if the women he usually went for stepped off the showroom runway, dyed, plucked and blown out, falling that way into his bed.

But not Essie Bradford. She was tall and slim, but he could tell by her well-fitting jeans and no-nonsense sweater, she had delicious curves in all the right places. And her skin, Ross sucked in a breath, there was something about her skin, with its rich, chocolate tone that seemed to glow from deep within, made him long to touch it, taste it, be a part of it. *Freaking hell!* Even to his own mind he was already sounding whipped.

But still, her eyes came to his mind. Deep and soulful, sparking like onyx jewels, only there to enhance the full lips he wanted to kiss so very much. Those plump lips that made him think of her delicious desserts and all the ways he wanted to devour her.

*Damn it!* This whole thing was a huge mistake. He knew that now. Just as he knew that Misha, wherever she was, must be laughing her ass off. Ross reached the bridge and Captain Grayson turned around. "I just want to check if we're on schedule and you have everything you need."

The older man smiled and looked around at all the shiny new equipment. "I have more than I need, sir. I can't wait to get her out in the open water. It will be an honor to sail her."

Ross grinned. "Well, I'm happy to have you in charge and on board. I'm going to go up to the fly deck and watch the launch."

"Enjoy, sir. The weather is optimum, so we should be good."

Ross exited while the captain made an announcement for all hands to be ready to leave. On his way up top, Ross thought for a moment about going to collect Essie and invite her to join him, but stopped. Setup or not, he wouldn't play into Misha's hands. His life, if not his numbers, was fine as it was. And he didn't need the complications of some goody-two-shoes, interfering chef.

Really he should have invited Lela on this trip, or a version of her. It wouldn't have been hard. But something stopped him from doing that. Yes, it was a business trip, but he knew his clients. Most were married and would be bringing their wives, and those without would bring girlfriends or expect some sort of female entertainment. They all expected him to show up with



a beautiful woman on his arm, as he always did. And that night at the restaurant when he first saw Essie, he was so close to inviting Lela to come with him, but he stopped and he let her go on to that sneaker party. The question was why.

Just as Ross got topside, as if by some divine answering, there was the “why” at the railing. Her face was lifted up to catch the breeze; her hair was whipping playfully, fighting the wind and losing. But still she smiled to herself, saying a silent goodbye to cold New York while *Serenity* backed away from the city. Taking her away from home and family and him away from nothing but his newly remodeled three thousand square feet of . . . now that he thought about it, way too open apartment space.

The moment filled Ross with an unexpected sense of melancholy. In his mind he saw visions of skating with his little girl, hand in hand, under the colorful lights of the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree. Ross shook the thought off with an inward snort. Not that it would be happening. She was in California and would be enjoying the holiday as she always did, with her mother and stepdad. She was happy, and that was enough.

“The view is beautiful, isn’t it?” Ross said as he eased next to Essie and leaned against the railing.

She turned slowly and faced him, as if she knew he would walk up and stand next to her. “It really is. It’s been so long since I’ve seen New York from the water. As a kid I used to love to take the Staten Island Ferry to get this view.”

Ross smiled. “I used to do that as a kid, too. Best cheap view in the city. That, and the Roosevelt Island Tram.”

Essie’s eyes went wide. “You’re so right. I love the tram. I used to go back and forth just for the fun of it. Now that I’m over the free kid height, no more back and forth for me. Not with the way metro fares keep going up. More and more it seems the joys of the city have been priced out for regular folks.” Essie averted her eyes, as if remembering she was on a

yacht with a real estate developer. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean, well, you know.”

“No offense taken. You don’t have to be sorry for saying what you think. I agree. The city is way too expensive. And there should be simple luxuries and joys available to everyone. Now, I know that sounds crazy coming from me, with us standing on my yacht, but it’s true.”

Her eyes got that skeptical gleam once again. “Okay,” she replied with a shrug, turning away.

Ross crossed his arms. “You don’t take anything at face value, do you?”

She frowned and turned toward the city, staring a long time before turning back to him, her expression once again a mask of calm. “That’s not true. As a matter of fact, I take everything at face value. I’m the type of woman who believes what I see. I believe people show you who they are, and, as Ms. Angelou’s saying goes, when they do, believe them.”

She smiled brightly; then those full lips went wide and once again she showed that quirky armor-shattering space in her front teeth, which he found so endearing. But her statement said a lot. This woman had a history, and she’d also been hurt. For some reason Ross wanted to know more. He frowned then, about to question her, but she cut him off flicking her wrist and checking her watch.

“Look at the time. Quincy sent me your usual schedule and I’d like to take a little time to get to know your galley before I start to prepare lunch. Do you have anything you absolutely don’t like?”

Knowing this was the end of that particular conversation, Ross relented. “Never been a fan of asparagus or Brussels sprouts.”

“I’ll make note of that, sir.”

Ross frowned.

“What is it? Is it something else?”

“I also don’t appreciate you calling me ‘sir.’”

“Why? I’ve noticed everyone else does aboard the ship.”

“Well, you’re not everyone else. You’re working for me, but we’ve established we have a special situation, and since we share a mutual friend, can we, once and for all, get on a first-name basis and get a little less formal?” Ross didn’t know why he made this little speech. Maybe it was the way she held her arms so tightly together, or maybe it was the rigidity of her spine, or the way she tilted her chin up at him. But all he wanted in that moment was for her to soften her stance at least a little bit. If all he could do was get it in a name, then so be it.

It was crazy, he knew. But somehow looking at her, and the way she looked at him, Ross knew respect was not what he wanted from her. He wanted something different, something more. Something strangely close to admiration, approval, or maybe something even more dangerous. Something like affection.

Essie gave him that weary look once again, and then her eyes went soft at the same time something on him went dangerously hard. *Oh, hell.* She stuck out her hand and smiled. “I’m Essie. Nice to meet you.”

Ross’s lips quirked, feeling shy, an emotion he definitely didn’t welcome. He took her hand in his, enjoying the feel of its powdery coolness. “I’m Ross. It’s nice to meet you, too.”

Essie’s eyes narrowed as she pulled her hand from his, leaving him feeling slightly bereft. “Okay, I’m going to give you a warning. Now that we’re officially friends, there will be no holding back from me. I’m going to be as tough on you as Misha would be. Today starts the rest of your life. So remember you asked for it.”

Ross watched as Essie made her way from the deck and disappeared going toward the galley. “Don’t worry, Essie. I’m sure I’ll enjoy every moment.”

## Chapter 6



*Every moment? What the hell does he mean by every moment?*

Essie made her way to the galley, wondering if Ross knew she'd heard his parting comment, and happily only getting turned around twice, which she attributed to the size of the boat and not her "Ross infatuation." Freaking Misha. Sure, he would be enjoying every moment. He had a silly chef who mooned over his broad shoulders and smooth handsomeness at every turn. What was there *not* to enjoy?

*Get your crap together, girl.* None of her usual emotion-filled, wear-your-heart-on-your-sleeve ways. She had to be strong. She'd been burned one too many times by smooth-talking men to take anything they said at more value than playing a game, or playing her. She'd gone on long enough listening to her heart. It was the head's turn to lead. And as for listening to regions farther south, which seemed to be blaring horns and trumpets when Ross Montgomery was in spitting distance, she was putting that area on mute, as it was not to be relied on for good advice.

When Essie got to the kitchen, Chef Scott was leaning against the counter, arms folded as if he was standing guard over his domain.

She smiled. "Hello, Chef. Once again, I hope you don't mind me butting in on your domain. I'll try my best to stay out of your way, but I may ask for a little help from you, as I'm new to finding out what Ross"—Essie paused—"I mean, Mr. Montgomery likes, and I've been charged to convert his diet to something a bit more heart healthy."

She watched as the already-rigid chef drew his body even tighter and stood taller, while plumping his chest out.

“Do you mean to tell me there is something wrong with my food? Are you trying to say there’s something unhealthy about it?”

“Of course not,” Essie soothed. “I’m sure your food is top-notch, or there is no way you would have been hired to be the head chef on such an exclusive boat. I was brought on as a nutritionist and a consultant. My expertise has nothing to do with your capability. Like I was saying, I’m sure there’s plenty I can learn from you.”

“Oh, what do I care about how he spends his money? You are just another in a long line of more of the same.”

Essie bristled, but refused to bite, keeping her smile, but lowering her tone. “You’re right. It is his money, and I suggest you do your job, and start by showing me around the kitchen and pantry properly. I want to be sure the items I listed to be supplied are all accounted for.”

She and Chef Scott stared at each other, and once again Essie was up against a man she knew she could not back down from. But just when she thought he was about to break, a voice came from over her shoulder. “Why are you not moving, Simon? Like you said, it’s my money. What? Are you afraid you may learn something?” Both Essie and the chef turned around at the sound of Ross’s voice.

“I . . . I didn’t mean anything by it, sir,” Chef Scott stammered out.

Ross gave him a steely stare. “Let’s be sure you didn’t, because if you did, I can easily find other ways to spend my money than on your paycheck.”

“Why, yes, sir, of course.”

Essie saw the bloom of embarrassment take over the chef’s face and a hint of anger as he clenched his jaw.

“Ross, really, it’s all fine. Chef Scott and I were having a discussion about working arrangements. This is his kitchen, and he was showing me around.”

Ross shot her a look that was at once caring, but somehow dismissive, and the smile he gave her didn't quite reach his eyes. "Now, in all actuality it's my kitchen." He turned to Chef Scott. "Am I right?"

The chef gave a nod of his head as his eyes went downcast. "That you are, and as you said, I'm sure there's plenty for me to learn."

Ross nodded then and smiled. It was that sexy and somehow dangerous smile that made Essie want to step away from him, when, at the same time, she wanted to step forward into his atmosphere.

He clasped his hands together, casually breaking the serious mood. "Well, then, I'll leave you both to it. Essie, I can't wait to taste what you have in store for me this afternoon."

As he left, Chef Scott lowered his hands and let out an audible sigh. Then he shot Essie a look that, while full of disdain, showed his defeat. "You heard the man. This is his boat, his home, and, as of now, it looks like you're the lady of the house." He made a wide gesture with his arms. "What's mine is now yours. So please tell me, how can I be of service to you?"

# Chapter 7



Though Ross was deep in conversation with his lawyer, he somehow felt Essie's presence outside his office door, even before she gave it a knock. "Hold on a minute, Barry. Come in," Ross said.

As Essie entered, Ross felt his body, his entire body, immediately spring to attention, like a trained Pavlovian dog. He couldn't help but notice the look of surprise she tried to hide at seeing the mess his office had become in the short time he'd been working. He was a bit of a manic worker and liked to spread things out, so just about every available surface was covered. There was no place for her to set the tray.

He watched as she did a little spin, which showed off her figure nicely, but as she came up empty, she turned back to him in frustration. "Barry, I'm going to have to get back to you. I'll call you in a half an hour or so." Ross cut off his call without waiting for a reply and got up from his seat.

Essie gave him a quick glare. "You didn't have to do that. I need a place to put the tray, and then I'll go so you can work."

"Who said I was hanging up for you? Presumptuous, aren't we, Ms. Bradford?" Ross gave Essie a grin. And he got back a hard stare.

"Not at all. I thought we agreed we were on a first-name basis, Ross. Now, do you care to let me know where to put the tray? It's getting pretty heavy."

Ross ran over and cleared space on the seating area's coffee table. He then took the tray out of Essie's hands, and fought to ignore the little spark of electricity that sizzled through him

when their fingertips grazed. He had no time for shivers or sparks. He had a deal to get done, despite what Misha's plans for him were.

"Thank you. I hope you enjoy it."

*Shit.* Even her voice gave him shivers. All sweet and full of sass, but still with a hint of honey, even though she seemed mad as all get-out. "I'm sure I will. Now, tell me what it is. And while you're at it, you can tell me why you're ready to spit nails at me." Ross took a seat on the couch and lifted the cover on the plate, giving it a look over.

His eyes popped up when Essie cleared her throat. "Lunch is a simple ratatouille. Eggplant, bell peppers, onions, zucchini, some tomatoes, all served over quinoa. And for dessert you've got a seasonal fruit plate with a vinaigrette dressing."

Ross looked over the tray and frowned.

"What's the matter?"

Ross gestured for Essie to take one of the chairs and watched as she seemed to do a double take before taking a seat, as if the chair would bite her or something.

"Okay. I'm sitting. What's wrong? I'm here to serve you."

Ross couldn't help his raised brow at that last comment, and still she was as taut as a fully loaded slingshot. "Are you going to tell me what has you so stiff-lipped and fired up?"

"I don't think I'm being stiff," she said. "But what is slightly bothersome to me is the fact that I didn't need you butting in when I was hashing things out with Chef Scott."

Ross was quiet. It wasn't as if she was wrong. He had been high-handed, but a guy like Simon needed to be pulled in, and pulled in quick, otherwise he could get out of hand. "I apologize for that. But as I said, this is my vessel, and I know Simon's reputation. He can be a bit of a bully, and you are my guest. I wanted to make that clear, so he wouldn't think anything otherwise. I will apologize, though. I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable in any way. If it was any other situation, I would let you handle it yourself. But since you're my guest, I felt it was my duty to step in."



Essie's lips tightened. He could tell she didn't like his high-handedness, but, hopefully, she couldn't fault his logic. She looked over at Ross as he was eyeing the green smoothie.

"I see you are frowning. Is there something wrong with your lunch?"

Ross looked up, slightly bewildered. "There's no chocolate." He searched the tray again. "None of your chocolate puff pastry, chocolate tart, not even a hint of my favorite, your chocolate mousse."

Essie gave him a long look before speaking slowly, as if he were a child. "First of all, man cannot live on chocolate alone."

"So say you, but I beg to differ."

Essie let out a snort, but at least he got a hint of a smile. "As I was saying, man should not live by chocolate alone. And how was I to know that you wanted it at every meal? Is that why you hired me, for my chocolate?"

