



*For you,  
Anything*

A BILLIONAIRE ROMCOM

ELIZABETH  
SAFLEUR

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## Blurb

**Rayen came to Washington, DC to do great things. Not fall for a womanizing, billionaire real estate developer who knows *nothing* about women.**

As a personal chef specializing in pre-colonial cooking and new to Washington DC, Rayen is quickly learning several things. One, no one cooks in this city. Two, people love her food but running a business is hard. And three? Most of her bachelor clients are hopeless around women.

Like billionaire real estate developer Knox Michaelson. Sure, he's good looking, wealthy and could be charming—*sometimes*. But he doesn't know a thing about how the opposite sex works. Rayen tells him, too.

Which is why when he offers to help her with her business in exchange for tips on women, she's shocked but can't say no. She needs the help, and the "let me show you my penthouse view" player needs a little education.

But an inconvenient sizzle and heat quickly forms between them, and Rayen finds herself not only taking in his penthouse view but falling for a man completely wrong for her.

Or is he?

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# Chapter One

---



If outer space aliens existed—and the jury was still out—Knox Michaelson was positive rush hour traffic was why they’d fly right by the planet. A sloth moved faster than the sea of red taillights blocking his progress.

“Come on. Move it.” He gestured toward his front windshield, which was stupid, given no one would notice.

Attorneys and their damned four p.m. Friday afternoon meetings. Their blustering had made him hella late, and one way to tick off Charity Billings was to make her wait.

A beat-up black Honda with a bumper sticker that read *Keep Calm, Cook On*, switched lanes for the fourth time in the last half a mile.

“As if that’s helping,” he muttered. All the other cars on the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge were inching along like normal, harassed Washington, DC drivers.

He craned his neck to peer up at his building, the brand-new Michaelson high-rise, perched on the bank of the Potomac River just across from the Kennedy Center. So close and yet so far from home.

A blue truck darted to the next lane, leaving him space to move into until the goddamned Honda cut him off. He smashed his palm on the steering wheel to give off a loud honk. “Jesus, lady. Watch yourself.”

Man, today wasn’t his day. Traffic, bad news about the real estate deal he was trying to close, and his upcoming dinner meeting all had him on edge.

Tonight he would have to engage in his least favorite activity: *grovel flirting*.

Of all people who held the key to completing his vision for his final project in Rosslyn, it had to be Charity.

Five minutes later, he managed to maneuver his way into his building's underground garage, a good thirty minutes later than he'd intended. Funny, his guest parking spot wasn't occupied. He'd couriered a key to his penthouse to the personal chef so they could set everything up on the balcony overlooking the Potomac before Charity arrived.

Despite his building boasting three five-star restaurants, he needed their meeting to be private. Bringing in a private chef ensured no gossip would circulate about him and Charity. It would kill his friend Paul, who'd been in love with her for years.

Knox shut off the ignition and turned in his seat when he heard the rumble of a car behind him. The beat-up Honda pulled into his guest spot.

Oh, for the love of ... It was the driver he'd been cursing for the last hour. Had to be the personal chef service.

He unfolded himself from the car. "You the chef?"

A petite woman with jet-black hair scrambled out of the car. "Hi, I'm Rayen Johns. From Gentleman's Gourmet?"

"You're late," he said, slamming his car door shut.

She ignored his scowl, beaming him a bright smile as she walked to the back of her car. "Seems we both are. I got a little lost there at the end. But I promise you'll love what I've brought."

"I'd love it more if it were on the table." His words were a tad testy, but he expected professionalism starting with being on time. He shook his wrist to loosen his watch from his suit's cuff and stared down at it. "Goddammit."

"She'll understand," Rayen called from under her trunk hood.

He rounded his car. "They rarely do." Reaching in, he grabbed two large, insulated bags from her trunk. "I don't want her to see you bring in food."

"I get it. Most of my clients don't want me to be seen. They want to pretend they use their kitchens."

*Pretend?* Ballsy statement. Then, again, he supposed he deserved that shot across the bow after letting his frustration show. He was better than that. "Apologies for being so short with you. I'm Knox Michaelson, by the way."

"Nice to meet you."

He walked the chef to the elevator, then punched the up button.

She flashed another megawatt smile. "This is some place. I understand

it's yours?"

"Yes." He'd spent the better part of the last five years developing the multi-use building. It was worth all the headaches, schmoozes with zoning boards, and construction delays. Not to mention the experts he'd brought in to go above and beyond the LEED certification for green buildings—something his developer father would have laughed over. Who's laughing now?

Open three months and already it was *the* place to live. He'd reserved one of the four penthouses and a floor of offices for himself, but the rest of the building sold out in weeks. Something his father had never been able to pull off—100 percent occupancy in record time. God, he loved that fact.

Now, he was ready to build its twin next door—if he could get Charity to sell her shares to Billings Investment Land Trust, which had a major stake in the land. No way would he let that piece of property end up in his father's hands.

As soon as the elevator doors closed, Rayen set a large pot she'd been holding down between her feet and grasped the long polished wood railing inside with both hands. The lift lurched upward.

"Whoa."

His eyes darted down at her. "Not a fan of elevators?"

"Not particularly."

"It's regularly inspected and has a load rating of 1.5 tons." He checked his watch again and took out his phone. No messages declaring Charity was upstairs waiting for him.

"Oh?" She sucked in a long breath as if attempting to steady herself. "Are you sure? Because I've heard stories." Another lungful of air.

Instead of working on her breathing, she needed to school her imagination. "We'll be fine."

The caterer grew a little greener.

"So," he glanced her way, "pre-colonial cooking, I understand. Your specialty?"

According to the woman who recommended Rayen, the personal chef was new and upcoming due to her Native American pre-colonial cooking emphasis.

"It is. Back to the land." The fake lilt in her voice told him she wished she was back on solid ground. He preferred the sky.

Inching his chin up, he peered at what she held. "Smells good."



“Pumpkin soup.”

“Hmm.”

The elevator slowed to a stop, and the doors slid open to a hallway with two sets of double doorways on either side. He strode to his front door, pressed in the code on the keypad, and gestured for her to step inside.

She gasped when she stepped through the doorway. “Wow. Big.”

He gestured to his left. “Kitchen’s over there.”

“Where’s the dining room? So I can set up.”

“We’ll dine on the balcony. Didn’t I put that on my order form?” He pointed down the hallway. “The view is spectacular. Best in the city.” And worth every cent he’d spent to get a view of his father’s place at the Watergate—the top of it. He rather liked looking down at the man.

“Outside?” Her eyes flew open wide, and she swallowed hard. “I’m not great with heights.”

“The balcony railing can take 100 pounds per foot, double the uniform load.”

She swallowed. “You know a lot about loads.”

“I should. Real estate developer. A Greenbay Packers’ linebacker couldn’t get through that glass.” He pointed at the glass balustrade, only earning a shudder from her.

Her eyes grew wider. “Have they tried?”

“Follow me,” he said, shaking his head. “We don’t have much time.”

She trailed after him into the kitchen, where he set her bags on the gleaming white quartz countertop.

“Plates, dishes, whatever you need ...” He waved his hand toward a set of pantry doors. “Taking a quick shower. She’ll be here in twenty minutes. You’ll have dinner set up outside by then, I trust.” He didn’t wait for an answer.

Striding to his bedroom, he went straight for the shower. Hot water might unknot the kinks in his neck from traffic hell.

When he returned to the kitchen, Rayen was busying herself before a giant skillet. The soup simmered in a pot. It did smell delicious.

He moved closer. “Find everything you needed? Everything set up on the balcony?”

She averted her eyes, rolled her lips between her teeth, and tapped a large spoon against the pot holding the soup. “Dining room. She won’t like outside.”

He peeked out the swinging door to the large walnut table. Burgundy placements, gleaming stemware, shining silver ... all in place. Just not in the *right* place.

He let the door close, and before he could confront the rogue move, Rayen raised a hand at him. Literally put her palm up to stop his words.

People did not do that to him.

A growl might have left his throat as she quickly slapped her hand back down to her side. “The wind will mess with her hair.”

Rayen had long glossy black hair, the kind women in that town spent hundreds of dollars to achieve. “I don’t care.”

“Then there’s this.” She waved a finger over her lips, reddened and glossy. “Hair sticks to lip gloss. At least it does to mine.”

Now, he stared at her lips. She’d been gifted with that perfect pout. Plump.

Shit, noticing a stranger’s mouth only meant one thing. It was time for him to get laid. Noticing details like that was the surefire signal he’d waited too long—at least two weeks. Ending that streak wouldn’t be tonight, however.

She sucked a little of her lip into her mouth. “I want your date to be perfect.”

And speaking of the diva, his phone pinged with a text. Charity was running a “smidge late.” That meant a good thirty minutes, and he wasn’t upset about it.

He pocketed his phone and measured his voice. “I suppose indoors will do.” They could move outside later, giving him an excuse to get Charity up from the table and one step closer to the door.

He moved to the liquor cabinet to pour himself a whisky. He could use a few minutes to shake off the last remnants of the day—and the fact he had a chef who clearly knew what she was doing with food but didn’t seem to take client’s orders well.

Something sizzled in the pan, and Rayen slipped an enormous piece of fish into it. “She’s late because she wants to make an entrance.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your date.” She pointed at his phone.

“She does, huh?” More like punishing him for not picking her up, yet another thing she suggested. As if the woman didn’t have two drivers at her disposal twenty-four-seven. “It’s a business meeting. Not a date.”

He brought out a bottle of thirty-year-old Glenfiddich. “But I suppose you’re an expert on dating, given what you do.”

He poured himself two fingerfuls, the splash mixing with a snort from Rayen. “I suck at it.”

“I doubt that.” Though he couldn’t imagine the type of man she would go for. She was casual yet clearly had ambition if she was taking on the food scene in DC. He enjoyed women with vision, though he was beginning to believe he was sold a load of horseshit about her being “up and coming.”

She leveled her dark eyes on him. “No, I’m better with fish.”

He took a long pull on his drink. “I’m not disappointed about that.” A peppery spice and maple wafted in the air, and it surprisingly mixed well with the earthy scent of his drink.

“So, what else are you cooking so I know whether to serve white or red.” Gentleman’s Gourmet web site didn’t mention wine pairings, so he’d opted to do his own.

“What?”

Clearly, his judgment to handle the drinks himself was right. “Wine.”

“Oh.” Her brow furrowed. “Um, besides the soup, pine nut encrusted trout, wild greens in an herb sauce, butternut squash in maple syrup, and fresh berries for dessert.”

“Hmm.” Simple, but it made his belly rumble with hunger. He pulled out a sauvignon blanc and a riesling. “So, you don’t offer wine? Even my barber offers it.”

“Ayana says I should.”

“You should. Great margins.” He reached into a drawer for the corkscrew. “And Ayana?”

“The development officer for the Native Peoples Culture Center. She was the one who recommended me.”

Ah, yes. One of the many fundraisers who came begging for money. Her efforts, however, earned his interest.

Ayana had also slipped him Gentleman’s Gourmet card after overhearing his conversation with someone seeking a personal chef service. He’d remembered the exchange because she’d handed it over and walked away. Women rarely walked away from him. Arrogant but true.

Rayen held out a spoon with the soup. It was a familiar move, something a mother might do—or so he’d seen in the movies.

He released the spoon from her fingers and brought it to his lips. A burst

of creamy pumpkin danced on his tongue. “Mmm. Good.” Not too cloying and not too sharp.

“Oh, and full disclosure, Ayana is my sister.”

Now he understood the over-the-top endorsement. “I see nepotism still rules in this town.” And now that she’d mentioned her family connection, he could see the resemblance between her and her sister—the same shining dark hair and high cheekbones.

“Is that a problem?” she asked.

“Not with me.” Truth is, it was how DC worked—mostly. It’d done little to help him.

“Anything special I can do to help with your date?” She leaned against the countertop casually as if they were two friends chatting it up. “I mean, other than risk my life on your balcony—and for the record, I’m right about the lip gloss.”

He was back to staring at her lips. He normally didn’t care about lips unless they were wrapped around a certain part of his anatomy.

"Okay, I'll give you credit for foreseeing the wind issue. And again, not a date."

"I foresee a lot of things." She winked at him—and it went straight to his crotch.

What in the ever-loving? His anatomy was going rogue on him. Maybe he would have to place some calls to a few women he knew after Charity and Rayen left.

He cleared his throat. “All you have to do is impress Charity Billings with your food. That’s what I need.”

“Consider it done. My food will make up for not risking my life by going out onto the death porch, where I can tell you right now, she would not want to have dinner. Business meeting or not.”

A laugh broke through. “Ah, so you really are afraid of heights. And you’re quite confident.”

“I’m a good cook. And isn’t this the part where you tell me about the weight load again?” One side of her mouth twisted upward.

“I don’t normally repeat myself, but it’s 100 pounds per —”

“Linebacker?”

He took a swig of his whisky. “To be honest, not sure. The Packers were busy when I called.”

“Or they value their players and didn’t want to risk losing one.” Another

wink. She was cute. She lifted a bit of the fish with a spatula, nodded and then dropped it back in the pan. “So, Mr. Michaelson, do you —”

“Call me Knox. Mr. Michaelson is my grandfather.” God rest his soul.

“Not your father?”

“No, he’s Mr. Sociopath.” Didn’t she read the newspaper?

Her eyes widened. “I-I’m sorry.”

Shit, why was he telling all that to someone he’d met twenty minutes ago when he should have been running talking points in his head and the few compliments he’d lined up for the night’s flatter fest.

Maybe because he appreciated attractive women, and she had a unique beauty. Guileless and down to earth, and wholly unlike the aloof, coiffed women he normally hung around. Rayen’s hair caught the light, her eyes sparkled, and her cheekbones? Women would pay plastic surgeons all over to emulate them.

She also was easy to talk to. So few people spoke to him that way—casual. Not exactly flirting but tossing things back at him. Their exchange took a little of the edge off.

It was probably the whisky.

She tapped her wooden spoon on the edge of the skillet. “Um, do you need me to serve you tonight? It’s part of the service, but I leave it up to the client.”

He was certain there was no sexual innuendo there, but his body didn’t seem to care. Of all nights for his inner horny teenager to rise up. “Sure.”

Air, that was what he needed. “I’ll be on the balcony.”

“Going to test my wind theory?” She licked her lips, and he was back to staring at them.

“I’m testing everything tonight. When Charity arrives, we’ll want drinks right away.”

“Yes, sir,” she said with a smile that did little to tamp down his libido.

He strode across the living room and stepped onto the balcony, curling his hands around the silver tubing that capped the thick glass border. He gave it a bit of a shake. It didn’t budge, of course. Three linebackers couldn’t break through.

A gust blew through his shirt. Rayen was right about the wind. More than he’d anticipated. It would have been a mistake to start there when the stakes were so high.

His fingers twitched a little. Just nerves.

Charity had to sell to him. He'd settle for no other outcome. Then maybe, for fucking once, he wouldn't be called Thomas Michaelson's son when news of his latest project broke.

## Chapter Two

---



The penthouse doorbell chimed, an expensive, contralto dong. Even though Rayen hadn't seen anyone else in the penthouse, she waited for the shuffle of feet—the help that Ayana said would be there in droves. “Wealthy people are different,” she'd said. “Expect *staff*.”

At least she had another client. Marketing was hard, and if business didn't pick up, it might mean networking at one of Ayana's endless business events. Standing around a bunch of strangers, holding a warm glass of chardonnay she didn't want, making small talk? *Ugh*.

Then again, this town might not be for her.

Her brother Jacob kept saying she needed to join him in San Francisco. “It's more your style.” Her other sisters kept saying she needed to “come home already.” But big sister Ayana won, as usual. She wanted Rayen to branch out but with family close by. She kept telling her to “give your business some time already.”

Any more *time* and she'd be flat broke—and she'd still not have figured out how to have a life of her own. She would *not* return home with her apron strings between her legs and suffer all the “I told you so's.” The disdain wouldn't be spoken aloud, of course. Just lots of “We knew you couldn't be away from family for too long” and “That's what you get for leaving home” sentiments.

The chime went off again.

Knox hadn't answered? He seemed like a guy who'd want things attended

to immediately.

She closed the oven door. The squash's roasting sauce—a mix of sunflower oil and maple syrup—filled the kitchen with its aroma, covering up some of the fish scent.

If only she'd been there an hour ago, she could have explored the kitchen. It was ginormous—all gleaming stainless steel appliances and quartz countertops. It also didn't look like anyone had ever cooked in it.

Then again, almost all of her clients—all three, single men—had professional designers come in and create Pinterest-worthy kitchens and then never used them. Rich people were strange. They had money but no time. And sometimes, no sense.

So far, Rayen had put together date nights for a guy running for Congress, a fitness guru who literally wore sweatpants to his dinner, and a tech giant who used words like blockchain and metaverse so much his date nearly fell asleep over Rayen's acorn meatloaf.

The guys all had one thing in common. They hadn't a clue how to talk to women.

Not that she was an expert in dating. Her history with men involved a few encounters in the back of a truck with Kenny from down the street, only out of sheer boredom. There wasn't much to do in their little town.

She still was pretty sure no woman wanted to hear about blockchain and elevator load levels over a private dinner.

The doorbell rang for a third time. Where was Knox? Probably still outside loving on his view.

She wiped her hands with the towel hanging off her waistband and headed to answer the door. The poor woman couldn't be left standing in the hallway.

She cracked open the door and took a step back. A tall woman with long blonde hair—they were always blonde and gorgeous, weren't they?—launched herself forward.

Her face fell the second she got a load of Rayen. "Oh, my." Her hand flew to her lips. "Do I have the wrong penthouse?"

"Mr. Michaelson will be right with you," Rayen said. "You must be his dinner companion. Please, come in."

The woman stepped farther into the entryway, the softness of her fur coat gliding across Rayen's arm.

"Yoo-hoo, Knox. Where are you hiding?" She cooed as she let her coat



slide down her arms to reveal bare shoulders and a low-cut, fire-engine red dress.

Not a date, huh? Seduction wasn't Rayen's skill, but she knew it in action. That dress was made to drive men to distraction—and straight to a bedroom. "Um, he'll be right with you."

The woman's smile was downright predatory.

Could she blame her? Knox had been blessed with some spectacular genes if one was into thick blond hair and slate blue eyes that reminded her of the Blue Ridge Mountains at winter back home.

If only he weren't wound tighter than Kim Kardashian's shapewear, he might actually be a catch.

Judging her clients' romantic odds wasn't why they hired her, however. She needed them to like her food, that was all.

"Please tell me there's champagne open." The woman winked at her as she held out her coat.

Rayen took it. "I'll go see."

"Thank you. But first, how do I look? Good enough for Knox Michaelson?" She ran her hands down her hips.

Women didn't ask Rayen for fashion advice—ever. But honesty was the best policy in any given situation. "You're a knockout." She and Knox would have spectacularly beautiful babies.

"And you're my favorite new girlfriend." She waved her hand, delicately raising it to her breastbone. "I'm Charity."

Rayen shifted the woman's mammoth coat so it didn't drag on the floor. "Rayen. I'll hang this up for you."

The woman made a beeline for the balcony, where Knox stood staring out at the skyline like a king surveying his kingdom. He had that energy about him.

Was he reciting *I am Lord and Master. I am the emperor. I ping bras open with one hand* in his head?

Crap, something was burning in the kitchen.

She hustled back to her station to see the butternut squash sizzling and crackling but thankfully not burned. All she had to do was toss the wild greens salad, and dinner could be served.

She wrestled open a bottle of champagne she'd found in the fridge—which held little else. After opening a million cabinets, she found two flutes with a fancy etching of KM on their sides and poured the bubbly to the brim.

He said he wanted drinks right away. He was getting them right away.

Rayen found them in the living room, staring at a piece of artwork over the fireplace.

“You have exquisite taste, Knox.” The woman’s hand found its way into the crook of his arm.

He divested himself, angling his body so her arm slipped out and back to her side. He wasn’t interested in her touch. That was one thing Rayen had begun to watch for. Little signals to see if the guy was into his dinner companion or not. It was so obvious who was into whom when you stood on the outside.

She held up the two flutes. “A little champagne?”

“Oh, thank you,” Charity reached for her glass. “Your friend here is quite attentive.”

“Rayen is an up-and-coming chef in Native culinary arts.”

Ah, so someone was paying attention after all. She wasn’t sure about the “up and coming part,” but she’d take any positive thoughts at that point.

Charity smiled at her. “I think I’ve heard of you, Rayen.”

“Oh?” Doubtful. She’d been in DC a month.

“Word gets around fast in this town when someone talented pops up.” Her arm made its way into his again. “Like my Knox here.”

He shifted his feet and stretched his neck like his collar was too tight. For someone worried about being late for the blonde bombshell, he didn’t look so happy.

He took the other glass from Rayen’s hand, lifted it to the light, and stared at the cascade of bubbles. “Is this the Louis Roederer that was chilling?” His steely blue-gray eyes sliced her way.

“Ooo, Knox, you opened the good stuff.” Charity fluttered her eyelashes. “But I suppose it *is* a special night. Asking me to dinner.”

Knox glared at Rayen. She’d opened something she shouldn’t have, hadn’t she? Set the wrong tone, perhaps?

His eyes softened, and his smile returned. “I was saving it for when we signed the papers, lovely.” His attention returned to Charity. “Consider this offering as faith in our deal that it will work for both of us.”

Oh, smooth. He almost appeared a different person when he turned on the charm—lowered his voice to a rumble, doled out a half smile, and stared right at you like you were the most fascinating person in the world.

Charity tightened her hold on his arm. “Ah, yes, you did say something

about how this could finally get me out from under Daddy. Then you can build your little castle next door. A win-win, is how you couched it?” She clinked his glass and took a sip. “Mmmm.” She pursed her lips in his direction. “I guess you mean it with this on the menu.”

The night turned out like every dinner she’d ever catered. He ate everything in sight. She barely touched her food. Rather, she touched Knox—a lot.

*Oh, Knox. Then a titter. Maybe we should work together. A true partnership.*

Hovering was part of her business, so she could explain her food, how it was a return to the Native peoples’ original cooking. All colonial ingredients were cut from her recipes, including dairy, wheat, chicken, pork, and cane sugar, because they weren’t used in her ancestors’ time.

She wasn’t sure her words were landing. Though Knox was staring intently at Rayen as she described the meal while Charity trailed her red fingernails over his hand.

Girlfriend definitely was not reading the signs well. Then again, some pretty enchanting words came out of his mouth throughout the dinner. If the shoe were on the other foot, Rayen would have thought tonight was definitely a date.

*Our meeting was on my mind all day.* Then a half smile. *Anyone would be so lucky.*

At some point, papers were presented, and they had some business conversation. Charity signed a few documents. Rayen tried to give them space by disappearing into the kitchen as much as she could.

After dessert, Knox rose from the table and took his non-date out on the balcony. Rayen took that as her opening to clean up.

Stacking the plates, she peeked through the wide glass doors and choked back a laugh. Charity fisted her long blonde hair to keep it from whipping around like a Tasmanian devil. Knox, clearly oblivious, gestured out to the scene before him as if leading an orchestra.

She should leave, in case Charity didn’t. No reason to break their mood. She packed up as fast as she could, debating if she needed to make two trips to her car.

She slipped through the swinging door and found them standing in the foyer.

Charity was cupping Knox’s balls and murmuring—purring like a cat on

the prowl. “Knox, you did break out the special goods for me.”

Her fingers curled, and he rose on tiptoes. Rayen almost felt the squeeze herself from down the hall.

She tried to spin back to the kitchen but couldn’t move for some reason. Her feet were frozen in place.

He divested Charity’s hand from his groin. “Darling, I have an early morning.” He lifted her hand to his lips. “It’s been a pleasure doing business with you. I’ll walk you down.”

The woman’s lips thinned, her face growing stony. “So, that’s it?”

“You’ll be a very rich woman.”

“Rich. Yes.” Her voice steeled. “I suppose tonight was a pleasure for you. You got what you wanted. But I didn’t.” So, she was giving in to the reality of the situation.

The poor woman. She’d tried so hard all night, and Knox had charmed his way straight to getting the upper hand. Maybe Charity knew all along and thought she could turn the night around?

Something told Rayen no one turned that man around—not even model-worthy Charity.

Knox sent his gaze her way, and his body stiffened.

Oops. Caught staring. Her insides split in two, wanting to both shudder at his penetrating gaze and burn from head to toe because *embarrassing*.

“I’ll be right back,” he said. “I’m walking Charity downstairs.”

Was he sending Charity to catch a taxicab? In that dress and those heels? After being rejected by him? Rayen cleared her throat. “I can give her a ride.” She didn’t know the woman, but karma was real and always needed to be heeded.

Charity cocked her head, blinked.

Rayen shrugged. “I mean ... if you don’t have one.”

A muscle twitched in Knox’s jaw. “My driver is downstairs, waiting to take you home,” he told Charity.

Oh, cold. They strode out, neither looking happy.

It was none of Rayen’s business.

“Be a professional,” she said as she returned to the kitchen to grab the last of her things. She’d leave a note, then scoot out like she hadn’t even been there.

She rummaged around and found a small pad and pen in a junk drawer. It was the neatest “junk” drawer she’d ever seen. Pens lined up like soldiers, a

pair of scissors, and some paper clips.

*“Thank you for letting me serve you. I owe you a bottle of champagne. Rayen.”*

She then repacked, better, so she'd only need to make one trip, and risked another ride in the elevator that made her belly lurch when it sunk to the ground. She was about to ease back out of the parking space when a loud rap sounded on her window. She yelped and turned. Knox peered down at her, lips thinned in a grim line.

She eased open the window.

He frowned. “Didn’t mean to scare you. You almost left without getting paid.”

Oh, my, she stupidly had. She was so off her game—not that she had game.

He held out an envelope. “The food was excellent. Sorry you had to witness her desperate move at the end.”