His brow shot up and she blushed. A distinct rosiness radiated under her deep brown skin. She knew she walked right into that one, and it was cute as hell. Essie shook her head. "Really, Ross. Grow up. Besides, Misha would have my ass. There is no way she would sanction that sort of diet for you."

"Why? It's not like I need to lose weight. I'm in great physical shape."

Essie looked him over then, and with her dark, assessing gaze, his old jeans and sweater suddenly felt about two sizes too tight.

"Okay, I'll give you that," she finally said. "You can have a bit of chocolate, but you need to up your fruit, too."

He grinned at a small victory, then frowned again. "And I'm not really a fan of quinoa."

"Please don't tell me my newest client is a five-year-old. Misha warned me your taste in food was somewhat"—Essie paused—"shall I say, juvenile?"

"Hey, just because I like a burger now and again doesn't make my tastes juvenile."

“Fine. But if those burgers are from a fast-food restaurant that you’ve had your driver pull up to more than three times a week, I’d call that *juvenile*.”

Ross gave her a hard stare and she gave him one in return. He blinked and Essie grinned, no doubt enjoying her moment of victory.

“You know, nobody who works for me gives me so much grief.”

“Why am I feeling that nobody gives you grief if they work for you or not? Now pick up your fork and eat your lunch like a good CEO.”

Ross shook his head and did as he was told. Essie smiled, clearly enjoying the fact he was enjoying her food. She took pride in her work and he could respect that. For so long with him it always seemed to be about the bottom line, just numbers on a page. But when was the last time he really looked at the work he was doing? Took time to look and enjoy all he’d built?

“What is it now?” Essie asked.

He looked her in the eye, enjoying the moment of getting lost in their depths. “Nothing at all. This lunch is terrific, Chef.”

She grinned a wholly satisfied grin, which was nothing short of glorious on her.

“Well done. You can stop gloating. You know you did great.”

“You caught me. Later we’ll talk breathing and maybe some meditation?”

At that, Ross let out a growl and Essie chuckled as she got up to make her exit. “Okay, I won’t push my luck. At least not for today. I’ll see you at dinner. Don’t work too hard.”

“Don’t worry, I always do.”

As Ross watched Essie’s retreating back, and then headed back toward the phone, he was surprised by how much he enjoyed the banter with Essie. He couldn’t remember the last time he had fun simply talking to a woman, or anyone for that matter, about a subject that wasn’t business related. With her, talking came easy. And now as he picked up his phone and

looked at the closed door, he found himself already looking forward to dinner and their next conversation.

## Chapter 8

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Essie was laying out the dough for her puff pastries when Quincy came in with Ross's discarded tray. "Well, it would seem your first lunch was a hit, Ms. Bradford."

Essie grinned. "That's good to hear, and please call me Essie."

Quincy reached over and nabbed a strawberry from her bowl. "And you can call me Quince. So, what brings you here to sail away with our little crew?" Quincy made an exaggerated fanning motion. "You know, besides the fact that our fearless leader is the hottest eligible bachelor on the planet?"

Essie's head shot up from her work. "That is definitely not the reason I'm here. I'm here to cook, and that's about it. Just doing a favor for a friend."

"Oh, my dear. You must have some really good friends. I need to hang with a better class of people," Quincy said with a laugh.

Essie laughed along with him as Ethan, the bosun, came in, followed by Jayce, the deckhand, who lifted his T-shirt to wipe at his sweaty brow, despite the chill of the sea air outside. Essie averted her gaze, but not before checking out his rippled abs. She bit back a giggle as she fought down a blush.

"Oh, darling, you have a lot to learn about us guys at sea. We are one big happy family on this boat," Quincy teased, catching her look.

Cooper came over and gave her shoulder a squeeze. His crystal blue eyes sparkled with sweet charm. "That's right, E."

She grinned, already liking her new nickname.

"We all get along like peas in a pod here. All for one, and one for all. Those are the rules." He dipped his pointer finger into

her bowl of chocolate and took a long lick. "This is delicious!" He looked at his mates. "Guys, this woman's food is as sweet as she looks. We've got a winner here."

Essie gave him a smile along with a playful shove. "Watch those hands, Cooper. And definitely no double dipping."

"All right, boys, that's enough," came Ross's deep voice, stopping all conversation like a scratched record. "No dipping your fingers into my bowl without permission." At the double entendre no one knew whether to laugh or not, so it was Essie who broke the tension, refusing to let Ross once again come into the kitchen and ruin what she was trying to build.

"You'd better be talking about these stainless-steel bowls, because if not, you'll be meeting the hard end of one of my frying pans."

Ross stepped down from the stairs and fully into the galley. Everyone was silent as Ross and Essie stared at each other. He raked his eyes from her eyes to her lips, down to her breasts and on to her hands, back up to her lips, then her eyes again. Each point he hit seemed to flame along his route. "Now, what else could I possibly be referring to?" he finally growled out before walking over to the fridge and pulling out a beer, twisting the cap and taking a pull.

"Sir, I could have brought that to you," Quincy spoke up.

He gave Quincy an exasperated look. "I'm not helpless, Quincy. But what you can do for me is prepare the small dining room." He then looked at Essie again. "If you wouldn't mind joining me there for dinner, Ms. Bradford?"

Oh, boy, so bowls licked and they were back to that. Essie gave him a cool smile. "Sure, Mr. Montgomery. I'll see you at eight."

The smile she got in return before he walked off could have frozen the water they sailed on, but she ignored it and continued her work. She wouldn't let him get to her. No way was he ruining her mood or her food.

Essie finished her work, filled her pastries, and then handed Cooper the spoon.

He laughed at that. “Oh, E, you are a tough one.”

“Of course I’m not. You said it yourself. I’m as sweet as my chocolate, and don’t let anybody tell you different.”

## Chapter 9



The petite dining salon might as well have been called the grand salon for all its opulence. The wood of the table was polished to a high shine as was the modern glass chandelier above with its golden accents. Not to mention the china was also gold edged and gleaming. Quincy had done a beautiful job with the settings. *Maybe a little too beautiful*, Essie thought as she caught the reflections of the candlelight in the large windows, which offered a beautiful view of the glistening moonlight bouncing off the dark sea.

*Crap, this is looking a little too much like a date!* It had Essie feeling uneasy. First, about how her meal would be received, which was ridiculous because she was always confident in her food. But after seeing this setup, she was really nervous over the fact she'd be sitting and sharing a meal with Ross.

Alone.

For the first time.

Butterflies started to flutter, threatening to swirl in an uncomfortably familiar way in her belly. This was silly; she had to get it together. It wasn't a "date" date; it was Essie and a client sharing a meal.

That was it. She'd consider it an assignment.

But as she was laying out her dishes in the center of the table, and removing her chef's smock to reveal the simple black cotton dress underneath, Ross walked in, looking like 110 percent of movable sex and money in his slacks, high-shined shoes, and expensive dress shirt. The butterflies went wild.

Essie brushed at her bangs and tugged on her casual dress, which now felt like an old painter's smock. "Sorry, I didn't have anything particularly dressy to wear. I really only came with more casual work clothes and these easy dresses." *Oh, God, why am I explaining myself to this man? Shut up, Essie.*

Ross smiled as he walked over to her. His closeness and clean freshly showered scent, with a hint of some expensive undertone, sent her senses into overdrive as he pulled out the chair for her. The urge to lean over and lick his neck was overwhelming.

"You look absolutely perfect."

Oh, hell, if that wasn't the worst thing he could have said. The butterflies went into a tailspin as her hormones followed behind.

In that moment Essie longed to be in the crew dining area, enjoying a casual laugh-it-up dinner with them. The safe kind, like she'd had with the band. Nothing felt casual or safe about tonight. With her out of her chef's smock, and him looking at her like he saw entirely too much, this dinner had her up front and out of the kitchen—very much on display as Essie. *Just as Essie.* She didn't like it one bit.

Thankfully, Quincy came in with the wine. "Sir, tonight we have a Pinot Noir, and I believe it will complement your meal beautifully."

Ross gave Quincy a nod as he continued his intense scrutiny of Essie. "And what is the meal for the evening?"

Essie let out a breath, which she realized she'd been holding way too long. Finally they were in her wheelhouse and she could be herself. Essie put on her best serene smile. "Well, we're starting with a pear, arugula, and warm goat-cheese salad. Then for the main dish we have sea scallops with light lemon reduction and spinach. And for dessert you'll be happy to know I've made your own mini chocolate mousse." When she spoke the word "mousse," she gave him a wink and was rewarded with a smile that was as sweet as a kid's at Christmas.

"It all looks wonderful. Can we start with the dessert?"



Essie laughed. “Oh, my goodness. I think I had it right. Deep down you are five years old.”

She noticed Quincy smirk as he finished his pour and discreetly left the room.

Ross gave her that quirky brow of his. “You know you are going to ruin my reputation with my crew.”

Essie reached over and began to plate the food for him. “Somehow I doubt that. No matter how much I tease, you’ll find a way to wash away any bit of playfulness.”

Ross took the plate and looked up at her. “Are you trying to imply that I’m no fun?”

Essie finished plating her own meal, sat down, and looked across at Ross. “I’m just saying that I call things as I see them, which I explained to you earlier, and so far all I’m seeing you do is work and be slightly scolding to your crew.”

“And all I see you doing is being highly judgmental toward me. So by your logic, I can surmise that your whole world revolves around cooking and judging people.” Ross took a bite of the salad and closed his eyes to let the dressing’s flavors flood his senses. He gave her a smile. “One of which you’re very good at”—but then he shrugged his shoulders—“the other, not so much.”

Essie frowned and began to eat her meal in silence. *What does he know? Though he does have right the part about me cooking well.* The man had excellent taste when it came to food and chefs. But, hey, she was a pretty good judge of people. Essie paused in her thinking as Cam came to mind, and the waste of time and space. Roger before him. It’s just she wasn’t the best judge of boyfriends. So what if every time she thought she found Mr. Right, give or take a few months or few weeks, they always turned out to be Mr. Wrong. Oh, well, hell! Maybe Ross was right and she was too quick to judge, and judged in the wrong direction.

Which was why she was over trusting her “yes”; from now on, caution was the way to go.

Essie stared at Ross. He looked every bit like a bite of sweet, sexy chocolate heaven as he ate his meal. Maybe giving up her “yes” was hasty. But there was no way she was going all in and giving up her heart for a man, when all it would take was a little taste to satisfy her need.

Essie smiled to herself as she took a sip of her wine.

“You look quite content there. It’s like you’ve had a full-on internal powwow without me. I’m starting to feel slighted. Penny for your thoughts?”

Essie stared at him for a few beats and then looked around the opulent dining room. It was lovely, but void of any personal touches. So very different from the way she lived. Thoughts of home and her mom came to her mind, and she wondered what her mother must be doing right now. Probably pulling out their old artificial Christmas tree. But would she really want to do it alone? Sadness swept through Essie in a sudden wave. “You know you can afford to pay way more than a penny for my thoughts.”

Ross’s lips quirked up. It was like a switch went off with that little quirk, the way her nipples hardened and the shiver sizzled down her spine.

“You’re right I can pay more, but how about you share anyway. You were far away for a moment there.”

She looked at him and took another sip of wine. “I was thinking about my mother for a moment and what she must be doing right now.”

“And what might that be?” he asked, seeming genuinely interested.

Essie briefly considered the time. “I was thinking tonight she’d be putting up the Christmas tree, but I’m wondering if she would have wanted to do it without me. I should have made time to do it with her before I left. It’s our favorite thing.” Essie smiled, wanting to lighten the mood. “If she’s not into tree trimming, I’m guessing, given the time, she’s watching her favorite show on TV, with her feet up, having something warm to eat. Probably a leftover stew of some sort from Sunday. My

mother always likes to make large pots so she doesn't have to cook during the week, since she still works fulltime at the post office."

"And what does your father do?" Ross asked.

Essie's shoulders tensed as the usual ache settled in her chest. "He drove, boy did he drive." As she heard her voice start to fade off, Essie forced herself to snap back. "He passed away two years ago," she said quickly, and then tried to cover it with a smile she hoped was bright enough. "But my mom is up for retirement soon, and I'm looking forward to taking her away on a long-awaited and much-deserved vacation one of these Christmases."

"I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to bring up a subject that would cause you pain." His voice was low and deep, full of so much sincerity that it made her pause and swallow down a lump in her throat.

Essie waved a hand across her face in dismissal. "Oh, it's fine, really. It's been a couple of years. It's just that, well, my mother and I have never been apart during the holidays, so I do worry about her being alone. But she won't really be alone. My aunt Viv invited her to come and visit with her family, so as long as there are no big fights between her and Aunt Viv between now and Christmas"—Essie rolled her eyes—"all will be fine."

Essie wanted desperately to get the subject off her and on to anything else. She noticed Ross's plate was empty and laughed. "I see you hated tonight's meal. How about we get started on dessert?" She stood to move his plate to the side buffet, when he reached out a hand to still her, and the charge was instantaneous. She turned and stared.

"I'm sorry I took you away from your mom on Christmas. You sit, and I'll move these."

Essie sat, but only because she was more stunned by this apology than anything else. She watched silently as he moved the plates to the buffet and then came back to top off her glass

of wine. She looked up at him with a half smile. “I hope you aren’t trying to get me drunk.”

“You say that as if I would need to.”

Part of Essie wanted to call him a “cocky asshole” for that comment, but his matter-of-fact way of stating it held no arrogance, and hell, it wasn’t like he was lying. He was hot as sin and definitely wouldn’t need to get her drunk to get her into bed. So Essie watched as he expertly served the mousse from the left and took his seat.

“You do this like you’ve had your fair share of practice. Have you ever worked in a restaurant?”

“As I said before, you, Essie, are quick to judge, and yes, I have.”

Essie furrowed her brows. “But I looked you up. Your family is quite rich.”