She took the payment. “I don’t think she thought it was a business meeting.”

“She should have. There’s no way I’m hooking up with Charity Billings.”

The way he said *no way*, as if she couldn’t possibly be on his menu, irritated her. Charity was a bit dense, but his thorough dismissal was an asshole move.

Knox may be rich and handsome, but he wasn’t that likable. In fact, his looks had begun to fade.

“She seemed quite nice. She certainly was pretty.” She also had a body they probably designed mannequins on, which he likely used as his ultimate benchmark for rating a woman’s worth.

“I suppose.” Knox leaned down. “I’d like to book you again. Next weekend.”

“Another date?”

“Tonight wasn’t a date. My next one —”

“No thanks.” Witnessing a man crush a woman’s spirit wasn’t why she’d started her business.

She was doing work to help revitalize her culture while assisting clueless men with their dates—real ones. It wasn’t designed for him. Rich or not, she didn’t need a client who had such little respect for women. In fact, it was surprising Ayana had given him her card. How did she know him?

His brow furrowed like he didn’t expect a no. Then again, did anyone tell

him no?

“My specialty is being hired by hopeless bachelors trying to impress a date, treat her as something special.” *Unlike you.*

“I’m hardly hopeless, and are you seriously turning me down?”

“Yep.” She threw her car in reverse and began to back out of the space. Let him replace his own champagne because, with any luck, they’d never see one another again.

He slowly folded his arms over his chest. “Tell your sister I said hello. I’ll see her next week.”

She braked. Her lips dropped open. Oh, shit. Was he important to Ayana? She hadn’t said anything except, “Here’s a guy who needs a personal chef.”

Knox strode to his waiting elevator car and leaned against the shiny back railing, his smug smile still camped on his face, his gaze aimed at her. The elevator doors shut.

“Everything’s fine,” she said as she furiously texted her sister.

RAYEN

Finished. Knox Michaelson is an ass.

Her fingers drummed on her thigh. “Please agree with me. Please say ...” *Anything* that showed he wasn’t important to her.

Her phone rang within seconds.

“Of course, he’s an ass.” Ayana laughed. “He’s a real estate developer in the DC metro area. But he could be our largest donor, so —”

“What?” She slammed her head against the headrest. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Rayen.” Her sister’s warning tone felt like knives scratching down her back. “What did you do?”

She bit her cuticle. “Let’s say I’m not getting a testimonial.”

“Rayen! How *else* would I know him? Everyone is a donor or potential one.”

The last thing she ever wanted to do was put Ayana in a bad spot. Her sister was letting her stay rent-free until she got settled and had hooked her up with some business. Plus, Rayen would never hear the end of it.

She would have to buy that replacement bottle of champagne now, wouldn’t she? And worse? See Knox Michaelson again—to apologize.

She’d rather step onto his balcony.

## Chapter Three

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**K**nox spun his hand on the steering wheel. “You’ll love this woman, Paul. She’s just your type. Can’t keep her hands off your balls. Sound familiar?”

His friend chuffed through the speakerphone. “I don’t need your sloppy seconds.”

“Haven’t had a first.” Didn’t have anything last night. He ended up *not* calling any other women and stared at the ceiling for half the night.

Despite him winning Charity’s agreement to sell her shares, he hadn’t felt good about how the night had ended. Then, that personal chef chastised him. In one evening, he’d pissed off *two* women. Some days he swore he knew more about the making of the universe than the make-up of a female.

He pulled up to the valet stand. “Paul, trust me.”

“Never. What’s up with her?”

The man’s suspicious tone was warranted, he supposed. Dating in DC was entering the Thunderdome. “If you’d rather, I’ll send Jamison to meet Charity Billings —”

“Charity?” Knox nearly heard the man sit up straighter through the phone. “Way to bury the lead, man. Where? When?”

Nailed it. He’d known Paul for decades, and for the last few years, Charity was all he could talk about. Time to get off the stick. “Meet me at the Dupont Cabana Room. It’s a Native Peoples Cultural Center event. Right now.” He killed the call.

With any luck, he'd also talk to Ayana to help him get in touch with Rayen. The mystery of why she'd turned him down gnawed at him. He didn't let things gnaw at him.

But her business card went missing, his assistant rather inconveniently left for vacation that morning, and the Gentleman's Gourmet website shockingly didn't have a phone number. He'd be damned if he filled out one of those web contact forms.

He tossed his keys to the valet and strode inside. Another happy hour, another fundraiser. Thirty minutes, a quick chat with Ayana, the hand-over of a check, then he'd exit. With any luck, he'd get to bed at a decent hour.

He made a beeline for the makeshift bar. When he twisted back to face the crowd, he nearly plowed into Mrs. Darden, a self-proclaimed arts patron. Her husband also was a business associate, so mandatory small talk incoming.

Knox swirled the ice in his drink as Mrs. Darden launched into where she and Peter were "summering" that year. Her voice faded to white noise as he scanned the room for any sign of Ayana.

"Don't you agree, Knox? I said, Peter, we couldn't *possibly* buy a house in the Outer Banks. I'm a Rehoboth girl through and through."

He murmured, knowing he didn't need to respond. She'd be happy to just keep talking. His eyes wandered through the crowd. Women in pastel suits, men in rumpled suits. Typical Washington, DC event.

A petite dark-haired woman was balancing a tray of tiny quiches. She lifted one foot, circled her ankle, and grimaced. Either his eyesight was failing, or Rayen was waitressing.

He hadn't expected to see her there. And working service? Her cooking was too good to be passing around hors d'oeuvres no one would touch. Though he appreciated the opportunity to see her again. He needed to find out exactly what turned her so icy.

Her sister Ayana sidled up to her, glanced his way, and whispered something to her sister.

"Isn't that right?" Mrs. Darden touched his forearm.

"What was that?"

"Your father. He built half the Outer Banks."

His stomach lurched a little. "Yes." The man loved nothing more than to pave over something undeveloped.

Rayen turned, faced him, and rolled her eyes. Fucking *rolled her eyes*. At



him.

“You did not,” he muttered, setting his drink on a nearby table. “Excuse me, Mrs. Darden. I see someone I must talk with.” He swept himself away.

Rayen met him halfway across the ballroom floor. “Hi, Mr. Michaelson. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean what I said.”

“It’s Knox. And you haven’t said anything yet.”

She sighed, and her eyes went heavenward again. “Hey, Lauren, mind taking my tray?” She passed it to a very tall redhead who eyeballed him from balls to face before accepting.

Rayen held up both her hands. “What I said last night about you being hopeless. And before I begin groveling —”

“Is that what you came over to do?”

Her brow furrowed. “*You* were coming over to see *me*. Listen, I’m terrible at networking and making small talk, so here’s the deal. I’m supposed to suck up to you, so you won’t hold back on donating to the center tonight because of what happened.”

“Oh?” he said into his drink. “And what happened?” He really wanted to know why she turned on him.

She crossed her arms. “You’re going to make this hard, aren’t you?”

“At least you didn’t call me an asshole.”

“Not out loud.”

Yeah, she was ballsy, alright. “Is this how you apologize?”

She heaved a sigh. “Look, I felt bad for Charity. How you dumped her.”

“It wasn’t a date,” he gritted out. Because he didn’t let Charity paw him like a new mink coat? That was what that was about?

“You must have some mad romantic skills, then, because if you could top last night —”

“What do you mean?” *Women. I swear.*

“I’m not calling you unaware —”

“At least not to my face, but go on.”

She held up one finger. “One, you invite her to dinner at your place.” The second finger joined the first. “Two, you bring in a personal chef.” Three fingers waggled at him. “Three, you show off your view.”

He could see that interpretation if he thought about it hard enough. But Charity wasn’t interested in him—not really. “She barely got a load of the view because someone warned me about lip gloss. But I don’t date, and Charity knows —”

“Seriously? Never?” Her eyes flew wide, and she shook her head. “Never mind. Why didn’t you invite her to your office on the sixteenth floor? That says business.”

An odd gratification bloomed in his chest. “You Googled me.”

“I was looking for any reference to that champagne. I owe you a bottle. Consider it an apology gift.”

He waved off another waitress who appeared as if she was going to stop and make another offer. “No, you don’t, and you won’t. It’s too expensive.”

She raised one eyebrow. “I’m not poor, you know.”

That woman and her bravado. “It’s eight thousand dollars a bottle.”

Her lips parted, and his attention once more landed on her mouth. “Seriously? That’s more than my first car. No wonder she was impressed.”

His gaze lifted. One thing was for sure, Rayen wasn’t from around there. Expensive bottles of champagne were being popped open all over town that evening.

Her freshness was adorable—and suspicious. Could be an act. Truth be told, he wasn’t very good at reading women.

Curiosity took possession of his tongue. “Where are you from?”

“A little town in Amherst County.” She gathered her hair in her hands and fanned her neck. “Nine hundred residents. You’ve probably never heard of it.”

His eyes caught the little curl plastered to her skin above her ear. “No. I imagine it’s quite different from here,” he said distractedly. He finally broke whatever momentary trance he’d fallen in to. “How are you finding DC?”

She blinked, probably at the switch in conversation, but he was done talking about last night. “It’s ... nice.”

Not what someone normally said about the hustle and bustle of the nation’s capital. “Nice?” Usually, he’d get an answer related to its importance, its historical significance, and something about “generations of leaders,” blah, blah, blah.

“Mostly.” She let her hair go. “But honestly? Everyone seems lonely here. So many people, yet no connection.” She waved her hand around the crowded ballroom.

Ah, an honest answer. Even though smiles were being thrown out like candy, hands touching arms, laughter ... What she said made sense. “Keen observation.” Then again, the only *connecting* he needed was in business. “So, why are you here?”

She shrugged. "My sister needed me. Living alone is no fun."

It sounded perfect to him. He couldn't imagine living *with* anyone, especially family. If he did, he'd have to invest in a Kevlar suit.

She fidgeted on her feet again. "You okay?" he asked.

"High heels were developed by a sadist."

He couldn't argue that, though he'd never tried on a pair. "Why are you waitressing anyway? You're too talented for that."

"Penance. For mucking things up last night. So, you'll forgive me? You'll still donate?"

"Well, I was a bit ... short with you." The truth just spilled out. He'd been in a bad mood and let it show.

"You were. And it's not nice to use women."

Use? He could pretend her words didn't land like an arrow, but it'd be a lie. "I wasn't using her. If anything, she'd like nothing more than to use me."

"Got magic skills there, too?" She raised one eyebrow, clearly believing he didn't.

Yet another arrow? "That's not what I meant." How could he explain how Charity and his friend Paul had been dancing around each other for years? He wasn't about to be her revenge fuck for Paul's lack of movement. Forcing them together tonight was his last ditch effort for them to *get a room already*.

Honestly, last night was a perfect reminder of why he didn't date.

The wading through a person's past, the endless games, the toothbrushes, and panties conveniently "left behind by mistake" cluttering up his bathroom. Then, the inevitable "where are we going ... *really*" discussions. It all ended up the same: A woman slamming a door in his face over something he said or didn't say or should have said. They always wanted a level of intimacy that made him break out into hives even thinking about it.

"Look." She licked her top lip, pulling his attention back to them like last night. "I was just trying to be nice. Offering her a ride, I know you don't know me well —"

"No. And you don't know me, either."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "No. I guess I don't."

He cocked his head. They were getting nowhere. Time to pivot. "But I know a talented chef when I encounter one. So." He slapped a hand to his chest. "For whatever I did, I apologize. I'm not a *total* ass." Or so he'd thought until she landed in his orbit.

"I think you should tell that to her." She pointed at Charity, who was

talking excitedly to two other women.

“I won’t need to.” He cocked his head toward Paul, who had just entered and was making a beeline for her. “I’m fixing her up with one of my friends. He’s been pining for her for years.”

Her lips dropped open. “Oh. Wow. I mean. That’s so ... *nice* of you.”

Astonishment—that was what her eyes held. They really had gotten off on the wrong foot. “They’re perfect together. Contrary to me, my friend doesn’t mind taking the death march down a wedding aisle.”

“Don’t believe in love, huh?”

He scrubbed his chin. “You don’t know much about me or my family, do you?”

She shrugged. “Should I?”

“In this town, knowing everything about your client is important.” Her sincerity was refreshing, but her obvious naïveté concerned him.

Her head tilted. “Why?” Honest interest colored her eyes.

“It’s good business. How long have you had Gentleman’s Gourmet? Terrible name, by the way. Sounds like something from the sixties, straight out of an Austin Power’s movie.”

She dramatically slumped. “You’re going to make me voice thoughts now. I admit I’m new to this.”

He knew it. Up and coming, his ass. “How long?”

“A month.” She bit her lip and averted her eyes.

“I can help you.” The words tumbled from his mouth. Her sincerity was palpable, and she was a good cook. Maybe even great, and he was sick and tired of this city swallowing up people with talent. Hell, it had nearly eaten him whole. *Thanks, Dad.* You needed more than that here, and she wore her inexperience on her sleeve.

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Know much about catering?”

“I know about making money.”

“But not about women.”

Ouch. She didn’t quit. “I understand them well enough.” They wanted too much, too soon, and too deeply.

“Oh?” By the expression on her face, she most definitely considered him an idiot, which was not a look he got often.

He widened his stance. “Women read too much into things. Like take the woman I was with last night. We had a good time, a *very* good time, which should have been enough —”

“Enough?” She dropped her chin. “Did you ask her?”

“I didn’t have to.”

“You know what?” She pointed at him. “I could help *you*. Give you pointers.”

Then he did laugh. “Don’t need help there, Rayen. I almost had to apologize to my neighbors for how loud she was, if you get my drift.”

“Drift gotten, and now I most definitely know I can help you.” She stepped closer, bringing a rosemary and sage scent toward him. “I have a proposition. I’ll give you pointers around women, and you help me with Gentleman’s Gourmet.”

She had to be kidding. “I thought you sucked at dating.”

“I do, but that doesn’t mean I can’t offer some friendly advice. I am a woman, after all.”

No kidding. Her scent was now all around him. Her hair caught the light, distracting him.

She put her hands together. “I’ll cater a few dates for you, deliver some tips, and you give me business advice.”

“I’m not in the market for anyone.” He didn’t need pointers on attracting women. Getting them was easy. It was everything that came afterward, like Madison that morning, whose dreamy eyes made his skin itch.

“But you have trouble with them, right?”

She was annoyingly intuitive.

When he didn’t answer right away, she leaned in closer. “Unless you think it’d be the blind leading the blind.”

Oh, she had negotiating instincts, alright. *Nice move, little chef*. Her words were a blatant challenge. He’d have to insult her to argue, saying she didn’t know women. Which would be ridiculous given, as she’d pointed out, she was one. And if he didn’t take her up on that “deal,” he’d have to admit he didn’t know enough about business to help her.

Like hell.

Already his head was spinning with the things he was sure she hadn’t considered yet. She could do well in DC—if she had the right approach, watched her margins, and engaged the right marketing.

He hadn’t mentored anyone in years, and their deal could shake up his usual nights of staring out over the skyline.

He stepped forward a little, more to keep their conversation private. Too many ears were already eavesdropping. “I suppose you giving me your girl

code knowledge could be useful.”

If nothing else, he’d love to know how to end all the *why didn’t you call* and *I thought we were something special* speeches—all of which had been lobbed at him after a few dinners at Marvin’s and a few rolls in his king-sized bed. Promises he couldn’t keep never left his lips, but somehow, women heard them anyway. Knowing how to change that would be worth gold.

It was settled. “Three dates. Tops. You cater. Afterward, we go over your business plan.”

“I don’t have one.”

Of course, she didn’t. “Then we’ll start there.” He held out his hand. “Deal?”

Her face broke into a grin, and she returned his handshake. “Deal.”

Her enthusiasm had a strange effect on him. Most women would play it cool. She didn’t have a game face in her. He liked it—and her.

## Chapter Four

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**T**he one thing Rayen could say about Knox Michaelson was he could wear a suit. He stood in the parking garage by the elevator, wearing a finely cut charcoal suitcoat with a deep blue shirt underneath that made his eyes glow. Her insides flipped upside down—which was so not like her.

For one, she still wasn't sure whether or not he was an asshole or just slow on the uptake around women. Either way, if he were willing to help make Gentleman's Gourmet a success, she'd do some good by educating him. It might save future women some heartache. It was her own little "pay it forward" experiment. As Grandma always said, "Kindness given will be returned."

She lowered her window and leaned out a little. "Wow. Parking lot service. You waiting for your date?"

"I'm here for you. You hate elevators." He strode over to her car door and cracked it open.

She lifted herself out. "Way to butter up your coach. Two points!"

"I'm earning points, huh?" He held out his hand to her, and she took it.

"I figured it could add a fun twist."

He murmured. "I expect you still won't hold back your critique tonight."

"Not on your life."

"I won't either." After slamming the door shut, he glanced at his watch. "You're on time."

Ye, of little faith. "But not late. Don't I get points for that?"

“Always be five minutes early. It puts people both at ease and on edge.”

“Is that important?”

“In this town, yes. You want them to know you’re reliable but also busy enough to slide in ‘just in time’.”

“Huh.” She had to admit it made sense, albeit a little too much like game-playing for her taste. She rounded to her car trunk to get the food she’d brought. “Which lucky Washington, DC single female are you going to tempt on to your death balcony tonight?” Her trunk lid creaked open.

“None. Someone once told me lip gloss—a buzzkill if I’ve ever heard of one—trumps a beautiful view.”

The man was in love with his view, but she’d give him a point for remembering her words of wisdom. He grabbed three of her bags and headed to the elevator, yet another part of his penthouse living she could do without.

He swiped a card and punched the code into the panel. The doors slid open in an expensive-sounding whoosh. She could be brave—again—and stepped inside before her courage changed its mind.

But as soon as the elevator lurched upward, her stomach fell to her ankles. “Whoa.”

Knox reached over and put his hand on her arm, now tense and tight from her grip on the railing. “You really do hate heights.”

“Broke my arm falling out of a tree when I was six. Pretty much cured me of needing to have my feet leave the ground again.” She shuddered at the memory.

He tsked. “That’d do it.”

“Why do you love heights?”

“I get to look down on my father’s buildings.”

He’d alluded to not being close to his father. Generally, referring to a parent as a psychopath was a clue. She should have found out more about him as he’d suggested. With what time?

She’d spent the last few days helping Ayana plan a few more fundraising events and then planning tonight. She’d wanted tonight’s dinner to be *perfect*.

She also did *not* tell Ayana about her deal with Knox. Her sister was dying to take over her life, and she’d have to endure a hundred questions and unasked-for warnings about dealing with “rich people.”

“So, what time do you pick up Madison?” He’d texted her his date’s name that morning.

He glanced at his watch. “The town car is likely in front of her building



right now.”

Rayen sighed heavily. “Seriously? There go your points.”

“Do not tell me you zeroed out my balance already?” He chuckled a little.

“No. You get points for,” she waved at his torso, “looking so great and remembering my advice on the lip gloss.”

He smiled down at her. “I look great, huh?” Wagging his eyebrows, he leaned down. “How many did I get for that?”

“Not enough to make up for not picking her up.” Though, honestly, being chauffeured must feel quite *Sex and the City*.

His smirk didn’t drop as he sent his arm out to hold the elevator door open for her because, thank God, they’d arrived.

After helping her get everything inside, he immediately launched a barrage of questions about where she found her ingredients, the ROI of each, and other terms she’d never heard of. She tried to listen as she prepared the food.

He waved a yucca fry at her. “Return on Investment or ROI is everything. How much is each one, and how much do you charge for it?”

She sprinkled some seasoning on the venison steaks. “Individual fry? You’re kidding, right?”

“I never kid about margin. Everything you buy, and I mean everything down to the napkins, you double the cost of. Then you price it twenty percent over that.”

She slipped the acorn flour bread into the oven. “Sounds like I’d be overcharging.”

“For this?” He lifted another yucca fry and put it in his mouth. “You’re definitely under charging.” He pointed at the plate. “These are worth gold.”

Warmth spiraled inside her that he was enjoying her food already. “Money isn’t the only reason I’m doing this, ya know.”

She’d started her own business, thinking she could learn as she went. But other than cooking, nothing else was intuitive. Advertising, accounting, *networking*.

“I can tell money’s not your focus,” Knox said. “I commend you for educating us.”

“Ooo, a positive point.” She pointed at him. “But remember later, it was *you* who brought up hopeless bachelors tonight.”

“I didn’t mean helping us get women. I meant teaching us about food before the European settlers. It’s important for us to remember there were

nations here before us.” He stuffed another fry in his mouth. “What? You look surprised.”

Of course, she was. “I wouldn’t expect that from someone who ...” she paused, waving her potholder in the air, “... paves over so much of the world.”

“I do more than that.”

“Okay, pillage and plunder the earth?” She winked to lighten her words though she meant them. She appreciated all the gardens in Washington and the fact that skyscrapers were not welcomed. But across the river in Virginia? With the exception of a few postage-stamp-sized parks and Arlington National Cemetery, every square inch of land had something on it—all man-made, all over the top.

He pointed at her. “Another business lesson. Do not insult your client.” At least he smiled.

“I was teasing.”

“No, you weren’t.” He got up and poured himself more wine before tipping the bottle in her direction. She shook her head at his offer. Alcohol and work did not mix.

She pointed at the pot stewing on his stove. “So, tonight’s menu. Besides the fries ...” On his fifth one, he was already making a meal of them. “Venison steaks. Butternut squash, corn and bean succotash with wild onion and chiles for a kick, the yucca fries, and acorn flour bread. And a blueberry honey cake for dessert. I hope it’s not too much.”

“She won’t eat.” He stifled a yawn.

“That’s because society has drilled into her that she’s only feminine if she picks at her food, and she wants you to believe she’s desirable, and —”

“See? This is why dating is absurd. Society wants you to take them to dinner, and then they don’t consume any of it.”

The man had a point—and earned some for grasping that dichotomy. “So, how do you know Madison?”

“She works in the coffee shop in my old office building. Loved to put foam hearts in my afternoon lattes.”

“Oh, she’s already into you.” It was most definitely a message.

He shrugged. “She’s also the woman from the other night. Ya know,” he lowered his voice. “the one who almost had the neighbors knock on the door?” He winked.

Rayen stared at him. “You invited your one-night stand? I hope you’re

into her. Remember little things from that night to bring up?”

“She favors vodka.” He snapped his fingers. “And wore pink lingerie. I remember that.”

Was he *trying* to be an asshole? “You honestly believe you don’t date.” He likely had hundreds of them, and he was the only one who didn’t know it.

“I don’t. Except tonight. So, what’s the game plan? You going to tell me to compliment her? Hold out her chair for her? Tell her she looks ravishing?”

“Something tells me you got the charming part down. Maybe too well.”

“Women like flattery.”

“Women like authenticity.”

“You know, I didn’t get where I am in life by lying to people.” He reached over and dipped a finger in the pot, making her slap him with the spoon. “Ow.”

“Don’t take food off your date’s plate.”

Like he would? “For that, I might.” He smirked. “How about this? Watch me. The tips can come after.” He lazily sipped his drink. The man wasn’t worried at all.

“You don’t think you need tips, do you?” she asked.

He tipped his chin a little. “No. But I’m open to what you have to say.”

At least he was honest.

When his date arrived—a brunette with the most stunning sapphire eyes she’d ever seen—he took her coat. Told her she looked lovely. And, as Rayen thought, he immediately escorted her to his balcony to show off the view.

She got them wine—not champagne because she wouldn’t make that mistake again—and scooted back to the kitchen. But not before overhearing Knox wax poetic about the skyline. As predicted, Madison declined an offer to dine outside.

Knox and Madison chit-chatted over dinner. He asked the usual questions; she laughed at his jokes. He complimented her choice of wanting to go to law school—something about DC could never have too many attorneys. She listened to him talk about building codes changing, and Madison acted interested.

It was downright a perfect first-real-date—because their one-night stand didn’t count. Yet, something was off. Rayen couldn’t put her finger on it. Maybe too practiced?

At one point, Knox returned to the kitchen and retrieved another bottle of wine. He winked at her. “I hope you’re watching through the crack in the

door.”

She was but shrugged delicately. “Maybe.”

“Don’t want you to miss any of my point-worthy moments.”

“Ooo, competitive.”

She brought the dessert out and placed it before them. “This is a honey cake glazed in wild honey and sunflower seeds and paired with blueberry wojapi and a little oak milk whipped cream.” She’d cheated a little with the cream but told herself she made up for it by growing her own mint sprig that topped it.

Madison clapped her hands. “Oh, fancy.” She wobbled on her chair a bit.

“Rayen, everything’s been wonderful. Thank you.” Knox then lit into his dessert like he’d been waiting for it his whole life. More pride blossomed in her chest. At least he was into her food.

Maybe he could have more points.

After the dessert dishes were cleared—and she’d disposed of Madison’s portion because, of course, she ate exactly one bite—loud giggles filled the living room.

She peeked through a crack in the doorway as she dried a big mixing bowl. Knox and Madison had moved to the couch. Knox splayed out like a king on his throne—or a mafia prince about to get a lap dance.

The man raised all kinds of thoughts she’d never had before. Like what would it be like to date someone like him? Never knowing if he’d call again. Wondering why he didn’t. No, thank you.

Maybe she should bring them coffee. Before she could push her way in, Madison leaned forward. “Knox, you really are a good-looking man.” Her navy blue dress stretched across her ass as she leaned toward him, her wine glass held between two fingers—it dangerously tilted and almost spilled the red stuff all over his white couch.

Madison seemed a little drunk. Then again, Rayen had seen two people drain more bottles in one evening than she could consume in a month and then stride out as straight as if they were walking a balance beam.

Knox grabbed her glass from her before she could spill it. “Coffee?”

“I’ll have more wine.” She dramatically slapped her lap and tried to rise before falling backward in a fit of giggles. “Oops. New heels. I like it down here better anyway.”