She saw his mouth harden a bit. “That’s my family—though I did get a good amount of money when my mother passed away.”

“I’m really sorry,” she said, but he continued to talk, wanting to gloss over his lost parent in the same way she had.

“Don’t worry. It’s been even more years for me than you. And my father has not always been that forthcoming with sharing his wealth. I will say he was right in wanting me to learn all facets of business, though. I worked a few summers in the kitchens of his resorts. I did kitchen, grounds, hospitality, as well as working construction. I’ve seen every aspect of the business while working through college. He made sure to let me know my education would not come free.”

Essie studied Ross closely and was careful with her words. “He sounds like a tough man. Are you close?”

Ross picked up his wineglass and drained it before looking at her. “That we are not. I always seem to fall just short of Dad’s expectations. No matter, though. I’ve ceased looking for my father’s approval and now only seek to satisfy myself.” Ross smiled, his eyes seemingly quite far away before he blinked and

his gaze turned warm and approving. “And I will say, right now I am quite satisfied.”

Part of her wanted to blush and possibly preen under his approving gaze, but something in her wanted to go back to what he was clearly trying to cover up. “You have me at a loss right now, Ross. For all the judging you say I do, I can’t quite figure you out. What I know from Misha is pretty much stats. That you’re a hard worker, maybe overly so, and you have poor eating habits, though not the worst I’ve ever seen. But you counter that with hard, grinding workouts that are just as hard as your work ethic. With you, it seems to be all or nothing. For some reason Misha speaks very highly of you. I’ve known her for quite a while and she doesn’t speak so highly of that many people, so that makes me wonder why.”

Ross shrugged. “Of course Misha likes me. What’s there not to like? I have that kind of effect on women.”

Essie narrowed her eyes. “Yeah, I don’t think so. I’ve known Misha a long time. She would tell me if that was the case. Either way, I think there’s a little something more to you, too. What’s the real reason you’re working so hard that you end up in the ER, having a panic attack that scares you enough to fear it’s a heart attack? What are you running from, Ross Montgomery?”

With that question Ross got up and took her hand, pulling her into his arms. His embrace was swift, but not so fast that she couldn’t push back if she wanted.

But she didn’t want to.

She wanted to stay where she was, her body flush against his solid hardness. Ross looked down, his dark eyes meeting her own in a challenge as old as time.

“Maybe I’m not running from anything, sweet Essie, but running toward something? Did you ever stop to think of that?”

The question took her breath away because she hadn’t thought of it. She blinked in the wonderment of it all, yet at the same time she steeled herself against the emotional onslaught as his lips came down toward hers.

Quincy walked back into the dining room, breaking the sexually charged tension. “How are we doing here?” he said brightly, and stopped short when he realized what he’d walked in on.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’ll go and, uh, get you another bottle.”

Essie attempted to back away, but Ross, unfazed by the interloper, kept his arm firmly around her waist and challenged her with his gaze.

“Yes, you can, Quincy,” Ross said, cool as ice. “Thank you. I think we’ll have it in the main deck’s salon.”

“Very good, sir,” Quincy said as he quickly left the dining room.

“I think it would be nice to continue this conversation where we can enjoy a view of the sea.”

“Why did you do that?” Essie asked, trying hard to keep a tight rein on her temper. “You may not care about what others think of you, but I sure care what they think of me.”

He seemed to study her hard after that statement, making her increasingly uncomfortable under his critical eye.

“Maybe that’s your problem.”

Essie’s gaze sharpened. “What are you talking about? I don’t have a problem. Besides, it’s you I’m here to fix. It’s you with the problems.”

He raised a brow. “If you say so, Essie.”

Essie pulled back sharply, yanking herself from his embrace, then hating the decision as soon as the coolness of the broken contact hit her. “I say so.”

“Methinks the lady protests just enough to try and convince herself,” he said, smooth and easy. “What are you trying to do? Do you think if you play nice and be a good little girl the world will reward you? I’ve got news for you—it doesn’t work that way. It’s eat or be eaten. You’re a chef. You should know that. Survival of the fittest, and all that. But Lord knows there are opportunities for a swift ass kicking around every corner.”

Ross took a dangerous and altogether too-alluring step toward her as Essie fought to slow her rapidly beating heart. He

was just above her, so close that she could feel his breath against her lips.

He spoke again. “But if you’re smart, you’ll also grab swiftly to any chance of pleasure you can get. I know I do.”

Essie snorted, her mind going to him in the ER. “Yeah, and look where it’s gotten you.”

Ross got a dark smolder in his eye, his expression taking on a look of pure sex. “Yeah, look where it’s gotten me. The question is, where will it take you?”

Essie swallowed as Ross stared at her, then gave his head a small shake as if he were dismissing her and the idea that she could be like him: a person who could swim with the big fish and hold her own. The type who could know herself and, really and truly, live in her own pleasure, come what may with the consequences.

Essie studied the idea for a moment. *Could I?* God, in that moment she really wanted to do so. All she wanted to do was to take Ross with both hands and taste all he had to offer. At least for this moment. But how could she? She barely knew him beyond two conversations, a Google search, and a friend’s recommendation. Jumping into bed like that was definitely not her style. Not to mention, she was in a business relationship with him. Ten days later and maybe, yes, fine, they could go on a date and see where things went. But now? No, it couldn’t be done. It shouldn’t be done.

Still, Essie couldn’t help the small twinge of satisfaction she got from seeing Ross’s eyes widen when she surprised him by suddenly reaching up and fisting his shirt in her hands and, against all her better judgment and his presumptions, pulling him down into a kiss.

# Chapter 10



*Holy hell, could this woman kiss!*

Ross was instantly swept away by the sweet, decadent, and surprisingly addictive taste of Essie Bradford.

Where he thought she would be timid and demure, she proved him wrong by taking charge, pulling him down to her with two hands, and rising up to meet his lips forcefully with her own. And what a first meeting it was. Those full, ripe, pillowy lips were everything he dreamed they would be. Soft and luxurious, sweet to the taste, the first touch had the normally unflappable Ross just about going weak in the knees.

But he steeled himself. Telling himself to be strong and not to lose it too quickly. Giving himself a pep talk, not unlike he did when he was a teenage boy. Think baseball stats, cold showers, bespectacled librarians . . . okay, maybe not librarians. But still, how was it this almost-unassuming woman, a chef to cook his meals, could come in here and, with a mere brush of her lips, just about lay him flat? Ross closed his eyes and let the feeling take him away.

He felt Essie's excitement as she pushed her soft body against his and her rapid heartbeat vibrated against his chest, giving him a rock-hard hard-on. She tilted her head and leaned in, going further with her kiss, tentatively easing her tongue out, to run along the seam of his lips. He was only too happy to open his own lips to let her in to taste him fully for the first time.

But with a dangerous first taste, his own emotions went out of control and Ross wrapped his arms around her body and pulled her in tight. His hands traveled down to cup her curvy



bottom and pull her up against his hard erection. His tongue snaked out hungrily to taste the sweet wine and chocolate as it clung to her very clever tongue.

He wanted to taste her everywhere, to see if the sweetness continued all the way down her body. As the kiss changed, Ross took control, moving down her neck, pausing to lick along her delicate collarbone. Ross couldn't help but smile when she sighed, and his erection jumped in response to the erotic sound as it escaped her lips and her head lulled back in unabashed pleasure. That's all he wanted to do. Give her pleasure from now until the sun came up, and then do it all over again and again and again. Getting her to sigh could easily turn into a life's mission for him.

Ross reached a hand up and cupped Essie's breast and she drew in a quick inhale. Something in the quick indrawn breath pulled his attention up to her face. Seeing her beautiful dark neck thrown back in submission, her lips swollen from their passionate kiss, her eyes fluttering in dark ecstasy, about did him in. He could have her right now if he wanted. Just like so many women before, he could have her.

*And then what?*

Ross frowned at the unwanted question. It was one he hadn't thought of in a long time, causing him to draw back ever so slightly, breaking contact only a minuscule bit. But that bit was long enough and Essie's eyes fluttered open, looking at him with the question he asked himself, unsaid but reflected there.

*And then what?*

"I think I should forgo the second bottle of wine and go up to bed. Or is it down to bed?"

When Essie stepped back, she left Ross feeling more alone than he cared to admit.

"Besides, it's starting to get late and it's been a long day. How about we pick up again tomorrow? I'd like to prepare for the day and really get you started on your regime."

Letting her go anywhere, especially to bed tonight without him, was the last thing Ross wanted to do, but he wouldn't push

her any further. Besides, she was right. It had been a long day. Maybe what they both needed was a little space and perspective. Also, Ross didn't want any woman to feel pressure to end up in his bed. That was a strictly-by-choice situation, always had been and always would be.

Ross cleared his throat and hoped his words came out even, and the turmoil he secretly felt was hidden. "You're right, it has been a long day. Thank you so much for dinner, it was wonderful. Misha was correct. You are a very talented chef, and I look forward to all you have in store for me during the rest of this trip."

After what they had just shared, he didn't quite know how to end the evening, which made him feel like a damn fool, since he usually knew what to do in just about every situation, especially when it came to women.

Thankfully, the surprising Essie once again took matters into her own hands and gave him an easy smile. "I'm glad you enjoyed the meal, though you will be a challenge, and I have to think of ways to counteract all the chocolate you're going to demand."

At his raised brow they both laughed.

"Don't start, Ross, just say good night. I'm going to go make sure everything is fine in the kitchen, and then I'm heading to bed. You gave me enough to think about for one day and night," she said as she casually walked off toward the galley, leaving Ross with nothing better to do than take a chilly but welcome walk along the outer deck to hopefully cool his heated passion.



It took all of one point five seconds into the new day for the night before to come flooding back to Essie's mind.

*Oh, God, did I really do what I know I did?*

She wanted to cringe over the embarrassment of the shameless, brazen way she came on to Ross, but at the same

time she couldn't fully regret kissing him. She so wanted to give herself a high five and the "atta, girl" she knew her girlfriends would.

Essie stretched, surprised at how comfortably she had slept when she finally did drift off. *Serenity* was just that: a sure ride that cut the ocean smoothly, its engines a low hum, combined with the sensual tingle she received from Ross, sent her to sleep way more contentedly than she'd expected.

Essie went to the large window and saw the sun just coming up over the horizon, beautiful soft shades of orange where it met the still-slumbering sea. Essie longed to be outside, to smell the sea air.

She changed into her workout clothes of leggings and a tank top and grabbed her yoga mat to take her morning practice above deck.

On the way out she purposely closed her stateroom door softly so as not to wake Ross as she slipped past his door. According to the schedule, she had an hour before she had to start to prepare breakfast and then she had all day to deal with Ross and what happened last night. Before Essie went to bed, she mulled it over in her mind numerous times, and still had yet to come up with how she would handle this new facet of their equally new relationship. All she had come up with was to take it slow and continue to be a professional.

Which, to her ears, sounded quite dull.

The only voice she could hear over her own was Misha's, and it was telling her to let loose and enjoy herself. She needed this.

Cam had left her, high and dry, and this was supposed to be her holiday—a working one that it was, but still her holiday. Not to mention it had been over two months since she'd had sex. Not a desert, but bordering on a parched spell for sure. Why not let go and see where these days with Ross could take her? Why not say yes, for once, to herself and to what she wanted?

But just as she was on her way out to head to the outer deck, sure of herself and her decision, Essie heard grunting and a constant *thwacking* sound as she passed the gym. There was

Ross, looking like he had been working out for at least the past hour, glistening, rich brown and drenched in sweat. He pounded hard at the heavy bag. Essie instantly felt her body go on full alert as she took in his stance. Sure-footed and strong, his arms were muscular and powerful; his loose-fitting shorts were barely being held up by the tie at his trim waist. His wide back and broad shoulders were well accented by his wet tank. When he punched the bag again, and she watched those muscles contract and release, Essie couldn't help but let out a breathy sigh.

Ross stopped and turned around, meeting her, eye to eye. "Good morning." His voice was strong and raspy. Essie could tell he was fighting to catch his breath.

"You going a bit hard for so early in the morning, aren't you?"

Ross's eyes raked over her body, and in that moment Essie could practically feel his hands grazing over her skin. He stopped briefly at her yoga mat and then came up to her eyes with a playful smile. "And I see you like to take things slow and easy in the morning. Duly noted."

Essie's eyes narrowed. "Here it is, the sun is barely up, and you are spoiling for an argument."

"With you, Ms. Bradford, I'd hit the mat anytime, any way."

Essie smiled, then looked at the fairly large, cleared workout area in the exercise room. It could easily accommodate a yoga session for two. She looked back at Ross with a challenge in her eyes. "Okay, Mr. Montgomery. Just be sure you remember you said that. The session starts now."



Ross was only too happy to oblige. He loved to shake her up. Liked to see that little spark of fire she got when they sparred a bit and he called her Ms. Bradford. She really had no idea how

hot she was. And time in a possible downward-dog position with the delectable Essie Bradford? He'd be a fool to hesitate.

Eagerly, he took off his sneakers and let her place him in position on the mat. Her strong but gentle fingers at his waist instantly put his body on alert, reminding him of the fact that thoughts of her put him through a tortured and restless night.

It wasn't so easy making it through this workout. Ross spent most of his time torn between wanting to look at her beautifully shaped form in her work-out gear, and fighting looking at said form because of the effects on his body.

He took the edge off by going tried and true, thinking of sports, stocks, anything but her shapely figure. Thankfully, Essie wasn't easy on him. Starting out slow and easy, after a while picking up the pace, taking him through a series of moves that had him panting for air like he did with his cross-fit trainer back home. When she was down in a sort of modified plank and swooped into a cobra and quickly went from there—back to plank, then up into some mad one-armed twisted-pretzel thing—all Ross could do was lean back and marvel at her strength as his own muscles cried “uncle.”

Essie gracefully came out of position and gave him a saucy wink. “You’ve had enough?”