Knox eyed her. “Madison, we —”

“Because you’re here.” She perched her arm on the back of the couch and

ran her fingers over his hair. “And I’m here. And we are sooo good together.”

Wow, women were aggressive in DC. Rayen could never ...

The woman then swallowed hard. “Mmm, maybe that coffee would be good.” She clutched at her stomach as she leaned forward.

Rayen recognized that stance. She ran out with her mixing bowl and got to Madison’s face just in time for her to upchuck.

“Whoa.” Knox leapt from the couch and took two large steps backwards. “Did *not* see that coming.”

Rayen would cut him a break. The woman was about to straddle his lap two minutes ago.

Knox put one hand on his forehead, the other on his hip. “This is a first.”

Rayen had her hand on the woman’s back, keeping the bowl in front of Madison’s face. Thank God, she was holding the giant one. “Help me get her to the bathroom. Where’s your bedroom?”

“Not in there.” He grabbed one of the woman’s arms. “Powder room.”

Rayen threw him a look. “Afraid to mess up your decorative towels?”

“Hallway’s closer,” he choked out as Madison retched again.

They managed to get her to the powder room, where the woman immediately dropped to her knees and hugged the toilet bowl—like a pro.

Rayen held her hair back while Knox continued to hold his stomach. “I need a cold cloth.”

His lids were at half-mast, and he held his stomach. Oh my God, he was going to wretch, too?

“I’m not good with,” he waved his hand over Madison, “this.” But he returned a minute later and handed her a cold towel. “Do you think it’s food poisoning?” he asked—from the doorway, she noticed.

Was he serious? “No. How about two bottles of wine? How much did she have?”

“Most of it, but I thought she’d know not to drink that much.”

“You couldn’t stop her?”

It was his turn to throw her a look. “Have you ever tried to stop a woman on a date from her wine?”

“Well ... you probably made her nervous.” She didn’t know why she was irritated. Oh, maybe because he dared to bring up food poisoning. “We’re going to be here a while.”

He didn’t protest. Probably because he didn’t know what else to do.

Madison groaned a little. “Oh, my God. I’m so embarrassed.”

“Don’t worry about it. It happens.” Now that Rayen looked at the woman, makeup smudged and pouting a little, she appeared to be a middle school kid.

“You can leave me. I can clean up,” Madison said.

Rayen patted her back. “Are you sure?” Though she could imagine why the woman would want some privacy.

Madison waved at her. “Give me ... five.”

Rayen rose to see Knox had vanished. Probably to call the stupid town car. She gently closed the door and heard Madison gag again inside. Poor woman.

Rayen found Knox in the kitchen, pouring himself a drink of all things.

“Don’t you touch that,” she told him. “You have to drive her home.”

“No. I’m not.” He took a sip.

“Then I’m ripping up all your points for the night.” She crossed her arms.

He stilled, put his drink down, and slowly crossed his arms over his gorgeous blue-shirted chest. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Rayen held her fingers up and made ripping motions. “All gone.” She then threw imaginary confetti in the air.

His eyes narrowed. “What’s gotten into you?”

Honestly, Rayen didn’t know. Everything had been going well. Knox was being great. Her dinner was great. And then it had dissolved into chaos. She somehow felt responsible. Crap, did she put something in the food that didn’t agree with Madison?

Rayen bit the side of her thumb. “Did she really drink that much?”

“Yes.” He’d softened his voice. “It wasn’t the food. I promise.” Ah, so he knew what she was thinking. God forbid she ever made someone ill with her cooking.

The knot in her chest eased. “How old is she anyway? She looks ... young.”

“I don’t know. She graduates from Georgetown in a few months.” He twirled his glass on the countertop.

“Knox.” Rayen slapped his chest with the back of her arm.

“Ow.” He grabbed her arm and held it there. “Easy there, Rocky.”

She wrenched herself free. “Are you kidding me? She’s a baby.”

“Excuse me, *mother*. She’s a grown adult. She’s been working on her master’s thesis, for God’s sake.” He scrubbed his hair. “I got to hear all about it tonight. Something about the mating behavior of earthworms. *Lumbrus testicle* somethings.”

A laugh erupted from her throat. She couldn't help it. "They have testicles?"

"Hell if I know. It's in their name." He laughed a little, too. "Should we go check on her?"

Before they could, the swinging door pushed open, and a disheveled Madison stood there, heels in hand. "I gotta go."

"Of course." Knox pushed off from the counter. "I'll drive you."

She nodded once and let the door swing shut.

"Thank you," Rayen whispered.

"Don't get used to it," he whispered back.

They strode out of the kitchen. Madison leaned a little against the console table.

Knox went to her and put his arm around her, wiping the hair off her face. "You're okay, baby." He kissed her on the forehead, and Rayen nearly melted into a puddle right then. Madison gave him a watery smile. He truly could be sweet sometimes.

He tossed a key at her. "Can you lock up by yourself? Get down the elevator okay?"

"I'm *fine*."

His gray-blue eyes shone directly at her as the elevator doors closed—right before Madison nearly collapsed against him. One could only hope she didn't throw up on the way down.

Rayen then finished cleaning and packed up. She glanced around his kitchen—spotless. "Well, tonight's one for the books." She swung her bag strap over her shoulder and headed to her car.

She survived the elevator ride down to the garage and made a mental note to suggest date number two—if she was allowed to continue with their deal—be somewhere closer to the ground.

As soon as she got everything put away and herself in the driver's seat, her cell phone vibrated.

KNOX

She threw up in my car again before dropping her off

Rayen giggled. He would never drive another woman again, would he?

RAYEN

Please tell me NOT dropped off at the curb

KNOX

Ye of little faith. Tucked her into bed. Clothed

RAYEN

Good man

KNOX

Do I get my points back?

He seemed to really care about that. So, yeah, she could throw him a little encouragement on that front.

RAYEN

Some

KNOX

Tough crowd. Now go work on identifying your profit margins while I hose out my car



## Chapter Five

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**K**nox leaned back in his office chair, stretched his neck, and stared at the Potomac River through his office window. His father’s building across the water stared back at him. The man had texted him, asking him to swing by for a chat. Even if he was in no hurry to get to his dinner tonight, at least he wasn’t sitting in his father’s office listening to another lecture about his business plan.

*No thanks, Dad.* He’d texted back. **Busy.** It was the most polite thing he could come up with. And, of course, his dad didn’t respond. Why would he? He didn’t get the answer he wanted.

His phone buzzed again, and thankfully, it was Rayen asking about the business plan she’d delivered last night—after disastrous date number three. And if he was ready for his fourth date, something he unwisely agreed to because he was “points negative.”

How did he allow himself to be in that situation? He ran a billion-dollar real estate development company, had two vacation homes—one in Vancouver, another in Hawaii—and a private jet on speed dial. And he couldn’t seem to get out of seeing women he wasn’t remotely interested in romantically so a five-foot-five private chef could critique him.

After Madison’s vomit-thon on their pretend date—because who was he kidding about the reality of the situation?—she’d texted him endlessly. He’d tried to make light of her embarrassing moment, telling her he’d seen worse.

You should have seen what came out of Jamison Scott during last year's Super Bowl party

Rayen had declared his response the most unromantic thing she'd ever read, which was kind of the point. He didn't want to egg on Madison.

He should never have shared their text exchange after the Madison retch-fest.

He hadn't been completely *unsympathetic* toward the woman. He'd sent her flowers the next morning—and Rayen the confirmation of it. Five whole points were added to his tally for that move. But he should have gotten more. The long-stem roses came from Hedge and Vine, the most expensive florist in town. Even so, Rayen could not be persuaded to add more, and God knew he'd tried—not that that whole point reward system was important.

He then tried to put an end to his and Rayen's deal, offering to mentor her for nothing. But Rayen staunchly refused, saying it wouldn't be fair. "Plus, no way are you getting out of your education, mister."

So, he'd endured two more excruciating, never-wanted-them-in-the-first-place dates. He was no closer to understanding the female sex than when he'd started. And somehow, he'd ended up ticking them off—repeatedly.

It wasn't his fault date number two ended so badly. Mazie, a real estate agent he once worked with, was clearly still in love with her ex-boyfriend, given how much she talked about him. Knox honestly was doing her a favor by telling her to call the guy and get him to pick her up instead of Knox driving her home.

The chilly end to date number three wasn't his fault either. Could Rayen truly have blamed him for doing a little work on his phone under the table as Laura, a legislative assistant for a super-conservative US Congressman, tried to interview him about his thoughts on firearms, foreign relations, and immigration? After he got a fiery speech from Laura about how "men in this town never want to hear from a woman with brains," he'd agreed with her—but only to get her to end her tirade.

Apparently, it was the wrong answer. She went on for some minutes afterward.

Then, he got another lecture from Rayen in the kitchen. Her lips pursed, arms crossed over her chest, which only highlighted a spectacular chest he tried hard not to notice, but, goddammit, he was still living like a monk, a most unnatural state for a man like him.

“I didn’t text the *whole* time,” he’d argued.

“You’re now in negative points.”

“I’m devastated.” He then proceeded to pour himself a healthy tumbler full of bourbon, glad his three-date duty was finally over.

“You need a fourth date to at least end on a positive,” she’d declared.

He’d nearly chugged the entire glass. Over his dead body, he’d thought, and then somehow ended up agreeing to it before she packed up and left.

He stared out at the window again and swiveled his office chair. At least the nights weren’t a total loss.

After each “date,” he had given Rayen pointers on building a business plan, downloaded QuickBooks to her laptop, got her bank account connected, weighed in on several logo designs for Gentleman’s Gourmet, and lost the battle again about changing her company’s name.

She was one stubborn lady.

Instead of texting Rayen back about her business plan, he punched in her phone number.

“Tell me you don’t hate it,” she said quickly.

His mood instantly lightened. “You have good instincts.”

“Is that a kind way of saying I have a lot more to do?” He could almost hear her biting the side of her thumb, something she often did, through the phone.

“Let’s say I’m impressed you got this far on the first pass.”

For one, she’d listened to him and got right on it. His own staff didn’t listen to him that well or work that fast. And while her plan was rough, all the basic concepts were there, including market positioning, which no one ever got right.

She sighed. “Now, see, that sounds like a compliment but might really be an insult.”

“If I wanted to insult you, I’d tell you to start over. I can say this, reading your plan was a hell of a lot more fun than making getting-to-know-you talk over a dining room table.” Jesus, he *still* couldn’t believe he was having yet another dinner at his place with a woman he had zero interest in. “Why don’t you and I eat whatever you’ve planned?”

“You’re not getting out of tonight. You need to at least end in the positive points zone.”

He chuckled a little at her dedication to her little game.

A click of a pen sounded in the background. “What time is Penelope

coming tonight?”

“Eight p.m. And I cannot get over you’re making me do a fourth date.” He couldn’t believe he’d *agreed* to it.

Perhaps he was losing his mind. He’d jumped onto the crazy train—though he wasn’t sure who the conductor was anymore.

A pen scratched on the other end of the phone.

“Adding up my points?” He was almost afraid to ask.

“Maybe.”

He leaned back in his chair. “How many points needed for the giant stuffed panda?” Did they still do that—give out stuffed animals if you won at the ring toss?

“You’re not even close. So, tonight ... no texting under the table, talking only about business, and pouring too much wine.”

Jesus, she was bossy.

She cleared her throat. “So, you didn’t hate it? My plan, I mean?”

“Didn’t hate it. Can you stay after tonight, and we’ll go over it?”

“You mean after you drive her home?” And there was the head tilt and serious face he knew she was making.

“After she *leaves*. Keep my points balance where it is. She insisted on meeting me there.” Honestly, it was why he’d asked her over for dinner. Penelope Drake was the biggest control freak he’d ever witnessed in a board room. She took no prisoners and enjoyed entering and exiting at will.

She also had zero romantic interest in him, so he may have fudged the “date” parameters for the evening. Honestly, he needed a break from all the doe eyes and expectations.

Rayen sighed. “Okay, so long as it was her idea. I’ll be there at six.”

He glanced down at his watch. Two more hours before he was once again forced to answer endless questions. But also two more hours until he would see Rayen, who at least made him laugh.

AS RAYEN HEATED her special berry-mint sauce and black walnuts to go with the roasted turkey she’d pre-cooked, he filled her in on his date, Penelope Drake.

“She’s on her second tech start-up and just raised \$100 million for a

third,” he said.

In other words—sophisticated and perfect for Knox Michaelson, who favored talking business.

Rayen couldn't wait to eavesdrop on them during dinner. She was sure she'd learn something useful.

Not that Knox hadn't been great at helping her. He still sucked at the man-woman thing—the man could not stop talking about real estate values and the “red tape around getting LEED certified.” But already, the inventory spreadsheet he'd helped her create, listing her ingredients and their cost, helped her price her dinners better. He still thought she undercharged.

Then again, billionaire. In addition to women, the man wasn't worried about money—at all. “You've got to spend it to earn it. But watch the ROI, always,” he said for the hundredth time while he sipped drinks that cost more than her car.