“I may regret saying this, but yes. I give up. You got the best of me this morning, Essie.” For his acquiescence, Ross was rewarded with a smile so sweet that he suddenly felt like he could do twenty laps around the deck and not break a sweat.

“Okay,” she said, her voice going low, taking on a softer tone. “How about we relax and cool down for a minute. Just stretch and breathe before we really start the day?”

She took him through an easy series of floor stretches and some light breathing, only to test his willpower to the max when, in order to get his legs stretched wider apart, she used her own outstretched legs to open his. “Are you trying to be the death of me, woman?” he asked, giving her a look that left no question as to what he was really talking about.

But Essie played it cool, taking his hands in hers, and giving him a tug forward toward her most intimate of places. “I’m only trying to challenge you. Make sure you’re getting all you paid for.”

He leaned back, gently pulling her forward toward him. “There are some things I never pay for.”

At that, she stilled, and there they were for the moment—both suspended, legs spread, hand in hand, eye to eye, both wanting the same thing, but pulling in opposite directions.

There was a noise from the gym doorway, a discreet cough that had both their heads turning. Quincy.

“Once again, Quincy, your timing is perfect.”

Quincy was impeccable, despite the early hour and the embarrassing moment of the night before. “That it is, sir. I’m sorry to disturb you, but you have a call that said it can’t wait. Would you like it here or in your office?”

Ross reluctantly let go of Essie’s hands and helped her up. “Thank you for an exuberant workout.”

“Thanks for joining me. I’ll go and get breakfast started. It shouldn’t be long. I didn’t expect you up this early.”

“It’s no problem. I never eat before working out. Please take your time.” He then turned to Quincy. “Thank you. I’ll take it in my office.”

As Ross left Essie in the exercise room, he wanted both to curse and thank Quincy for his second, not-so-well-timed, interruption.

# Chapter 11



Essie prepared breakfast for Ross and even got to score a few points with Chef Scott by asking him for advice on Ross's preferences, and by helping the chef with prepping the crew's breakfast. She was putting the finishing touches on Ross's tray as Simon gave her a gentle ribbing.

"He won't like it," Simon said, his tone light and teasing as he referred to the fruit kale smoothie she added to the tray.

"You wanna bet?"

Simon looked her up and down, then shook his head. "Nah. The money would be too easy. You do yourself a favor and heat one of your sweet pastries from last night. I know Ross, and no matter how much fruit you try and sweeten it with, he's not drinking that green smoothie."

Essie rolled her eyes and took the tray. "I'll just leave and take that as a compliment on my baking, Chef."

Simon laughed.

As Essie made her way toward Ross's office, she once again almost literally ran into him as he came down the stairs. "Hi. I was just bringing this to you," she said, keeping a tight hold on the tray and her unsteady emotions.

His sudden appearance towering on the stairs surprised her. He was clean and freshly showered in easy sweatpants, which hung low on his hips, and he wore a finely threaded cotton tee, which defined his muscles well. He was no less powerful from when she saw him at the heavy bag that morning, and his clean, freshly showered smell and close presence set her off-

kilter. Thankfully, he reached out and took the tray from her hands.

“Come, have you eaten?” he asked.

“I have.” She’d grazed from her homemade muesli while prepping, and she had her own shake before heading up, too. Their exuberant workout session made her more famished than normal.

“Well, please still join me while I eat. Chat awhile?”

She studied him for a moment. It wasn’t like she really could say no. He’d paid for her time for the duration of this trip. And, honestly, it wasn’t like she wanted to say no. “Of course. But don’t you have work to do?”

He turned to head up the stairs, but instead of turning left and going toward his office, as she expected, he continued up and went to the large salon. “How about we sit outside? You’ll find that it’s warmed up. We’ve had to take a detour, and we’ll be making a brief stop along the way at my resort in Bermuda.”

Essie looked at him in surprise. “But isn’t that way off our course? How long will it delay the trip?”

Ross put the tray on the table nearest the doors to the outer deck and then opened them wide, letting in the fresh air. The view of the open water was stunning. The sun had fully risen and the water glistened a gorgeous crystalline blue through the large windows. “Don’t worry, it won’t delay us long. And it will give me a chance to show you my resort. You’ll get an idea of what I’m planning, with the partnership of these investors.” He readied to take a seat, but pulled out a chair and gestured for her to sit first.

Essie came over and, instead of sitting, gave him a small shove into the chair. “I thought on the way to Miami you would get a little relaxation. Seems you found a way to find some extra work.”

Almost instinctively, Ross pulled her down onto his lap. The easy snug fit had them both looking at each other with a bit of shock. Ross reached up and brought his finger to her cheek. “I didn’t go looking for this work. It came and found me.”



Essie knew she should get up, push back, act affronted, something. But sitting on Ross's lap, doing exactly what she was doing in that moment, was the only thing she wanted to do, and right where she was, was the only place she wanted to be.

She took in his dark eyes as he looked at her with a raw, unrestrained desire, the type she had never experienced. "I swear, you make me do the most unprofessional and inappropriate things, Ross Montgomery. When I'm around you, I feel like I'm somehow not my usual self."

Those sexy as hell lips quirked a little at that, and she wanted to kiss him again.

"Is that so bad?" he asked.

Essie thought for a moment. "It sure isn't good. What must you think of me? What must the crew?"

He let out a low, husky growl as he pulled her in close and nuzzled at her neck, sending the most decadent thrill sizzling throughout her body.

"Why are you so worried about what the crew thinks, or what I think for that matter?" he asked as he leaned back a bit and looked up at her seriously, and maybe a little too deeply. "Why not think about yourself and what you want and feel—do you ever do that?"

Once again he read her and came back with a too-clear summary. She was always caring what others thought and putting their needs before her own. Wasn't it just what she was saying was her downfall and what she had to change most about herself? Essie looked at Ross now and came out with the truth. "No, I usually don't ever do that."

He ran a hand lazily up and down her side, the shivers turning into lazy waves that lulled her into some sort of Ross Montgomery spell.

"Is there any particular reason you don't?"

Suddenly he felt too close to home, and Essie wanted to dodge the subject. She shimmied around and reached for his tray, pulling it toward him while trying to get up. Essie pulled

the cover off the plate, and once again Ross pulled a skeptical face. Essie laughed. “Really, again? What were you living on?”

Drive-through breakfast specials, too? You really have to change your palate.” She hoisted herself up.

“Aww, come on now,” Ross said as Essie went around to the other side of the table.

“Come on, yourself. Pouting isn’t cute on a CEO. For lunch you’ll join me in the kitchen. I think a lesson is in order.”

Ross surprised her by grinning as he held up his smoothie. “Fine. I welcome joining you in the kitchen. I’ll show you where the fryer is and we can dispose of whatever monstrosity made this.”

Essie rolled her eyes. “That is incredibly healthy and delicious.”

Ross laughed, shaking his head. “Well, I finally found the one thing you can’t cook.” He sipped at it again and grimaced. “You didn’t really cook this, did you? You’re pulling one over on me.”

“Well, technically, it’s not cooked.”

Ross cocked his head to the side as he put the smoothie down and dug into his omelet and salmon. “Well, therein lies your problem. Food is meant to be cooked.”

Now it was Essie’s turn to frown. “Why is that a rule?”

“It’s my rule.”

“And what? Your rules are somehow law or something?”

He shrugged before taking a long pull of coffee. “Or something.”

Essie leaned back, crossing her arms. “You are annoyingly self-assured.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve heard that, and you have to know I can’t say I take it as an insult.”

“I’m not saying I meant it as one.” Essie let her gaze wander from him as she looked out at the view. Jayce walked by with an easy wave. It was a glorious day and she suddenly longed to go out.

“I’m glad to hear it. Usually it is not said so kindly.”

Essie looked at him once again, and there was a hint of something in his eyes. A certain longing. A hurt. For a moment she couldn't help but wonder if it was a woman bringing that look into his eyes. She wanted to ask, but she knew it wasn't her place. And then he blinked, and as she'd seen him do before, his expression quickly changed and he was cool. Not emotionless, but there was no sign of the brief hint of hurt she had seen. Just the smooth assurance he usually exuded.

"The sun is getting strong. Would you join me for a stroll around the deck? We never took that walk last night."

Essie looked at him and thought of Misha and her ever-so-obvious setup. She wondered if he was in on it, too, and felt her lips twist. What if he was? Would that be so bad? What was the harm in having some fun for a change? She'd earned it, working pretty much nonstop this past year. "Fine, but you'll join me in the kitchen after we go out."

"Of course," he said, getting up and heading for the deck's open doors, confident in the knowledge she'd follow. When she didn't immediately, Ross paused and turned back, putting out his hand. "Please walk with me awhile, Essie?"

Fighting not to overthink, Essie reached out and took Ross's hand in her own, ignoring the smooth, easy fit. "Okay, Ross, show me around. But after that, it's my turn and in my kitchen, and you're my student. So I'm in charge?"

He grinned. "Deal," he said with a mischievous look in his eyes. "How about we seal it with a kiss?"

Essie pushed at him playfully, but followed it by pulling him down until his lips met hers once again. She kissed him until she felt they both needed to jump into the water and cool off. Ross's low moan followed by his erection when she rubbed against him was her clear indication she'd gotten the best of him. She pulled back and looked up into his eyes. "I told you, Ross. You make me do the most improper things."

He smiled. "And once again, I'm so glad for it." But he pulled away from her and took her hand again. "Still, I don't want to rush you. At least not an hour into our first full day together.

Besides,” he said, taking a breath, “if I don’t slow down, I may embarrass myself.”

Essie couldn’t help the inner smile that showed on the outside with that one. She knew she was good-looking enough and did fine with men. At least no one was kicking her out of bed or turning her down, but no one was openly expressing to her that she made them feel out of control. It was nice, if not surprising, and she couldn’t help but wonder if it was some sort of line. She looked at Ross and tried to hide her skepticism.

“Sure. Let’s walk. Tell me about your project.”

As they walked, Ross told her about the resort he was building. It was an offshoot of his Bermuda resort. But closer to Miami. Essie was amazed at the size and scope of the project and the fact that it sounded like a mini utopia, sort of a *Fantasy Island* for the new set. If he could pull it off, it would be great. Not that she’d see the likes of it. It sounded like “if you have to ask the cost, you can’t afford it.” Single residences, with private chefs, twenty-four-hour maid and concierge service. All top-notch. No amenity spared and, he’d added, practically no wish, within reason, denied. Essie couldn’t help the heat that rushed to her cheeks as her mind wandered to the types of hedonistic fantasies she could explore with Ross in a place like that.

They made their way back toward the main salon area, and Ross and Essie took lounge chairs on deck to relax in the sun awhile. Essie turned to him. “The island sounds fabulous, and like it’s a huge undertaking. I can see why you’ve been under so much stress with that in the works, plus your other holdings in the city. What made you take it on? Your resort in Bermuda is already successful.”

Ross’s expression got serious for a moment before he spoke. “I don’t know. Bermuda is wonderful, but I’m ready to expand. In New York I can always go up, and, believe me, I will. But my father made his mark in resorts, and I know he always wanted to do something like this. Could never do something like this. I’m going to be the Montgomery to make it happen.”

Essie frowned. “Have you spoken with your father about it? Is he one of your investors?”

Ross’s eyes grew cold. “No. He’s given up on that part of the business. Told me I was a fool to do it. I plan to prove him wrong. Once and for all.”

Something in Ross’s voice let her know she’d gone far enough with the questions for one morning. She gave him a smile. “Well, you’ll need your strength to do that. What about we hit the kitchen?” She stood and then reached out a hand to pull him up, but Ross pulled her back down on top of him. Her body hit his with a gentle thump.

“I’d much rather spend time learning more about you, Essie.”

His lips were strong and self-assured. There was no tentative pretense in this kiss. Ross pulled her into him, his large hands roaming up her thighs and cupping her behind perfectly as if he had some sort of claim to stake as he rubbed her against his hard body. He coaxed her lips apart and his tongue expertly intertwined with hers, stroking against hers until her body was aflame from her toes on up.

Essie let out a moan when he moved a hand from her behind to the underside of her breast. His thumb teased over her nipple in a circular motion and her most intimate spot went instantly to liquid. “Hell, the things you won’t do to get out of cooperating,” she said, her voice a hoarse whisper as she pushed up against his chest.

Ross chuckled. “I didn’t get this far by playing fair.”

Essie came to her feet, taking gulps of air and smoothing down her hair. She looked down at him with narrowed eyes. “No, I don’t think you did.”

## Chapter 12



As they stood at the galley counter, side by side, Ross tried his best to concentrate on what Essie was saying and not just stare at her luscious lips, not to mention her curvy hips. He was ready to break out into a sweat. They had already gotten the shrimp stir fried for the spicy Thai salad they were having for lunch, and now he was chopping, or supposed to be chopping, cucumber. But Essie looked so cute at the stove, her hips giving a little wiggle, which he could almost swear she was unaware of, as she stirred the mixture of shrimp, lime, fish sauce, and onions. At first it seemed like a lot to put together, but he had to admit, she made it seem fun and easy. Essie turned and gave him a smile. Damn those lips. His knife slipped and he nicked his finger. “Ouch!”

“Watch it!” She came running over to check him out, pulling his hurt finger toward her for scrutiny. “You have to pay attention or you’re going to get hurt. It’s not as simple as it looks.”

Ross kept staring at her. “Nothing ever is.”

Essie pulled him toward the sink as she simultaneously turned off the stove. She rinsed his cut thumb, then dried it. She pulled the first-aid kit down with a quick, no-nonsense air and bandaged him. “It’s nothing much, but you have to be careful.” She started to plate their lunch then and, without fanfare, served him at the counter.

Her eyes now held a seriousness that Ross didn’t want to accept. He leaned in to kiss her, but she backed up and waved a fork.

“Eat. And enjoy your work. But think about being more careful when you’re in my kitchen.”