She stared into his refrigerator. “So, does this mean I can open up that bottle of Louis Roederer in your fridge?” He'd replaced it.

“No.”

She lifted the bottle out and read the label. “So, who are you saving the hoity-toity champagne for?”

“Someone.”

She'd also learned Knox was fond of non-answers when it came to anything unrelated to a spreadsheet. “I'd love to know the woman who would be worthy of an eight thousand dollar bottle of champagne. What her return on investment might be.”

“A lot.” Knox's doorbell chimed, and his face broke into a grin. “Ah, there's Penelope.”

Rayen couldn't wait to meet the superwoman. Knox strode toward the front door, leaving the kitchen swinging door wide open.

He looked good tonight. A bit more casual in gray trousers and a thin, dark green sweater. He'd pushed up the sleeves to reveal the hard muscles of his forearms. The guy was in great shape for someone who sat at a desk all day and occasionally walked through construction sites.

“Knox Michaelson.” A tall woman with dark hair, except for one big streak of white down the side, walked in, her heels clicking on the polished wood floor. Her back was straight as a board, and she appeared far older than the last three women he'd invited over.

He nodded once. “Penelope Drake. Coat?”

She presented her back to him, and he slipped the black trench coat off her shoulders. “Welcome. I’m glad you were free for dinner.” He’d whispered in her ear, which sent shivers down Rayen’s spine. The man did these little sexy things and didn’t even know it.

Penelope turned and finally gave him a small smile. “Beautiful building. I’ve been meaning to swing by. Assess its suitability for my firm.”

“Oh? I’m looking forward to hearing your thoughts. We’re at full capacity here but I’m building next door if that interests you.”

Great, she gave him an opening for the most non-personal thing he could talk about all night. The man needed to get a life outside of work.

Penelope glided inside the living room, moving toward the wall of windows. Rayen had to lean out the kitchen door to keep watching. She pulled her shirt down, feeling a bit like a country mouse against Penelope’s pure elegance.

Every single woman he’d been with was so different. She couldn’t get a handle on who he would go for.

Penelope glanced over her shoulder. “I trust you saved the best view for yourself?”

“Of course.” His voice rumbled in the large space. “Drink?”

“Scotch. Rocks, please.”

Shit. Her berry sauce was bubbling. Rayen had to return to dinner. She turned the heat down on the saucepan and moved to the warming drawer to get some before-dinner appetizers.

Knox had said he’d wanted hors d’oeuvres tonight—probably a preemptive strike against anyone drinking too much.

She cracked open the oven and drew out the acorn-stuffed mushrooms. Hopefully, the woman ate. Rayen hated wasting food, though Knox did a pretty good job of cleaning up all the leftovers.

Rayen balanced her tray on one palm and headed out to the living room. They were, as usual, staring up at the large painting above the fireplace. He’d done that with everyone so far, and Rayen was pretty sure it was part of his schtick.

Penelope glanced her way. “Oh, hello.”

“Stuffed mushroom?” She presented the plate of little morsels.

Penelope took one and a napkin from her outstretched hand. “Thank you.”

Knox took one as well. “This is Rayen, our personal chef.”

Penelope blinked at him. “Oh. A chef.”

Rayen smiled at the woman. Let the record show she did not smile back. “Dinner will be ready soon.”

As soon as Rayen turned away, Penelope moved in closer. “You didn’t have to go to such trouble.”

“For you, only the best.” Rayen could hear the wink in his voice. Maybe tonight he’d do better.

But before she could make her way through the kitchen door, Rayen stopped. Did she hear Penelope right? She swore she heard her say, “You know what, Knox? Who cares about food? Let’s just do this thing.”

Rayen had let the door swing shut behind her, but she spun quickly and peeked through the crack.

Penelope had her hand on his arm.

“Penelope. You’re surprising me,” Knox’s voice rumbled. “You’d be missing out. Rayen is a spectacular cook.”

The woman smiled and chuffed. “You think I came here for food?” Her hand kept running up and down his arm. She was practically petting him. “Or real estate? Though ...” She made quite a show of staring down at his crotch. “There is some real estate I’m interested in assessing.”

Wow. He didn’t have to work for that at all. A much clearer picture of his life was forming. Women *loved* him. Rayen wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. That woman seemed bent on running the show—straight to the bedroom. Did he want that?

Knox grasped her hand and raised it to his lips. “Let’s eat.”

“Let’s not.” She pressed forward and leaned her whole body against his.

He gently twisted away, backing up a step. “Penelope, I think you’re getting the wrong idea. Do you think I invited you over to hook up?”

She half smiled at him, clearly puzzled. “Of course.”

His brow pinched. “Why do you think that?”

“You bring me to your penthouse, bring a personal chef, and show me this spectacular, romantic view.” She waved a hand to the wall of windows.

A sliver of pride ran up Rayen’s spine that she’d nailed that one earlier, though she didn’t expect any woman to believe it meant immediate naked time.

Penelope sighed. “Of course it’s a hook-up.”

“Let’s slow things down a bit,” Knox said.

*Yes, let’s do that.* Rayen wanted his dates to go well, but honestly? An

uncomfortable feeling arose in her chest.

Maybe she could help him. She pushed through the door. “Excuse me. But what time would you like dinner?”

Penelope’s eyes never left Knox’s. “We don’t. Thank you, that’s all.”

Oh, dismissed. So much for pre-admiring the woman who raised \$100 million. Maybe she held them at gunpoint.

Knox’s eyes glanced her way. Was that a signal for help? “Are you sure?” Rayen asked. “Because I ...”

Her words died in her throat because Penelope’s head whipped around and glared at her. She might as well have stuffed a gag in Rayen’s mouth.

Rayen closed her lips and nodded, semi-frozen. The woman most definitely had a take-no-prisoners vibe going on.

Knox’s rumbly voice shook her from her icy trance. “Thanks, Rayen. Give us a minute.”

Rayen slipped back to the kitchen. Of course, she pulled another Peeping Tom move. In case Knox needed her help again.

Penelope strode to the chair where she’d put her purse earlier and picked it up. “I see I’ve misunderstood the purpose of this evening. But I won’t be rejected.”

“It’s not like that, Penelope.”

She marched over to him, patted his arm, and gave him a patronizing smile. “Of course it’s not, Knox.” Then, turning her back on him, she rolled her eyes.

Note to self: don’t run into Penelope Drake again because the woman clearly did *not* take prisoners.

Rayen eased back into the kitchen. Should she finish cooking? She stared at her beautiful berry mint sauce, unsure what to do.

The door swung open, and she spun to see Knox with his palm splayed out on the door, his other twitching by his side. “See now why I don’t date?”

Rayen twisted the tea towel in her hand. “Didn’t want to go for it, huh? She seemed to be a sure thing.”

“And risk having my balls snipped? No, thank you.” He let the door swing shut behind him.

Rayen couldn’t help it. She started to laugh. Knox, however, did not look like he caught any humor in the situation.

He strode over to the wine rack. Pulled out a bottle. “Come on, Rayen. Let’s have dinner. I’m going to need this entire bottle.”



Maybe she should give him a break. He wasn't cut out for wining and dining women. She should never have talked him into it. Still, he had a lot to learn about women in general. "I see now what your issue is."

"Oh? Dying to hear your thoughts. Though I'm lying right now." He rolled his eyes and waved his palm at her.

She couldn't tamp down her giggle to save her life.

## Chapter Six

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“Best music. 1970s. Best fashion. 1940s. Best movie. *The Manchurian Candidate*. The original.” Knox poured her more wine. “Yours?”

“Wait a minute.” She wrinkled her nose. “You’re kidding about the 1970s music. You weren’t even born yet.”

“Excuse me, but that was the decade that gave us Fleetwood Mac, the Eagles, and Gordon Lightfoot, not to mention introduced us to Michael Jackson and Prince. Top that.”

“The 1980s. George Michael, Madonna, the *Police*.” She popped another stuffed mushroom into her mouth. She, hands down, had the best appetite of any woman he’d ever had dinner with. He wasn’t sorry about it either. Tried hard not to stare at her spectacular hourglass figure, so opposite of Penelope, who he would have to make nice with tomorrow.

He ran his finger along his plate and brought it to his lips. “You weren’t born in the 80s, either.”

“My parents listened to it all the time.” She snapped her fingers. “And the ‘80s gave us U2.”

She might have a point with that last one. “I suppose your favorite song was Madonna’s ‘Express Yourself’?”

“‘Like A Virgin’.”

The mention of virgin spiraled through his brain. Knox was a disciplined man—especially when it came to being led around by women. But she made his brain wander in all directions. Like, what was her experience with men?

She certainly didn't respond how most women did with the opposite sex. For one, she pushed back on matters she believed in. He respected that aspect of her.

Maybe that was why he found himself inextricably inviting her to stay for dinner versus packing everything up for leftovers and calling it a night. She'd been asking him personal questions—a real first. Up until then, they'd stuck to business topics.

Rayen spooned more sauce on her turkey. The berry-mint sauce was amazing. “And green cannot be your favorite color. I mean, look,” she pointed out the balcony slider, cracked open since the night was so nice, “you're about to build on top of the park next door.”

Had he mentioned his plans to build the twin to his building next door? He didn't think so, which meant she'd been studying up on him.

He leaned back in his chair. “Blue is yours, and you're afraid of the sky.”

“Just because I won't step out onto your death balcony doesn't make me afraid of the sky. I have a healthy respect for gravity.”

Rayen was sexy when she pouted. He took two more of the stuffed mushrooms. “What else do you want to know?”

Their little get-to-know-you game may have been the most fun he'd had in years. Once she got to know him, maybe then she wouldn't look at him as if he was an idiot all the time.

She leaned forward. “Why are you feuding with your father?”

He nearly choked on his mushroom. It would have come to the topic eventually. He just hadn't expected her to bring it up so baldly. “You've been Googling me.”

She shrugged. “Someone once told me it was important to know my clients. So, yeah. Google.”

His ego was happy about her move. His heart, not so much.

It was folly to think the newspapers would soon tire of the father-son fallout. Now every time he launched a new project—or his father did—it came up. Mostly because his father enjoyed keeping them in the headlines. “Good for business and all that,” he'd declared time and again. But not good for Knox controlling his image or reputation.

“We don't see eye to eye,” he said. “About how we do business.”

“How so?”

She wouldn't let it go, would she? He stared out at the sky through the windows. “What do you think of this corner of Arlington?”

“Trying to switch the subject?”

“Actually, not.”

She sighed heavily. “It has some beautiful neighborhoods, which I’m sure you’d love to pave over. Like next door.”

“‘Pave over’ is a little harsh, don’t you think?” He hated himself for sounding so hurt.

She quirked a smile and brought her wine glass to her lips. “I see ‘For Sale’ signs and ‘Occupancy Available’ in commercial buildings everywhere. Why another building?”

“Ah, but they aren’t my buildings. I’m going to build something that exceeds the environmental standards.” He leaned forward on his elbows. “I’m using recycled steel and bamboo, as little concrete as possible. Adding solar panels, a green roof, twice the amount of landscaping, on-site water capture and wastewater treatment, mandatory recycling ... and that’s just the start.”

“Oh.” Her lips had parted, and a curious need to touch them arose. “Is that why you and your dad don’t get along?”

Mood killer right there. He took a slug of wine. “Yes.” How could he explain? He rather liked his father having to stare across the river at the buildings the man said would never work. *Nothing beats steel and concrete*, he’d boasted. *This enviro-movement will end soon enough*.

Nothing Knox tried that wasn’t a carbon copy of his father’s ever met the man’s approval. His narcissism had no end.

*But checkmate, Dad*. Even from there, if he squinted, he could make out the ‘Space Available’ signs on his father’s latest project.

A breeze entered the room from the open balcony door, and a strand of hair blew across her face, a small piece getting caught on her lip. He reached over and released it, his fingertip meeting soft skin.

She swallowed.

He brought his arm back to neutral territory near his plate. “You were right about the lip gloss.”

Her smile broke free, and she cocked her head. “Told ya.” She glanced around. “You don’t ever get lonely living here by yourself? This place is so big.”

“Nope. I’ve always lived in large homes without a lot of people. I like having space.” He rolled his shoulders, trying to work out a kink that had formed. “Only child and all that.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Was she serious? He chuffed. “Why? Don’t be. I got everything my parents were prepared to give.” Which wasn’t much if it couldn’t be bought in a store. It was better that way. Their interactions usually ended up with them cataloguing all the ways Knox disappointed them. Not winning that game. Not getting that grade. Not marrying the daughter of some colleague. Not accepting a vice president position at his father’s company.

He cleared his throat. “I suppose you come from a big family.”

“Not too big. Three sisters and one brother. Ayana is the oldest sister. I’m the youngest.”

*Jesus.* “That’s a small town.”

One of her famous you-are-a-fool looks was thrown his way. “My father has seven brothers and sisters. My mother, ten. I have a lot of cousins, too.”

Holy hell. He couldn’t possibly imagine.

“What about you? Cousins, at least?” she asked.

“A few. We didn’t see them often.” Or ever.

“No family gatherings?”

He sipped his wine. “Nope.”

“How about pets? Not even a barn cat?”

Shudder the thought. “No barn. No cats.”

“That’s a real shame. Pets make a home warmer.” She glanced around. “You could have three families in this place.”

Enough of the family—and pet talk. “Your whole family cook?” He took the last stuffed mushroom. He couldn’t get enough of them.

“Mostly my grandmother and mom.”

“They your cooking inspiration?”

She played with her fork. “And my ancestors.”

“Monacan Nation, right?” He thought he got that right. He’d once heard Ayana tell a crowd about her heritage.

She blinked at him, clearly a little taken aback. “Thanks for knowing that. We originated in the Virginia Piedmont region, and we’re still here.” She was pretty when she smiled like she was now. “My mom used to tell me stories about how the people used to eat. I paid attention.”

“And a business was born. You need to make your origin story front and center on your website. Speaking of which, your business plan didn’t go into how you came up with Rayen’s Chef Services.”

She eyed him under her lashes. “Still not changing the name, Knox.”

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“I started *Gentleman’s Gourmet* because of Ayana. When she moved here, she told me all about the restaurants she visited. No one cooked. So, I thought, wouldn’t it be great to bring food to people that would appeal to everyone? The foodies, the fitness-conscious, culture —”

“And Ayana was already working on bringing Native American cultures more attention —”

“Yep, so she could do art, and I could do food. Then, she said dating was horrible here —”

“Can’t blame her thoughts on that one.” Seriously. “I see where you’re going. Marry hopeless bachelors with food culture education.” He couldn’t stop staring at her dark eyes, the intelligence shining through.

She gasped. “You used the word ‘marry’ and didn’t disappear into a puff of smoke.”

She was cute when she was tipsy. “You’re pretty brilliant, Rayen.”

“Thanks, Knox.” She reached over and grabbed his hand. Warmth spiraled inside him in all directions. “And you’re not hopeless.”

He couldn’t get over the effect her words had on him. “Thought you were going to enlighten me on what my real problem with women was.” He poured more wine.

She sat on her hands and leaned forward. “First, I feel slightly responsible for pushing you into these nights.”

“You didn’t. I agreed.”

“But ...”

Here it comes.

“Are you at all interested in women? How they think? Feel?”

He fiddled with the stem of his wine glass. “Of course.”

“Then why try to be so charming, so solicitous, so ... you.” She seemed to fumble with her words. “And then you send them on their way? It sends mixed signals.”

“So, me?”

“You draw women in. Natural charisma and all that.”

She did have a way of lighting up his ego. “I’m merely friendly. We then, *sometimes*, have some fun. As I said, they read too much into it, too fast.”

“Okay, let me be clearer.” She leaned back in her chair. “You entice them, make them fall for you, which I think you secretly love, then drop them off at the curb. It’s a power thing.”

Her words landed like a boulder in his stomach. Dating was a game, wasn't it? Always had been. He knew the rules. Be polite. Flatter them. Take cues and honor it. If they wanted to take it further, like into his bed, great. If not, okay. No promises he couldn't keep were made. It wasn't his fault they slipped into shopping for wedding dresses the morning after.

He lifted his glass to his lips. "You think I'm a heartbreaker."

"Maybe. But I do know this. You melt the panties off every woman who passes you in the street."

He nearly choked on his wine, and her face went slack.

She tossed her napkin on the table. "I shouldn't have said that."

He reached out, stopping her from trying to rise. "Do they melt? Because someone has been holding out on me."

She flushed. Then scrambled up, breaking her gaze. As soon as she rose, he stared at her torso to where her panties would sit on her hips underneath her tight jeans. His mind spiraled. Pink or blue? No, probably white. He'd honestly like to know.

She grasped both plates and headed to the kitchen. "I've got dishes to do." She gave him a view of her back—and her swaying hips in those jeans.

She thought he was charming, melted panties. He didn't mind that assessment. But the fact that she also believed he led women on and unceremoniously dumped them rose again. That couldn't stand.

He rose to help her, pushed open the kitchen door, and ran straight into Rayen, who was exiting. She was plastered against him in seconds, his nostrils filling with a warm bread and rosemary scent. His arms were full of her, his breath loud in his ears. She'd slipped into his chest like she was made for him.

She stared up at him, her luscious lips parting a bit. "Knox?" His name came out like a whisper.

The need to kiss her, devour those lips rose so hard he had to step backward. He swallowed. "I can help you. The dishes, I mean," he said, instantly feeling like an idiot.

"No, I'll be fine." She turned away. "I'll clean up for you."

*For you.* Two small words. He heard them often. Women telling him what they'd do for him, how good they'd be for him. None of it ever piqued his curiosity for long. Now? All he could think about was the ways Rayen could be *for him*.

Tasting those lips would be enough.

“The chef shouldn't always have to clean. Plus, it's late.”

“It is. Ayana's probably texted me half a dozen times already.” She tittered a little.

He handed her a few dishes. “Ah, curse of being the baby of the family? Someone always checking up on you?”

“I'm not a baby.” Her tone was vehement as she set the dishes in the sink. Red filled her cheeks, her hands stilled. So, she hadn't been taken seriously by her family, either. The sentiment was familiar to him.

He grasped her wrist and pulled her away from the sink. He tilted her chin with a fingertip. “Someday, you'll be someone's baby, and he will be lucky.” Gooseflesh ran up her arm.

Her lashes flicked up. “See? Full of charm.”

She then licked her bottom lip, and he couldn't stop staring at her luscious-looking mouth. He found himself leaning toward her. “You're blushing.”

A small fire grew on her cheeks. “Maybe.”

That's all it took. He drew her closer to him. A small gasp left her throat, but she didn't pull away. Her belly pressed against his arm, her face so close.

He was never this aggressive, but he couldn't stop himself. She fascinated him—had no idea why, but she did.

“What would you do if I kissed you?” He cupped her cheek and released her teeth's clasp on her lips.

Her lips parted, and her hand touched his chest. It woke him up a little. Shit, what was he doing?

He stepped backward and dropped his hand. His base instincts were merely stirred up by wine and too much sex talk. Pure chemical reactions—basic, easily explained away.

“Rayen ...” His tongue felt thick, wasn't forming words right. What could he say? Sorry I almost kissed you? He couldn't tell by her face if she was horrified or disappointed he didn't follow through.

His brain finally delivered some words to his mouth. “I should start paying you.” He reached into his back pocket and brought out a folded envelope. It was a little shabby from being sat on all day. He held it out to her.

She raised her hands. “No. It was part of the deal.”

“I insist.”

She took it. “Are you okay?”



His head was spinning a little. “Fine. I’ll sleep it off.” In the morning, he’d have forgotten all about that exchange. In fact, he may never see Rayen again. He could mail checks to the Cultural Center the next time they came calling.

The thought made him sad. Yes, too much wine. It made him sentimental. “Please. Leave the dishes. It’s late, and you need to get home.”

“Thanks. Okay.” She hoisted her bag to her shoulder.

He reached over and tried to grab it to help her.

She shook her head. “I got it. See you later.”

And when the door clicked shut in the hallway, the echo too loud in his ears, a hollow feeling filled his chest.

*Think.*

He almost kissed Rayen. It was the alcohol. That and he still hadn’t gotten laid in weeks. He drew out his phone. Penelope might come back. His skin crawled at the thought. He stared at the screen. Put the phone down.

For the first time in his adult life, he didn’t know anyone he wanted to see or talk to.

Not exactly true.

The one he wanted to keep talking to—to kiss—had just walked out the door.

## Chapter Seven

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**R**ayen almost bumped into the couple in front of her. “Oh, sorry.” She switched the phone from one ear to the other. “Ayana, can we talk tonight?” She could use some sisterly advice.

She and her sister had been two ships in the night lately. Between her own evening work and Ayana’s endless nighttime networking, they’d barely had any time together. Their situation wasn’t why she moved to DC.

Then again, she didn’t quite understand what she was doing there at all.

She didn’t fit—not really. And it was time to fess up to Ayana that she had one client. *One*. Who’d almost kissed her. The notorious ladies’ man who entranced women at a glance. The panty-melting playboy who didn’t seem to understand he shouldn’t be luring women to places when he didn’t intend to follow them.

Or perhaps she had it all wrong.

She was the one who pushed him into having those dates. And the women always went home at the end of the night.

“Can’t.” The sound of a zipper came through the earpiece. “Packing. Headed to Atlanta for that conference, remember?”

Ah, yes. Another *networking* event.

“You sound out of breath,” her sister said. “Where are you?”

“Headed to Eastern Market. See what inspires me.” Walking the fourteen blocks to the market seemed like a good way to get some good thinking time in. Maybe then she’d gain some perspective and get a *grip* on what happened

last night with Knox. Or almost happened.

The snap of fabric was next. “How was your gig last evening?”

“I did a dinner with Knox Michaelson again.” Her insides did a funny jig saying his name.

“Did you get a testimonial yet? He’s *exactly* the kind of robust connection you need.”

Ever since her sister got her fundraising job, she’d adopted a weird vocabulary. She used terms like “circle back” and “we need to pivot.” Pivot to where?

Then again, Knox talked like that, too.

She steeled herself. “It wasn’t the right time.” Mostly because she flew out of there.

“Rayen. You have to do these things. Did you at least get another dinner on the books?”

“Um, about that. I’ve done quite a few with Knox.”

“You mean Mr. Michaelson, right?” Her tone warned Rayen. Now was not the time to tell Ayana he’d almost kissed her last night.

“He told me to call him Knox.”

“They always say that, but they don’t mean it.”

Ayana was in full oldest-sister mode that morning. “Oh, he means it.” He’d brought it up with her repeatedly. She didn’t know what it all meant. Then again, she wasn’t sure what the strange feelings he stirred in her meant, either.

She probably hallucinated the almost-kiss. Knox Michaelson interested in her? What a fantasy.

Still, what would have happened if she’d stayed? Would her panties have melted off her body? Most definitely yes.

“He’s giving me business advice.” There. That was safe territory.

Her sister gasped. “He is? Why?”

“He believes in my business model.” Jeez, now she was sounding like Ayana.

“Be careful. That’s foreplay in this town, and you do not want to cross that line. I’m eternally grateful for his donations, but don’t get hung up —”

“Hung up? Come on. A real estate developer isn’t on my to-do list this lifetime.” The guy was into creating man-made environments. She knew the world already offered up an environment that was fine—if people took the time to actually look and care.

Plus, he lived in the sky, drank eight-thousand-dollar bottles of champagne, and was unavailability incarnate.

She'd Googled him again that morning and went a little deeper. Words like "playboy" and "real estate magnate" peppered every story.

All his pictures at events showed him virtually surrounded by women in chic little business suits or long gowns staring up at him adoringly. All of them beautiful. All of them latched onto his arms. It was strange, though. He never looked back at them. Rather, he was always gazing off into the distance.

She glanced around the street. So many beautiful people, clearly with money, given their designer clothes and their dogs with designer leashes. So opposite to her hometown, which was filled with small houses bursting with family and something always cooking on the stove. Cats and dogs ran around yards and neighborhoods, with the kids only returning home at dinnertime.

She and Knox had most definitely had different lives. For one, there was his father-son "family feud." They used to be in business together. Their resemblance in photos was uncanny. Thomas Michaelson's temples were grayed, but they had the same stormy blue eyes, strong jawline, and height.

Their respective company websites, however, showed how different they were. They both bragged about their history, coming from generations of land developers starting in the mid-1800s, but how they described their shared history was night and day.

Knox talked about how his great-great-grandfather and grandmother had immigrated from Ireland, were denied any social acceptance, and struggled to find work. They farmed, formed communities, and traded their bounty with neighbors. It was kind of odd, given how non-family he seemed to be.

Thomas' take on their family's history told tales of "formidable men and women" who conquered prejudice, grasped opportunities, and built towns on acres of land that was "given" to them by the government. Given—what a crock.

"It doesn't matter." She scooted by a family with a stroller that took up half the cracked concrete sidewalk. "I could learn something from him."

"I knew it. You like him."

"I do not. Now, go on your trip. I can take care of myself." She paused at a booth overflowing with irises, peonies, and daisies. "Pretty," she mouthed to the woman standing behind a vat of sunflowers.

"Sometimes you don't see the truth in front of you."

Way to kill the flower mood. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You believe everything people say. And here, it’s not like that.”

“When did you get so cynical?” She moved on, passing an artist perched on a little stool drawing a cartoon likeness of a woman sitting in a chair.

“I’ve wised up about a few things,” Ayana said. “That’s all.”

“I gotta go.” She ended the call and yanked open the big door of Eastern Market with more force than intended, earning a startled gasp from a woman trying to leave.

“Sorry,” Rayen mouthed before stepping into the indoor market. She took in a big lungful of spices, leather, and orange scent.

She scanned the vendors lined up in long rows. That was her favorite part—wandering the aisles, seeing what piqued her interest. Last week, she’d found a vendor who sold acorns and chestnuts, and she hoped he was still there.