He took a bite, then paused to smile. It was good. Essie gave him a nod of pleasure. “You did well for your first try. You can cook. I don’t see why you rely on eating out so much. All I can tell from our short time together is that you go way too fast. You’re reckless.”

Ross gave her a frown. A look that normally would end most conversations, but still Essie continued.

“Save the look, Ross. I see it. It may have gotten you far in business, but if you’re not careful, it could be your downfall.”

“I doubt that.” He said the words, but something about them still hit him hard.

“Really, then why am I here?” At this, Ross raised his brow and she dropped her fork. “That’s bullshit, Ross. And it doesn’t look good on you. Be serious with me for once. It was Misha who first called me from the ER. Something got you in there, scared as shit. You have a boat called *Serenity*, but it seems like your life is anything but. Why would you even name your boat *Serenity* if your life is full of chaos?”

Ross swallowed, trying hard to push down the truth he was sailing from as fast as his boat would take him. But he let it out. “It’s named after my daughter.”

Essie stared. Her eyes wide, her mouth shut. He wished more than anything she’d say something. Anything. Just fill the silence. Right now he didn’t want it. The silence was worse than anything. Bringing her on board gave him something to do, something to think about besides the fact that he thought just the other day he might die and would be missing another holiday, maybe his final chance to be with his daughter.

Finally she spoke and said just the wrong thing. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t need your pity. I’m fine,” Ross said in a low voice.

She laughed and somehow it made him feel better. “Yeah, I can see you are.”

Ross laughed then, too. “You really are a ball-buster, you know that?”

Essie surprised him by chuckling. “You know, that’s about the nicest thing you could have said to me.”



Essie was glad to break the tension. She could see Ross’s inner struggle, and though she wanted to be a little hard on him, she felt bad for causing him pain. It was clear that his emotions were erratic and raw. He warred with something in his mind and heart. Essie’s own heart broke a little for him and she chided herself for it.

*Shit.* Now she remembered seeing behind his desk the photo of the little girl. She was so taken with him that she didn’t look past the obvious and see deeper. Essie wanted to hang her head in shame. She was so focused on her own desires, she completely shut out what was happening with her client.

Essie could see Ross was uncomfortable, so she eased her way back to his daughter as they shared dessert, a simple brownie a la mode, which he helped make. “How old is your daughter?”

He swallowed before he answered on a low whisper. “She’s four.”

The answer took her cracked heart and shattered it. One, because of her age, and two, because it seemed to put to rest any buried thought of a blossoming relationship with him.

“I can tell you miss her.”

Ross shrugged. “You can’t miss what you never had. I was only with Yasmine, Serenity’s mother, for the first year of her life. A little less. I never even shared an actual birthday with her. I was on my grind, and I thought Yasmine was all for that, in the beginning. After Serenity, she changed. Said she wanted to settle down, and if it wasn’t with me, then it would be with someone she could make a home with. I get it. For some women, they need that.” He gave Essie a pointed look.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”



“I’m just looking,” he said.

“Well, you’re looking like you’re sizing me up, which there is no need to, since I’m only here for ten days. Besides, we’re talking about you and your daughter.”

“Touché.” Ross let out a sigh. “No matter, Yas and I were spending more time apart than together. Her modeling career was on a downturn and she was ready to settle down. I was not, and, besides, a kid needs stability. I get it. Her new husband has done well by her and Serenity. We talk and Skype. She knows I’m her father.”

Essie wanted to say something, but the way he ended his speech, it made her wonder if he’d be receptive to anything she had to say. She took a gamble. “I’m sure she does and I’m sure, even if you don’t think so, she misses you. Especially at Christmas. I know I miss my dad.”

Ross’s expression had her instantly regretting her words. “It’s just he worked a lot. And it was only on his forced time off, Sundays and holidays like Christmas, when we got to spend time together as a family. I cherish that more than I think he ever knew.” She smiled as the good times with her dad came back to her. The laughter and the good food they shared. “It was my father who first taught me how to cook.”

Ross’s eye widened. “Was he a chef, too?”

She shook her head. “Oh, no! Just a hungry man with a creative palate. Dad never made the same dish twice. It was always a little different, depending on what we had available. His only day off from driving the bus was Sunday, and he loved cooking for my mother. She worked so hard, so he’d make her these wonderful meals with whatever we had on hand. As I got a little bigger, I’d join him in the kitchen, and we’d laugh together and he’d tell me stories of his family, how one day it would be great to have a family restaurant where we could do this all the time. In the kitchen was the only place he wasn’t stressed about bills, time, the next shift.”

Ross glided the back of his hand softly and reassuringly along her arm. She gave him a smile as she continued speaking.

“He always said we were blessed that God made a way so that we always had a little food on the table. My father died on a Sunday, going in to make a little overtime to get more for our holiday dinner. Christmas was our favorite time. Trimming the tree. Sharing a meal.” Essie stopped talking when Ross reached out and wiped a tear from her cheek, which she hadn’t known she’d shed. “Oh, hell. I’m sorry,” she said.

“What are you sorry for? It’s me who should be apologizing. Taking you away from your mother on Christmas. No job or amount of money is worth that.”

She put her hand out to his lips to stop him. “No, this was my choice. You’re bringing me closer to my dream of my own restaurant, and I thank you.” She smiled wide, hoping to elevate the mood. “Now, enough talk. Let me clean this up, and you take care of whatever you planned for this afternoon, and I’ll think up your next fabulous meal.”

## Chapter 13



As *Serenity* docked in Bermuda, Essie didn't know what to expect. Ross told her his business for his resort wouldn't be more than a couple of hours. It was some trouble with the contractor who was doing renovations on his new state of the art golf course. But still, Ross planned on spending the day there. He wanted to take her out, to show her around, and then they could have dinner together before boarding and heading out to continue their trip to Miami.

She had to admit she was excited, but also hesitant. Ross wasn't the type of guy she was used to dating. And it wasn't as if they were even dating. As soon as they got off the boat, Essie spied the two drivers, with matching Mercedes sedans, waiting for them and knew this wouldn't be her usual roughing-it trek. *What? No mopeds available?*

Ross kissed her easily, as if they were a couple in a comfortable, much longer relationship, when, in reality, they were anything but. She couldn't help but marvel at his outward show of confidence. Though when they were alone and talking, without the buffer of a sexual flame, she picked up on definite insecurities that waved off him. But Ross did an excellent job of not letting it show. Regarding the crew, he felt no need to make any explanations or excuses about their heating relationship; and, in turn, he encouraged her not to feel it necessary to do so, either. His strong confidence left no room for any second-guessing, and she found she barely got a second glance when she went in to make breakfast this morning.

Part of it bugged her. Made it feel like them hooking up was something the crew knew was inevitable from the moment she stepped on the ship. It also made her wonder how often he did such a thing.

As Ross pulled back from their kiss, he stared at Essie hard. “You’re overthinking,” he said.

She frowned. “You’re right, I am. And it’s a waste of time on such a beautiful day.” Essie gave him a smile and rose up to kiss him, this time enjoying the thrill of his lips against hers. When would she get this opportunity again?

When she pulled away, he was smiling down at her. “I got you your own car for the afternoon. You take it into town, do some shopping.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out some bills.

Essie shook her head. “I’ll take the car, but I draw the line at taking your money.”

Ross sighed. “There’s my favorite judge. I was wondering where she went. How about doing your job? Do you mind buying some more fresh produce for the boat?”

Essie looked down, feeling bad for not giving him the benefit of the doubt. “Sorry,” she said, her voice low as she took the bills.

“Never be.” He kissed her as he moved around the driver and opened the door for her to get in the car. He kissed her once more. “You’re too sweet to be sorry. Have the driver bring you by the resort around four. I’ll show you around, and we’ll have dinner.”

As he closed the door and headed toward his own waiting car, Essie fought hard against her sudden feelings of missing him.

She had the driver drop her off at a spot in town, giving him no further direction except to make it as touristy as possible. She only had a few hours, so she might as well do it up. *Candy-colored houses and Bermuda shorts, bring it on!*

Essie explored the cobblestone lanes and colorful facades. She tried to get into the quaint cobblestone streets and the

pretty shops, but the high number of couples—hand in hand, and arm in arm—kept bringing her thoughts annoyingly back to Ross. And she knew that thinking of him, or anyone for that matter, right now in the realm of couple’s vacations, matching outfits, and long walks, was a total waste of mental energy.

Essie paused outside a pretty local art shop window, where there was a display of necklaces. It was funny how she didn’t miss Cam at all. At least not in the way she thought she would. And here she was, just a week ago as he was walking out her door, thinking she’d miss him for a long time to come. Showed what a waste the past two years with him had been.

A lovely blue stone necklace caught her eye and made her think of her mom. No use mooning over any of this, but she’d get something for her mother. She’d already gotten her the pretty scarf she’d wanted, but this would be a bonus to make up for being away. That decided, Essie walked into the shop.

As Essie left the shop, her mom’s gift in hand, she went in search of her car and driver, having decided she was set on having him take her to shop for fresh local food. Doing the tourist thing was a bore. She’d have more fun searching for ingredients.

Once they arrived at the roadside stalls, Essie was in heaven. So many fresh fruits and vegetables, not to mention fish. She knew that before going to the resort to meet Ross, they’d have to pick up a cooler or head back to the boat so the food wouldn’t spoil.

At one stall Essie was so engrossed in conversing with a local woman about the tripe stew she was making, she didn’t notice the tall man getting close to her until he was almost upon her.

“You like it spicy?” he asked, his leering tone letting her know he definitely wasn’t asking about the stew.

Essie looked around for her driver, but saw he wasn’t by the car. *Shit*. She pointedly ignored the man and paid the woman for two take-out bowls of her stew. As she tried to walk away and head across the road to the car, the man followed close. Too close.

“I asked you a question.”

Essie kept walking until his hand came out and he made a move to turn her back in his direction.

“What? You too fancy to answer me, miss—”

Almost simultaneously a dark figure came into Essie’s field of vision, and she saw Mr. Handsy crumble to the ground. He howled as his hands clutched his bleeding nose.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to get here.”

Essie looked up, her wide eyes meeting Ross’s own. “But I was supposed to be meeting you.”

He shrugged, unfazed by the man now on the ground, clutching his bleeding nose, and the gathering crowd. “And I’m here to meet you. I’m still sorry I took so long. You shouldn’t have had to deal with the likes of him.”

“What the hell, man?” Mr. Spicy said while attempting to right himself.

Ross looked down at the man. He had such a hard glint in his eyes, it almost made Essie back up. He stepped on the man’s outstretched fingers, causing him to writhe in pain. “Get up. I dare you. You need to watch who and whose you make a move on next time.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a bill and dropped it on the man’s chest. “Consider yourself lucky I’m feeling so good right now. Go get yourself cleaned up and something to eat.” He took Essie by the hand and led her to the waiting car. It was then that she noticed the cars had been switched. Her driver was gone and it was his car and driver.

“Where has my driver gone?” Essie asked as she got inside.

“Back to the dock. He’s taken your other packages back to *Serenity*. Take us to the resort, please,” Ross said. The last bit was meant for their driver before Ross hit a switch and the partition between them and the driver rose.

The look Ross gave Essie was one of pure primal sex and energy; it had the next question dying on her lips, forgotten instantly. He reached for her, and instead of putting her hand in his, she was on him. On top and straddling and kissing him, hard and fast and wet. She wore an easy sundress, which let

her thighs go wide, and left her deliciously exposed and open to him. She rubbed urgently against his hard erection, her feminine center feeling like it was on fire. And for the first time in her life, Essie wanted to strip off her clothes and see what it felt like to be taken hard and fast by a man she barely knew.

The feeling made her not recognize herself, and she felt slightly afraid of the person Ross was unleashing. She moved from his lips to lick at the side of his neck. Wanting to go further, with shaky hands, she undid the buttons on his shirt and was rewarded by the sight of his hard chest and dark nipples. Essie leaned down and nipped at the beautiful tight nubs.

Ross groaned and grabbed her thighs, pushing forward. His hardness and the zipper of his pants were roughly rubbing against her. One of his large hands moved to her breasts, and Essie moved back, pulling the straps of her dress down, along with her bra. It wasn't elegant, and it wasn't beautiful, but she didn't care. He was elegant, and he was beautiful, and slightly rough, and aggressive, and she wanted him on her, in her, wherever, however, she could have him.

Thankfully, he obliged, drawing one of her nipples almost reverently into his mouth and licking it as if it were the most delicate of desserts. She felt him pulse beneath her, and breathed in deep as his hand went up her thigh and almost shakily reached under her dress to clutch at her behind. She could tell he was doing his best to hold on to his hairsbreadth of control.

"Why are you holding back, Ross?" she choked out, almost wanting to shake him as she saw his Adam's apple bob.

He looked up, a bead of sweat popping out on his forehead as he put his head back. "Because I don't want to let go with you. I don't want to just take you in the back of one of my cars."

Essie swallowed, torn between telling him taking her in the back of one of his cars was just what she wanted, and knowing it definitely wasn't. She leaned down and kissed him gently. "Then take me to your bed, Ross Montgomery."



Ross set Essie to rights as they pulled onto his resort's grounds. She rolled down the window to catch her breath and take in the scenery—lush green and well-manicured grounds. They drove past a beautiful yellow main house that looked like it had maybe a hundred rooms, and off to the side of the main house were smaller villas. Around them were private balconies, and little golf carts sprinkled here and there.

Their car kept going, and when Ross caught her questioning look, he gave her a small smile. “We’re going right to my private villa. I thought it best we dine alone. I hope that’s all right.”

Essie blushed. “It’s fine, but maybe we should eat and then head back to the boat. I don’t want you to get off schedule.”

Ross leaned in close. “We can do whatever you want. I will work around you. If you want to stay here tonight, we stay here. If you want to go, we go.”

Essie looked at him as the car stopped. “I’d like to see your place here.”



Ross’s villa was so very him: minimalist, elegant, and sexy. Open concept with a large sitting area for entertaining and two bedrooms off to the side. The back of the villa was all floor-to-ceiling windows, which opened to a spectacular view of the fabled pink sand beach and had Essie gasping for breath. Out on the veranda, dinner was set with fresh seafood, sweets, champagne, and desserts.

“Ross, it’s gorgeous. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a beach so beautiful and all this food. We didn’t need my stew after all.” He came up behind her at the window and kissed the back of her neck, giving her a thrill that vibrated throughout her entire body.



“I think so, too. When I’m here, I can relax. Or, at least, my version of relaxing.”

Essie laughed at that.

“That part of the beach is mine and private. When we have more time, I’d love to bring you back here to swim with me.”

At his declaration she couldn’t help but feel a little sad.

“What is it?” he asked.

“That. You don’t have to make any sort of promise of anything beyond this trip. I know you can’t. That’s okay. Let’s enjoy *now*.”

Ross’s lips twisted, but he didn’t argue with her. “Don’t look so sad. CEOs don’t do sad.” She moved forward to kiss him. “Now I think there are more parts of this villa you can show me. I’d love to see the master suite. That is, if dinner will wait?”

At that, Ross picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. He gave her a light smack on her behind. “Oh, hell yeah, dinner will wait. If I have my way, it will wait until breakfast.”

“Hey, I don’t think this is the standard tour!” Essie kicked and giggled.

He laughed, low and deep in his throat. “It’s the way I do a tour. We’re not in the backseat anymore, Ms. Bradford.”

# Chapter 14



Despite the rough way he picked her up, Ross gently placed her down crossways on his large bed. He then pulled back, going to his knees to take off her slip-on shoes. He came up and kissed her long and hard, leaving her almost gasping for breath, before he eased up, to start a sweet, almost torturous, trail down her body.

Essie thought he'd linger on her collarbone, her breasts maybe, which he teased with his thumb through her dress, but no. He skimmed those spots, going lower, down to her ankles, spending time kissing them, making an anklet of feathery kisses, then working his way until he was behind her knee. When he got a desired response from her, he'd lick and nibble some more. As he was licking behind her knee, and she was distracted by the newfound glory of that particular erogenous zone, Ross's hand worked its way up to her most private spot, and he pulled her panties down as he brought his head higher.

With his first lick Essie thought she'd break apart. She was biting her lip and balling her fists tight so as not to come completely undone.

Ross was masterful. He licked and she rocked. He sucked and she rode. She was clenching and unclenching her hands until she grasped at his shoulders, letting go as she never had before. And when she finally reached her peak, with his name echoing as breathy gasps on her lips, Ross pulled back, tugging her dress over her head, taking her bra off, and giving her breast a last, long, gentle kiss.

"God, Essie, you are gorgeous," he rasped out.

Her instinct was to cover up, as gooseflesh suddenly tickled over her body. But something in his hot, admiring gaze made her feel so incredibly beautiful, she could do no more but reach for him. Essie kissed Ross hard and passionately. Undoing his shirt and pulling it out of his pants.

“You have on way too many clothes, Mr. Montgomery.”

“You are so right there,” he said, breathing heavy.

As she freed him, Ross handed her a condom. Essie sucked in an anxious breath. He was glorious. But her awkwardness came out in her ineptitude with slipping on the condom, and she was thankful for Ross’s help. His hand steadied hers as he guided her in easing it down over his hardness.

His first thrust stole her breath away with its power; and when she came once again, looking into the depths of his midnight eyes, he kissed her, sealing their moment with an unspoken promise of the next week of more glorious lovemaking to come.

They spent the next few hours making love in every way and every place in his villa, the bed, the Jacuzzi, his large shower. Somewhere in between, dinner got eaten, and Ross even convinced Essie to take a mad naked dash from his villa to the beach and into the water. Or maybe it was the other way around. Essie laughed so much she couldn’t remember when she’d last enjoyed such a night. In fact, she knew she hadn’t.

Just before dawn she woke with Ross kissing her shoulder. “I’m sorry to wake you so early, but do you mind if we get going to the boat? The captain may have to push it to make it to Miami in time with the delay.”

Essie could feel his tension and didn’t want him to stress. She turned and kissed him lightly. “It’s fine. Just give me a minute to get ready.” She stroked at his hardness playfully. “And stop being so serious. Just because we’re back on the boat and I’ll have you back to your routine, you’ll still have me in your bed. There’s no way I’m giving this up before New York.”

Ross grinned and nipped at her shoulder again. “Whew. That’s a relief.”



When they arrived back on *Serenity*, Essie was shocked.

The boat, which had been decorated luxuriously, was now decked out for Christmas with lovely twinkling lights and sprigs of holly and evergreen. And there in the main parlor was a large undecorated Christmas tree. She turned to Ross with shimmering tears she wasn't capable of hiding. "Ross, it's beautiful, but why? How?"

"I couldn't let you not have Christmas," he said in a matter-of-fact way. "I thought while I was handling the contractor, I'd have the boys pick up a tree, festive the old girl up a bit. I had them save the tree decorating for you though."

Essie grinned then looked at him with barely restrained hope. "Will you do it with me?"

Ross made a face. "It's not my thing."

Essie's smile widened. "Well, let's make it your thing. We'll do it together. After dinner. Please. Decorating a Christmas tree is always better with friends. We'll invite the crew."

Ross shook his head, but something in his eyes lit. "Sure. Anything for that smile."



Dinner was casual and shared with the crew, once they got under way again. Essie and Chef Scott collaborated on the meal. She was glad they had come to a mutual working relationship, though he was still a bit gruff around the edges. They casually dined on shrimp rolls, haddock, and spicy noodles, since Essie had quickly learned that Ross loved all things with either a touch of sweet or plenty of spice. Plus, a lovely blend of mixed vegetables. There was wine for everyone, and the captain joined them while Ethan took over his duties for a while on the bridge.

When Essie came in with dessert, homemade ice cream with dark chocolate mulled wine sauce, the captain stood and raised his glass in a toast. “To Ms. Bradford. Thank you for gracing us with your beauty and your talent. You are making this maiden voyage a sweet excursion.”

Ross grinned and stood, coming over to kiss Essie lightly on her cheek. But the crew would not be satisfied with that, and they cheerfully started to clink on their wineglasses with their tableware. “Kiss! Kiss!”

Essie gave them a wave of her hand. “You all are incorrigible! Thank you so much. You almost make me not miss New York and the holiday snow. Almost.”

But they would not be mollified. When Ross clinked his glass, too, she relented, taking Ross’s cheeks in both hands. For a moment she enjoyed the feel of his scruff and pulled him in for a big, sloppy kiss. The guys all cheered as she pulled back.

“Okay, enough with you all. Bring your desserts around the tree. Let’s get Christmas started!”

They all took turns adding the pretty gold and silver ornaments. The captain left early, letting Ethan come to take his place. When it was done and the rest of the crew left, Essie sat on the low couch as Ross turned down the lights and flipped the switch on the tree.

“It’s lovely,” she said as he put his arm around her and nuzzled her in close, kissing her behind her ear.

“Why is it I feel there’s a ‘but’ in there?” Ross asked.

“There is no ‘but.’ It is lovely. It’s just so elegant—more elegant than any tree I’ve ever had. Ours at home is jam-packed with mismatched ornaments. My mom made a point of buying or we made a new one every year. Maybe it’s something you could do with your daughter?”

But at the mention of the child, she saw Ross’s eyes go dark and cloud over. She knew instantly she’d made a mistake. Trying hard to bring the moment back, Essie spoke rapidly to cover the awkward moment. “My mom still buys me one, and I’m no spring chicken.”

Ross pulled back then quickly leaned forward, nipping at her lips teasingly. “Get out! You can’t be a day past twenty-two.”

Essie laughed as she rolled her eyes, glad to be back on sure footing. It was fun to sit with him and be playful for a while. “I won’t tell you how many years to add to that. But thanks again. I really do appreciate it. I know you weren’t into the holiday. I just think it should be shared with family and those you love. But this”—Essie paused—“this is really nice. But I didn’t mean to force it on you.”

He looked at her and ran a hand up and down her thigh. “You didn’t. No one forces anything on me.”

Essie snorted. “Now, that I believe!”

“I wanted to make you happy. With you missing your holiday with your mom,” he laughed then, “and the cold New York snow and all. You can’t really be missing that.”

She looked at him seriously. “I sure am. Who doesn’t dream of a white Christmas? You can’t be hardened to that. What’s Christmas without snow?”

Ross shook his head. “You really are a sweet traditionalist, Essie Bradford. I don’t know what you’re doing here in my arms. A man like me would ruin you.”

His last words were low and serious, and something about them made Essie’s heart stop for a moment with a deep fear of loss she knew she had no right to have.

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” he said too quickly. “I guess I’m not used to any downtime. See what you did to me? Went and got me thinking.” He pulled her tighter to him. “And you got me thinking about things with my daughter, too. I don’t know.” He looked down then and let out a sigh. “I guess things need to change.”

She leaned in and kissed him. She didn’t want to see him sad, and she didn’t want to make this moment heavy. Soon enough they’d make it to Miami and before too long her assignment would be over.

Their kiss changed quickly from sweet to deep and passionate; and before long, Essie was breaking apart again,

beside herself and feeling out of herself, all at the same time. She took a deep breath and then pushed up from Ross and the couch. She looked into his passion-darkened eyes and took him by the hand. “Your stateroom or mine?”

He stood. Tall and powerful, towering over her. “I’ll let you choose. I always want this to be your choice. Your terms, Essie.”

She smiled. “Yours, then. I want to try out all the beds you can offer me while on the trip, Mr. Montgomery.”

He grinned and gave a quick nod. “Then let’s go. What’s mine is yours, Ms. Bradford.”



When *Serenity* pulled into Miami’s Biscayne Bay, Essie steeled herself against her heavy heart. She and Ross had spent a blissful three days together on board, both in bed and out. Their days were unstructured and carefree, and their nights were spent making love in ways she’d only fantasized about.

She cooked for him, and he surprised her by spending quite a bit of time with her in the kitchen, learning what she hoped were lasting lessons about food choices and the benefits of cooking for himself. They also had a lot of fun in the gym, with her giving him the benefits of yoga and meditation, and him giving her the basics of kickboxing. More times than not, their sparring ending up with either Essie or Ross flat on their back, one pinned under the other.

This time spent with him would go down as some of the best days of her life—at least the most fun and carefree. And reluctantly, when she felt him standing strong by her side, his arm draped easily over her shoulder, rubbing her arm in that endearing, absentminded way he’d taken to doing, she had to admit she was going to miss this. No, she was going to miss *him*, when all was said and done. A knot twisted in Essie’s belly as the butterflies seemed to bunch up in one corner.

*Shit. I’m falling for him.*

But as Essie saw the stretch limo waiting for them as they departed, flanked by a female driver and two other beautiful women in short skirts and tight blazers, she couldn't help but stiffen. Normally, she was more confident. Seeing these women, who looked like versions of every woman she'd seen pictured with him, something in her deflated. It brought to mind the fact that it would all be over in days. But Essie forced herself to shake it off as a tall, slim young man stepped forward and came up to them.

"Good to see you, sir," he said before sparing Essie a glance. "And good to see you, too, Ms. Bradford."

Though Essie didn't know him, he did know her, and he seemed unsurprised by the intimacy of her and Ross's entwined hands. It raked at her and she stiffened.

"Essie, this is my assistant, Andrew Vaughn."

Essie gave the younger man a nod. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Vaughn." She let go of Ross and stuck out her hand.

"You too. I hope your trip went well. Please let me know of any supplies you need for the return, and I'll be sure to have them brought on board."

"Thank you. I think I'm pretty good. I do prefer to do my own shopping, but I'd appreciate it if you know Miami or have someone else who does, that could point me in the direction of the freshest markets."

Andrew nodded.

"Is everything all set and ready?" Ross asked.

"Yes, sir. You'll see these are the types of cars and drivers with the ladies as concierge that we sent to pick up the clients. They should be arriving at *Serenity* within the next two hours."

Essie was intently following along. It was a good thing Andrew was explaining because he wasn't giving out any introductions to the ladies. Essie thought of introducing herself but the women gave off a sort of aloofness that could tag the part of a gorgeous female spy ring or darned good exclusive club bouncers. A small bus pulled up and two more beautiful women got out, along with two men who were just as model



gorgeous. They lined up next to Andrew. “These are Lacey, Ana, Marco, and Louis. Additional staff for guest-stew services.”

Essie didn’t miss the hot look Lacey gave Ross. It was an invite, an openness, as Andrew continued his introductions.

“They will be available for the clients for any and all entertainment while on board. Marco and Louis will help with deckhand services and anything else that is needed.”

Essie couldn’t help but bristle. *Serenity* was about to become quite the party ship, and she couldn’t help but wonder at what type of services and or entertainment Andrew was referring to. But Essie pushed the thoughts back. She and Chef Scott would have plenty of mouths to feed. Playtime, at least for her, was definitely over. Though Chef Scott was a jerk, she would pitch in and help him with so many passengers coming aboard.

“Well,” she said, looking up at Ross, “I guess I’d better get going with supplies so I can get back to help out Simon. We’re about to get really busy.”

Ross bent and gave her a kiss. “Fine, but Simon can handle the bulk of the cooking. You take this car and get what you want him to prepare. I want you by my side tonight. I’ll stay here with Andrew, making a few calls if you don’t mind.”

Ross’s words about being by his side pulled her up short, but Essie tried not to make too much of them. “Not at all.”

But as Ross pulled away, he gave her a long stare. “Don’t worry, I’ll watch out. No buying stew in dodgy neighborhoods. And I won’t be long. I want to be back”—she looked over the leggy woman eyeing Ross like the last crab leg at the all-you-can-eat buffet—“before things get too wild.”

## Chapter 15



Essie made it back on board *Serenity* at the same time as the clients—a ruckus crew of three couples. Two married—the Cruzes and the Johnsons—and the other, an owner of a basketball team, Jimmy Paul, and his girlfriend, a model named Lola.

Essie tugged on her top and smoothed her disheveled hair as she was introduced to the bejeweled women. She didn't mean to be late, but while out shopping for supplies, she ran across the sweetest little Christmas shop. Though rushed, she couldn't help but go in. Once there she picked up an ornament for her mom. Though this one would be late, her mom would still love it. And when she saw they personalized ornaments, Essie couldn't resist getting a beautiful one with snowmen and palm trees, which she had personalized with the name *Serenity*. She hoped Ross would use it to both remember her, and to start a new tradition with his daughter when he was ready.

After the awkward introductions, Essie left the gift on her dresser and quickly changed for dinner, which as it turned out would be off board at a Miami hot spot.

Later, sitting on the deck with Mrs. Cruz, who refused an individual tart, as well, Essie noticed, as most of her dinner, Essie made attempts at small talk. There had to be a reason Ross wanted her here. Maybe playing hostess was it. "Though I'm sure you enjoy Miami, tell me, are you looking forward to traveling back to New York?" Essie asked. The woman was silent and had been for the past ten minutes. It was like pulling teeth, getting a word out of her.

“Surprising,” Mrs. Cruz said as she turned and examined her with a critical eye.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s you. You’re surprising.” She looked over at one of the new stewards, the pretty Ana, who was serving a drink to Mr. Cruz in the Jacuzzi while showing off her cleavage to its best advantage. “Now that’s more his usual.”

The cutting comment from the woman hit Essie at her core and she felt heat rise in her cheeks. Her instincts were to argue. She had her talents and it was a waste to let insecurities over legs and boobs fill sacred space in her spirit. She was the one that Ross asked to be here. Well, technically, paid to be here. Just like every other female on this ship. Essie let out a low breath as she spotted Ana handing Ross a drink and adding an extra touch to his bared bicep with it. Her argument died in her throat.

Essie tried to shake off her sudden unwelcome uneasiness when Ross turned and gave her a smile that was more head than heart. The tranquil peace of The Serenity was gone. And as Essie lay down that night cradled in Ross’s arms, spent from making love, the waves gently rocking the boat, she didn’t sleep soundly.



It was morning and they were now under way to head to Ross’s private island, where the resort would be built. It was a short boat ride away, just four hours. Near enough to Miami for party shuttles to go, and far enough for him to create his own secluded oasis.

The butterflies that had befriended her started up again, but this time their fluttering brought the most unwelcome feeling. She was not looking forward to her time with this bunch. And though she’d tried her best to straddle the line of help and hostess, Essie had not received a kind look or gesture since she

met any of them. She feared the time back to New York with them would not go well.

As if feeling Essie's unease, Ross turned her way and gave her a warm smile. The butterflies eased down and she smiled back. She was probably being nutty and should just chill. Essie relaxed and decided to ignore the pinched faced women and enjoy herself, as she had been.

But things didn't get better on the island. Though the tour was fascinating, and Essie could totally see Ross's exciting vision, she was once again pulled up short by their arrival to the fanfare of scantily clad women and a few men scattered within. Drinks flowed like water and the promise of all the hedonism imaginable was thick in the air. Essie's unease grew as she watched Ross seem to swell bigger, louder, and bolder, until he somehow was wearing a mask of himself that no longer fit. But maybe this was him and the Ross she got to know when it was just the two of them was a mask he was wearing to woo her into his bed? The thought stopped her short.

By the time the tour was over, and their party on board *Serenity* readying to head back to Miami, the party had swelled to one with a band and dancing girls, two to each man, in Ross's case three, as the women seemed to want to be sure their check writer knew exactly who they were. And Ross played it up, sharing cigars all around while being loud and boisterous.

When Ross, at the encouragement of the crowd, took a shot from between the breasts of a curvy brunette in a barely there bikini and turned to Essie suggesting she do the same, she was done. She had a splitting headache and wanted to retreat and go to bed, away from this version of Ross.

"Come on, babe, go for it! This is a party. Why don't you act like it?"

Essie eyed the way Ross's hands were grasping the hips of the brunette and wanted to step out of the whole scene. She looked into his slightly unfocused eyes and felt both anger and sadness. Anger for being put in this situation and sadness over

what she'd hoped it would be. "This is not my type of party Ross. And I'm tired."

Ross frowned and looked ready to argue, but Essie got her opening when Mrs. Johnson dropped her makeshift toga and shimmied naked to get under the limbo pole more easily. The crowd cheered and Essie got up and started heading across the room. But Ross saw her heading toward the stairs, and before she knew it, he was there at her side.

"Where you going?"

"Like I said, I'm tired, Ross. I think I'll leave you to your clients. It's late and the band is getting to me. I have a headache."

He leaned in to kiss her and his rum-and-cigar breath had her recoiling.

Ross frowned, his darkening eyes surprising her, but not more than the possessive hand on her arm. "But I want you here with me. Besides, I didn't say you were off the clock yet."

Essie heated so fast she felt like she may cause the whole ship to burst into flames. "Screw you, Ross Montgomery. I'm freelance, so I work for myself. You may own everything and everyone else on this boat, but you don't own me."



Ross looked down at his empty hand and closed it into a tight fist. It was all he could do, since all he felt was alone. His first instinct was to go after her. Go after her and pull her back into his arms. Kiss her long and hard with everything he had and let her know how much she meant to him. How he shouldn't have said what he said.

Ross took a step, then stopped short. But what did she mean to him? Did he even know? They'd made no promises to each other, which was probably a good thing. Sure, they had a good time aboard the ship. Secure in the world of just the two of them, but with just this simple test he could see they were no

match for the outside world. He thought he had known with Yasmine. Thought he could play the role of happy-home husband and father, but what did he do? He went and fucked that up in less than a year. And now his ex was married to someone else and, worse, his daughter was being raised by another man. He didn't want to relive that all over again with Essie. It had already been proven he was his father's son, and the business was his first and one true love.

But still Essie called to him. If only so he could at least apologize for speaking to her and treating her so harshly. Ross took a step forward and a hand grazed him lightly on his shoulder. He turned to look into the smiling eyes and glossy lips of—what was her name? Lacey?

“Mr. Montgomery, Mr. Paul sent me to retrieve you for a game of Twister. We're all playing and he said I'm not to take no for an answer.”

As she said those words, the new steward slipped her polo over her head to reveal a white bikini top. Ross frowned and shook his head. “Please tell Mr. Paul I won't be playing, but to enjoy the game with my compliments.”

She put on what Ross thought was a well-practiced pout. “I'm afraid he won't be happy, sir.”

Ross suddenly wanted to be anywhere but there. Here he was with everything he thought he wanted: money, women, prestige, and the one thing he really needed was just out of reach. “Tell Mr. Paul to have an enjoyable evening on me,” he said before he turned and headed for the stairs.



As Essie slammed the door, hot tears burned at her eyes. *Shit. Why did I ever get so close?* If she hadn't gotten close, he wouldn't have affected her. And what was with that Lacey? She didn't miss her lurking as she waited for her moment—all hair, lips, and boobs at the ready.

Still, Essie took a few deep breaths to calm her nerves. She really was tired, and then she thought for a moment of how tired he must be. He'd been tap-dancing for these people all day, trying to get their backing and support, and still he had more dancing to do. Essie's heart broke a moment for him, and then she saw her bag from the Christmas shop earlier in the day.

She took the ornament out and crossed the hall to leave it on Ross's pillow. A peace offering of sorts to let him know though she was angry, she still cared. Besides, no matter what happened, his daughter should still have the ornament.



Essie woke feeling refreshed and hopeful that she and Ross could get back on track. She dressed to go to the galley, and found Chef Scott was up, already preparing a big breakfast. They were docked in Miami and would be there for a few hours before sailing back to New York with the clients to conclude the deal.

She thought of Ross and their argument the night before and how tired he must be today. But today was a new day and she was ready to start over again. Essie reached into the fridge and took out the last tiny chocolate mousse. "I'm going to take this to Ross. I'll be back in a moment to help you finish up," she said to Simon.

"He's not here."

Essie stilled. "What do you mean?"

"He's gone. Said he had urgent business and left instructions with the captain about returning the passengers to New York without him."

*Without him?* What was she even hearing? Essie was so confused. Where did he go, and why did he say nothing to her? She went back to her room in a daze and saw a gift bag on her bureau. One she didn't see before. Essie picked it up and numbly went to her bed to open it. Pulling out the mass of

tissue paper, Essie didn't see the letter that fell between the bed and her nightstand. But she was surprised to find a snow globe inside with a scene of Miami Beach that when shaken would be covered with snow. Attached was a plane ticket dated today with a Post-it and just the words:

*Go home, Ms. Bradford, and get your New York snow.  
Thank you for a job well done.*

*Stay Sweet,  
R.M.*

Taped to the bottom was Essie's check with her full fee, plus her agreed-upon ten-thousand-dollar bonus. As Essie packed, she silently cursed her stupid tears. This was only supposed to be a little bit of fun, she told herself. Something to get over the hump so to speak. It was her own fault, opening her heart to a man who was only hiring her for a quick fix, nothing more. She'd done her job and now it was over. That should be enough. But as Essie walked the gangplank and left *The Serenity* behind, she couldn't help feeling completely undone.



It was indeed snowing, and had been since Essie returned home. She'd received one text from Ross asking if she made it home safely. She guessed that as far as employers went, he didn't have to do that much. She replied to him with just two words I did.

They had no further communication.

It was now New Year's Eve and she was with her mom at her apartment. They were sharing a meal of good-luck peas and rice, waiting for the ball to drop on TV. She was sure by 12:15 a.m. it would be lights out. Way to start the New Year. *Woo to the freaking hoo.*



So when the doorbell rang at 11:30 p.m., they both looked at each other, wide-eyed, New York instincts going on full alert.

Essie went to the door. “Who is it?” she yelled with extra bass in her voice before looking out the peephole.

“It’s me, Essie.”

She knew the voice, but didn’t believe her ears, so she took a look through the peephole. *Damn*. It was him. Tall, magnetic, his dark eyes seemed to connect with hers through the peephole, and then he had the nerve to have that smile. How did he even know she’d be here tonight? This had Misha written all over it. She’d kill her.

“What are you doing here?” Essie yelled.

“I’m here to see you. You going to open the door, or does the whole floor have to know your business? I’m fine either way.”

Hesitantly, Essie opened the door a crack before finally gesturing for him to come in. No use letting the neighbors know her business. Her mom stood and looked at him with a strong and well-deserved side eye. “This is my mother.”

Ross reached out a hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Bradford. I’ve heard wonderful things about you.”

Her mom gave him a hard eye. “Can’t say the same about you.”

Ross looked confused as Essie crossed her arms. “If you’re here to hire me for another job, the answer is no.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean, what am I talking about? You leave without a word? Just a ticket? You turned out to be the rich jerk I pegged you for in the beginning. Judgy? Me? Hell yeah!”

“You didn’t get my letter with the ticket?”

“What, your Post-it? Classy rich boy.”

“Post-it?” He furrowed his brow; then recognition and then a bit of horror dawned in his eyes. His words came fast and desperate. “No. My letter. I enclosed a letter and told you I was so sorry for the night before. I didn’t want to deal with those clients anymore, and I didn’t want you to, either. I told you that you were right. That the holidays should be spent with the

people you love the most. With family. So I went to see my daughter. I wanted to give her the ornament you gave me. And I wanted you to be with your mom at Christmas.”

There was a sharp “oh” as Essie’s mom took in Ross’s speech. Ross grinned as Essie’s mother made a polite exit to the other room. His smile widened when he turned and took in Essie’s stunned expression and slack jaw.

Ross walked over to her and cautiously wrapped her in his arms. The chill of the outside still on his coat gave her a delicious shiver as he opened it and she eased into the warmth of his chest.

She looked up at him. “I can’t believe you did that for me.”

“Woman, neither can I. But I’m coming to find out there’s not much I wouldn’t do for you. So here I am. I’m so sorry for what I put you through. For how I treated you and spoke to you. It was uncalled for and will *never* happen again. I was showing off, drinking too much, and being all around just too much. Just like I wrote in the letter, which you obviously didn’t get, I was an ass that night and I apologize. In my short time with you, you opened my eyes so much. You let me know what is truly important in life, and spending the holiday on a boat, named after the person I love dearly, with people I don’t care about, well, there was just something wrong with that. And when you walked away from me that night, I knew I had to make it right.”

His words stunned Essie. She was stunned by his openness and trust in her with sharing so much of himself.

Ross kissed her softly on her temple and continued. “I hope I can make it right with you. Because here I am taking off work on another holiday in order to spend it with the only other woman besides my daughter that I can say I love.”

Essie froze.

Now it was her turn to gasp out a shocked “oh!” But when Ross’s lips came down on hers, and New York exploded as the crystal ball dropped and midnight struck, New Year’s Day began for the both of them with the promise of a lifetime of sweet serenity.

THE ♥ END

Keep reading for a Bonus Excerpt of  
♥ *Insert Groom Here* ♥

## *Insert Groom Here*

### CHAPTER 1

*“I can’t marry you.”*

Eva Ward knew words were being murmured over her shoulder, but for the life of her she couldn’t quite make them out. The red light above the camera transfixed her, and Kevin’s voice sounded like it came from somewhere far away, as if from down a long corridor. To top things off, she was fighting a chill. The temperature in the blasted television studio had to be set at fifty degrees at the highest. Eva thought about the frigid air a moment and hoped the cold didn’t show on her face—or, lord help her—anywhere else on her anatomy. That would be all she needed, for her nipples to make a surprise appearance on national morning television. Eva pushed back a frown as she brought her thoughts back to that blasted red light and Kevin. *Okay, focus time. What is he going on about?*

“I can’t marry you,” Kevin repeated, and Eva blinked.

*Wait. What?*

“Wait. What?!” Jim Bauer, *The Morning Show’s* co-host, took Eva’s confused thoughts and echoed them out loud, punctuated with his usual everyman laugh. But this was a bad time to laugh. In fact, it was the absolute worst time to laugh. “I don’t think we heard you correctly, Kevin. It sounded for a moment like you were calling off the wedding.”

Eva fought to keep her smile in place as Kevin turned from her to Jim. “That’s right, Jim. I am.”

She blinked again as the words really begin to sink in. *He is calling off what?* Anger bubbled up, heating Eva more quickly than could possibly be safe. She caught another glimpse of the red light and forced herself to push it back down. *Hold on there.*

*This is not the time to go off the rails*, Eva told herself. She could do this. She'd practiced being on live TV, and she'd been put on the spot plenty of times. She was trained for these moments. Media relations was her job, for chrissake.

Eva pulled her attention away from the maddening red light that reminded her millions of people were watching this debacle over their morning coffee and toast. Instead, she plastered on a well-trained smile and focused on what her fiancé, Kevin, and the talk show's co-hosts were now saying. But try as she might, she couldn't wrap her head around the words as they trickled toward her in dribs and drabs.

Something about being "confused," Kevin said. "Just not the right time," he went on. And wait, did she really hear the words "moving too fast"?

Hold up, this was madness! It was as if she was having some sort of odd bout of both inner and out-of-body experience, and she couldn't get the two to gel. But she had to, because Kevin was talking about her as if she wasn't there, sitting by his side on TV. National freaking TV! It was time to take control of the situation.

Eva blinked again, her lashes feeling thick and gloppy from the extra coats of mascara plus the individual false lashes the makeup woman had put on her that morning. She had thought they were a bit much at the time. Now she was afraid that with all the ridiculous blinking she was doing, she probably looked like Bambi gone drag. Eva forced her eyes wide, as if that would somehow make her appear saner, and stared at Kevin. Oh hell, Mr. Smooth was starting to sweat, despite the fact that if it was two degrees colder, you'd be able to see your breath as you welcomed Satan into the studio. His sleek, ultra-groomed, dark cocoa skin was starting to glisten, and Eva now noticed a hint of fear in his eyes.

Eva's heart raced, but despite this, she caught Kevin's eye and gave him a smile that she hoped said, "Come on, honey, don't lose your cool now," as she reached over and gave his

hand a pat. She could do this. Just a little damage control, and she'd reel this right in.

Eva turned to her other side and looked at Diane Parker, one of *The Morning Show's* other co-hosts, but Diane's blue eyes only seemed to mirror Eva's own internal confusion.

*Just perfect. No help from blondie.*

So Eva turned her gaze to Jim. Good ol' Jim. Surely Mr. All America would help save the day. But in that moment, a clear sound finally reached Eva's ears, punctuated by good ol' Jim's good ol' laugh. The loud, false pang rang against her eardrums. "Har, har! Good one, Kevin," Jim said, as Eva took in the obvious tension playing around the corners of his mouth, causing some of his pancake makeup to crease. "Of course you're joking."

"No, Jim, I'm not," Kevin said, his voice clear, strong, and surprisingly absolute as he turned Eva's way. "I'm sorry, Eva. I can't go through with this."

Despite her best efforts at bracing, Eva winced as the words penetrated. The full impact hit her like a crosstown bus trying to make up for lost time.

This was not happening. It couldn't be happening. Not here. Not now. Not to her.

But Kevin continued, his voice getting higher with each word. The more his lips moved and the words washed over her, the more of a blur he became. His handsome features, smooth skin, close-cropped hair, fine button-down oxford shirt, new three-button jacket, pocket square—all becoming a washed-out mass of swirly rejection under the bright studio lights. For a moment, Eva felt like she might be sick, so she bent her head, her gaze hitting Kevin's highly polished leather shoes. The ones that she had picked up for him last week so he would be perfect for their big television appearance this morning. Eva felt her chest tighten as her throat squeezed shut.

"I really am sorry, babe. But I can't do it. It's all too much, and I've realized I'm not ready to get married."

It was like a physical blow. Like he had kicked her in the gut while wearing the shoes she paid for.

Eva's head snapped up then, away from the shoes and away from Kevin too. She saw the camera and the red light as it flashed before her like a beacon. She shut her eyes for a moment and thought once again about how many people watched this while they sipped their morning coffee and ate their sugar-toasted oats. What were they thinking as they stared at the seemingly normal-looking woman in her pink twinset and sharply pleated skirt? Damn it, she was wearing her grandmother's pearls. How does one go about getting dumped in heirloom pearls?

The nausea twisted at her again, and Eva had the distinct feeling that her normally caramel-hued skin was probably taking on a green cast to match the bile now churning in her belly. She wondered if the color would be picked up and broadcast in HD. Now there was ideal breakfast entertainment for you.

And then it hit her, and her worry doubled. Practically tripled. Shit. Her mother was watching this. Watching and most likely fuming. She could imagine the look on Valerie Ward's face right now. She was sure to be yelling into a phone right that moment to have her assistant and the rest of the staff come in early to get started on damage control. The thought sent Eva over the edge. Probably even more than experiencing disappointment herself, she hated the idea of letting her mother down. She'd had enough of that in her life, and though she came off as a human fire-breather, Eva knew it was mostly a mask to cover past hurts.

*Not ready to get married.*

Kevin's words echoed through Eva's head, along with visions of her mother's impending tirade, and she felt the heat rise. First, it was a burning in the soles of her feet, then it licked up her legs, moving on to radiate through her stomach before finally making its way to her face.

She paused, her breathing virtually stopping a moment as the stomach churning turned to a full-on boil. Was this bastard really breaking up with her on national television merely

months, hell, practically weeks, before her perfectly planned wedding?

Eva finally turned and looked at Kevin, fighting hard to keep her emotions in line. She laughed. A belly laugh that would make even ol' Jim proud. *It's a joke. It has to be.* Diane and Jim cautiously joined her in the chuckle and bolstered her spirits. *Whew.* She couldn't believe she'd almost fallen for it. Of course, Kevin would never do that to her. He also had too much riding on this marriage. Too much riding on them. It must have been some silly producer thing. They were always doing something to try and jack up the ratings. And she played along and fell for it, for a moment. She should have known it was a stunt. What better fodder for the gossip mill and ratings than an on-air breakup and makeup from America's, at least for the moment, sweetheart couple? But Kevin knew how important this was. How much this wedding meant to her. To them and their future. Both personally and professionally. But he had been a fool to go for it in the first place and not let her in on the joke.

Eva strained out a smile. "Funny. But come on, sweetie. Joke's over," she said. "Now tell me you were just playing." She turned to the camera and raised a perfectly arched brow. "Tell America you were playing. We will be married and have our dream wedding right here on *The Morning Show* courtesy of Tied Knot Style and Bliss." Eva smiled wide. Her mother would appreciate the advertiser tie-in. One never missed out on the opportunity to thank a sponsor. It was a cardinal rule of marketing. Always keep the sponsors happy and coming back to write another check.

But instead of laughing with her and getting in on the joke, good ol' Jim clammed up and flipped through his blue cards, looking confused, and Diane, well, she was still a grinning zero as she nodded in a bobble-headed way that couldn't quite be declared for or against the joke theory. And wait, was that sweat on her brow now too? *Holy hell.*

Eva looked back at Kevin for reassurance, and he shrugged. *The bastard shrugged!*



“I really am sorry, Eva. You know I always cared for you.”

Cared? Did he say *cared*? A rock thudded where her heart was supposed to be. Cared. As in, what you do for your late grandmother, as in how you felt about your childhood dog. Cared, “ed,” as in past tense?

Kevin turned to the camera and laid on that old Kevin charm, looking ever so innocent and sincere. “I’m, um, sorry, America. I’d like to apologize to you too. And this is not Eva’s fault. It’s all me.”

Jim piped in, “Well, I’m not really sure what to say here. We’ll, well, take a commercial break and be right back?” He then held his ear and with an awkward look turned to Eva. “Oh, uh, I really am sorry; it seems we can’t go to commercial. Not for ninety more seconds.” Jim gave Eva a look that said, “Tough break, kid.”

Eva bit her lip and tried to steady her breathing, since her heart was beating so hard and fast she was sure the mics must be picking up every erratic thump. Crap! In ninety seconds, she was sure to be dead from humiliation.

Diane shifted her eyes away before speaking to the camera. Her voice took on a funereal tone. “We are truly sad to hear of this development. We were all looking forward to your wedding. But I guess now, given the circumstances, and as per the rules of the competition, we’ll have to choose another couple.” Diane smiled and changed her voice on a dime. “Luckily, we still have Sherri and Brad from Des Moines, who are our runner-up couple. Hey, as they say, it’s for the best to find out before the marriage that the two of you don’t suit. Don’t you think?”

*Just perfect. It’s now that she turns into a freaking all-star chatterbox, spouting rules and crap.*

“No.”

The word came out before Eva could stop to think about what she was saying.

“Excuse me?” Diane asked, her wispy brows drawing together. “Maybe you didn’t hear what Kevin said. He does not

want to marry you.”

Eva shot Diane a look that said *Thanks, but no thanks for the clarification*, then turned back to Kevin as he piped up again.

“Yes, Eva.” Kevin put his hand across her forearm. “What are you talking about? I said I won’t marry you. There won’t be a wedding.” He rubbed his hand gently across her forearm. Eva looked down at it, not knowing if it was supposed to be comforting or controlling. It didn’t matter.

It wasn’t either.

She looked up at him, eyes blazing, and jerked her arm away. Then, catching the red light out of the corner of her eye, Eva thought briefly of her mother, before giving Kevin a huge smile that would probably make the most venomous snake proud. “I don’t give a damn what you said. I will have my wedding with or without you.” It was like a fire had ignited and was rushing through her veins, threatening to burn out of control.

Kevin pulled back, shaking his head. “Eva, come on. Stop, you’re not making sense.” Then he lowered his voice to a stage whisper, as if the mics still couldn’t pick him up. “Plus you’re embarrassing yourself.”

For the second time that morning, Eva laughed inappropriately on national TV. *Goody, maybe hysterics are setting in*. She supposed it was natural, given the circumstances.

“Oh, really? Tell me, how can I embarrass myself any more than you already have? Freaking all of America is watching my national dumpation!” She waved her hands wildly in a gesture to the studio. Beyond them there were multiple cameras and overhead lights, and you could see the silhouettes of the burly cameramen nodding their heads in the distance. Behind Eva, Jim, Diane, and Kevin was a large window with people jockeying for their moment of fame, holding up signs saying hi to mom. Eva blew a guy in a cheese hat a kiss when he made an obscene gesture toward his crotch.

She turned back to Kevin and nodded. “See there! I’m already fielding promising offers.”

A mumble of laughter traveled throughout the studio. Kevin looked down at the floor. Coward. She should have known he wasn't up to the challenge when she had to push him to retake the bar exam. No, he was ready, after one little setback, to squander it all and spend his life living between her couch and his rich stepfather's bungalow, making it party-hopping off his good looks and charm. Well, no more.

Eva jabbed a finger into his chest, and Kevin looked back up. This time satisfaction nipped at her as she saw a glimmer of anger in his eyes. "Six years! I have wasted six years dealing with your wishy-washy indecisiveness, and here we are about at the finish line, and you go and back out now. Stopping in the fourth quarter? Eighth inning? On the last lap? What kind of man are you? Well, I'll tell you. You're the type to use up all the best years a woman has, and then when it's time to commit, you bail." As she said the words, she felt a lump form in her throat and tears well in her eyes.

Oh hell no. There was no way she would let that happen. No way would she let Kevin know he'd gotten to her.

She swallowed and then continued, "Well, I've got news for you. There are plenty of men who I'm sure would be happy to take your place. Just ask Cheese Head." Eva looked back to the window, but Cheese Head was gone. She guessed the cheese was fine, but apparently pointing out your sausage was a bit much for morning TV. She turned back to Kevin and continued, "No matter, I will still have my wedding. You are replaceable. The question is, Who's got next? I will have my wedding! And I'll have it on the date as planned!" She pointed to the empty spot beside her. "All I have to do is just insert groom here!"

It was then that Eva detected a murmur going through the studio. Oh crap. Did she really say what she had just said out loud? She looked up and saw the red light flashing like a beacon out to New York, Chicago, Iowa, and beyond. And did she really just say it to not only Kevin, but to Jim, Diane, and the rest of America?

Eva closed her eyes. *Oh God. Please make this a bad dream. It has to be.* But when she opened them and focused on everyone around the studio, the same people who had smiled at her with admiration moments ago were all staring at her now like she was the Wicked Witch of the West or someone ready for a straitjacket. *Shit. This dream is way too real.*

Panicked, Eva jumped off the raised stool; pushing back sharply, she heard it crash to the ground behind her as she ran off the set.

“Well, um, that was spirited. We’ll be right back, folks, and in our next half hour, bringing romance back into the kitchen!” The irony of Jim’s words almost had Eva cringing as they echoed through the studio’s speakers. His ridiculous “Har, har, har” laugh kept time with the clanking of Eva’s retreating heels.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A native New Yorker, Kwana Jackson, who also writes as K.M. Jackson, spent her formative years on the ‘A’ train where she had two dreams: 1) to be a fashion designer and 2) to be a writer. After spending over ten years designing women’s sportswear for various fashion houses this self-proclaimed former fashionista, took the leap of faith and decided to pursue her other dream of being a writer.

Now a *USA Today* Bestseller Kwana has been tapped by *Oprah Magazine*, *ShondaLand* and NPR for their Best Romance lists.

A mother of now young adult twins, Kwana currently lives in a suburb of New York with her husband. You can find her online at [www.kmjackson.com](http://www.kmjackson.com).

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