Two girls stood over bins of chocolate-covered almonds, peanuts, and cashews, with the vendor standing behind his cart, bag in hand, ready to make a sale.

She rounded the end and eyed half a dozen little bistro tables and metal chairs offered to anyone wanting a bite to eat.

A familiar blonde smiled at a man who sat with his back to Rayen. It was Charity, her laughter drifting over the din of the market. Her beautiful silk blonde hair waterfalling in waves down her back.

A loud bang went off as a man cleaved a large piece of meat in a nearby booth. Charity’s lunch date turned at the sound, showing his profile.

Oh, my God. Five million people in Washington, DC, and she had to run into Knox and the woman he would “never end up with.” The morning after their almost epic kiss. At least, she thought it’d be epic.

He and Charity seemed to be having a good time because she couldn’t stop laughing, and he was smiling.

Maybe he and Charity had unfinished business. He had said that the first dinner was a business meeting. Maybe he was advising her.

He rose, leaned over, and kissed her on the cheek.

A weird sensation overtook Rayen. What did he say last night about being friendly and just wanting fun?

She turned, spied the chestnut vendor, and scurried over. He smiled at her.

“Ah, it’s the chef,” he said. “Rayen, right?”

“Yes. Nice to see you. Chester, right?”

“Easy to remember. Chestnuts, Chester. What can I get you?” His gaze drifted up over her shoulder.

“What are you making next?”

She nearly jumped out of her skin at Knox’s voice behind her. Her hands reached down to grasp the propped-up bin, and it tipped to the side. Chestnuts rained down to the floor.

“Damn,” she bent down and started grabbing handfuls.

Chester grumbled and started waving his hands. “Grab ‘em.”

Knox bent down to help her. “Making something special?”

“I-I don’t know yet.” She grabbed as many of the little brown things as she could hold.

“Are you okay?”

She stood and spit hair out of her face. “I’m fine. Everything’s fine. Fine.”

Chester leaned over. “Um, my chestnuts?”

Knox rose to his full height. “I saw you. Why didn’t you come over? Say hello?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt your ... situation.” She waved her hands, stuffed with chestnuts, toward the cafe area.

His brows furrowed but then smoothed. A smile lit up his face. “Ah. Charity.”

“Thought you were done dating?” She was only kidding.

He smugly looked down at her. “I am.” But then he smiled. “Jealous?”

She fisted her chestnuts. “Knox Michaelson, get over yourself.” She threw them into the bin. “Chester, I’ll have two pounds.”

He nodded an acknowledgment.

Rayen crossed her arms and stared up at Knox. “I thought you were fixing her up with Paul? Are you leading her on?”

A lazy smile spread across his smug face. “You’re cute when you get defiant and protective of other women.”

“We do that for each other.” She handed over two twenty-dollar bills to Chester.

“Charity wanted to get Paul a birthday gift and needed my advice. I suggested a cooking lesson with you.”

She was not expecting that—at all. “Oh. That’s nice of you. Good idea. Because I’m rethinking this helping hopeless bachelors thing.” After last

night? She was done doling out advice. Who was she to tell anyone what to do about the man-woman dynamic?

“Oh? They that unredeemable?” He was having too much fun with her.

“No, it seems they don’t need my help at all.” She chuffed and took the large paper bag from Chester.

“Why are you angry?”

Was she? Maybe. “I don’t know.”

“You wish I’d kissed you last night.”

Her breath caught in her throat. He *had* meant to kiss her—but then didn’t. Was she glad? She should be because, again, *wealthy real estate developer* who didn’t seem at all interested in understanding the opposite sex.

She still couldn’t let him get away with an ego trip. She slapped him with the bag. “You know, not every woman wants to be shown *your view*.”

“Hey ...” He held up his hands. “I don’t need every woman.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” She rolled her eyes.

He drew closer, close enough for her to smell his aftershave. He backed her up against the bin of chestnuts. “But this woman in front of me is driving me crazy.” He said so close to her mouth that his breath kissed her lips.

“That’s not good,” she said quickly as her legs hit the bins of chestnuts again.

Chester cleared his throat. “Rayen, and uh, whoever you are, watch the inventory, okay?”

“Sorry, Chester.” She pushed on Knox’s chest so she could have some room. Then, maybe, she could think.

He caught her hand and held it. “I can’t stop thinking about you for some odd reason.”

Odd? The man told her she would be somebody’s baby and the guy would be so lucky. “You’re a real charmer. You know that?” She pulled her hand free and hugged the bag of chestnuts to her chest.

“At least I’m not doomed?”

For a brief second, she caught a glimmer of what he might have looked like as a little boy—with a sheepish grin, eyes lit up by mischief. It cooled her skepticism—a little. “As you said, there’s always hope.”

“You know what I hope for?” He tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, and her pulse pounded in her ears as goosebumps chased up her spine. It was too tender, sweet, and so unexpected.

He didn’t wait for her answer. “You.”

All her breath left her body. “Me?”

He nodded slowly. “And I’m not usually someone who relies on hopes and wishes. You’re,” he closed the last inch between their bodies, “disarming me.”

The last bit of suspicion she had around him disintegrated.

He cocked his head. “Have you ever been to Bishop’s Garden?”

“What?” He was giving her whiplash.

Taking her hand, he hooked her arm in his, his touch once more shocking her with electricity. “You can tell me all about what you’re going to do with these chestnuts. And then, we’ll talk about last night.”

Just like that, she was back to wondering what his kiss would be like.

“Wow, this is in the middle of the city?” Rayen cast her arms wide and spun in a circle.

Knox had to admit, Bishop’s Garden at the National Cathedral was impressive—resplendent in its intimacy and depth. “Over 100 years old. It’s one of my favorite places in DC. And before you mock me, I appreciate natural beauty with the best of them.” He was still a little stung that she believed all he did was tear up land.

“This place is spectacular.” She stopped to bury her nose in a hydrangea bloom.

Most of the women he’d spent time with would have sent their gaze over the landscape and perhaps declared it beautiful but with glazed eyes and not taking in much of the scene. She’d stopped at every rose and gaped at the enormous boxwood hedges and large holly trees.

“You asked about the chestnuts.” She let her hand trail along the foliage before turning to look at him. “I’m going to try to make a chestnut, apple and cranberry roll using acorn flour. It might not work, but...” She shrugged.

“I look forward to having it.” If he was lucky enough ever to taste her food again. She was miffed at him, and it was a state he was getting tired of living in. “By the way, Penelope got home fine. We talked this morning.”

“You checked up on her?”

She thought he didn’t care? “Wanted no hard feelings.” He stopped. “Between us, either. I’m sorry if I was too ... forward with you last night.”



He wasn't, really. He wondered if she was offended, disappointed, or about to call an attorney for harassment after he almost kissed her. She could in that town—and win.

Though that didn't stop him from waking up that morning thinking about her lips or how she felt in his arms. When was the last time he'd ever thought *anything* the morning after? How about never?

She wasn't like anyone he'd ever encountered. Quick minded but not trying too hard to impress. She also wasn't trying to seduce him—the first female in a long time. It was damned relaxing.

Rayen kept walking slowly, stopping every so often to touch blooms and stare up at the trees. “No hard feelings.”

“I didn't want you to think I was trying to charm your panties off.”

“That would be melt.” She glanced at him. “And you'd have to do far more to make that happen.”

He chuckled, then stopped. “What would you have done if I'd kissed you?”

She turned to face him. “I would've kissed you back.” She then slowly turned and headed toward the stone gazebo.

The ground shifted a little under his feet, though he couldn't seem to move. He could only watch her hips sashay and then disappear into the building.

Did she just say that?

A loud female voice started talking about male and female holly trees, something about pollinating, to a small group of students dressed in school uniforms. It shook something loose in him.

His feet finally moved.

Cooler air washed over him as he entered the building to see her standing with her back to him, staring at the tall, damp stones.

“Rayen.” What did he want to say? No words came to mind.

“One question.” She turned to face him. “Were you going to kiss me last night because you were lonely?”

His heartbeat pulsed against his ribcage. Lonely? He supposed he understood the concept—feeling a lack of connection regardless of who was in the room. Then again, he basically always felt that way—except when she was there.

It was strange, the effect she had on him. Almost as if they'd known each other for years, not weeks.

His gaze locked on her mouth. “The lady asked a question, so here’s my answer. I almost kissed you because I wanted to know what your lips tasted like.”

“Oh, that’s —”

“Panty-melting?”

She shook her head a little. “It’s a good start.”

“I’d like to know what it takes to.” He advanced on her.

Her eyes lit up, and her plump lips parted as she met him halfway, bumping into him immediately.

“Oh, sorry,” she said.

Before she could get away, he snaked his arm around her waist. “Don’t be.”

She relaxed and eased into him, her torso softening against his. It felt so damned good. All those curves under his hands, against him.

She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, waking up his cock. And that urge to devour her mouth? Yeah, it wasn’t going to go away anytime soon.

He lowered his head, his lips meeting hers. Soft, warm, and, sweet Jesus, responsive as fuck. She wasn’t teasing about kissing him back.

He tightened her to him and deepened the kiss, letting their tongues explore each other. She tasted like cinnamon and something else he couldn’t name. Somewhere in the background, voices, laughter, and wind through trees drifted around them. None of it would interrupt him. He claimed her mouth for long minutes, not caring who saw.

When he finally came up for air, her chest was pushing against him as she took in fast breaths.

She put a hand on his chest and lowered her gaze. “So, about our deal.”

“No more dates.”

She nodded. “You don’t have to keep working with me, either. I mean —”

“What? And try to cook for myself?” He kept both arms tight around her. She didn’t protest. “I want you to succeed, and I want to help until you don’t need me anymore.”

Need. That was all he felt around her.

“Okay,” she said. “Until you don’t need me anymore, either.” Surely, she meant her cooking? He wasn’t sure. At that moment, he didn’t care.

“Good. Free Saturday?”

## Chapter Eight

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Ayana reached into the grocery bag and pulled out a can of beans. “You can’t go home this weekend for Margaret’s baby shower because Knox Michaelson is taking you to Georgia Browns? A date. Why?”

Way to be supportive, big sister. “It’s Margaret’s fourth baby.” There was a family event almost every weekend. “And it’s not a date. As I said, he’s giving me some business advice.”

“In a jazz club?” Ayana lowered her chin, peering up at her. “He’s also in real estate. You deal in food.”

“You’re the one who said he had ‘robust connections’.” She drew air quotes around the last two words.

Her sister crossed her arms. “Oh, I think he’d like to *connect* with you, alright.” She stated it so emphatically and definitively that heat crawled up the back of Rayen’s neck.

Thank God Rayen didn’t mention they’d kissed. Hell, dry-humped in semi-public with a Catholic school girl group outside. Ayana would go full-on Big Sister. And, honestly, Rayen wasn’t sure what to make of the new development herself.

For one, he hadn’t exactly asked her out afterward. It’d been more like a “Do you want to accompany me to brunch this weekend, listen to jazz, go over your spreadsheets” kind of invitation.

It was still the best offer she’d had in years.

“You don’t know him,” Rayen said. “He’s ... different.”

She gasped. “Oh my God.” Her sister touched her arm. “Tell me you’re not into him. He’s a player.”

Indignation rose. “I’m not. And he’s not.”

“Rayen, I don’t want to see you get hurt. I’ve seen this man at a dozen fundraisers. Usually in the middle of a cluster of women.”

Of course, he was. The man was rich, gorgeous, and charming—at least until he called you a car. But he wasn’t like that with her. He was just ... Knox. Super smart, sometimes funny, a fantastic kisser who absolutely could melt the clothes off anyone.

“He’s not going to hurt me.” For one thing, she had no illusions about her place with him. But the last thing she needed was Ayana to think she couldn’t handle him—even if she couldn’t quite name what was happening between them.

One thing was clear, however. “He likes me. We get along well, and he really is helping me with my business.”

“Oh, I’m sure there are lots of ‘getting along’ things he wants to do with you.” She put patronizing air quotes around her words. “Powerful men love adoring females.”

Ayana always had been a master of undercutting her, all in the name of protection, of course. “Honestly, I think he’s a little wowed by me.”

“Is that what he said?” She raised a hand. “No, don’t tell me. He offered to mentor you. Said your ideas were brilliant.”

Her chest squeezed tight. So what if Ayana used the same words he had? They were common enough. “Well, my ideas are. And besides, you’re the one who fixed me up with him.”

“It wasn’t a fix-up.”

“Oh, excuse me. It was ‘networking’.” *Take those condescending air quotes, Ayana.*

“Exactly.” She gently touched Rayen’s arm. “You do know the man’s bed is a revolving door.”

“No, it’s not,” she said with some force. As if she knew. The few dinner dates she’d catered didn’t seem to end that way. Then again, the last magazine article she’d read about him had said he was a playboy.

Ayana’s eyebrows shot to the roof. “Tell me you haven’t, Rayen.”

She couldn’t be serious. Knox Michaelson’s bed wasn’t anything she should think about—not that she didn’t think about it literally *all the time*.

It was because of his intense gaze with his stormy eyes. Fierce, focused,

and sad. She was a sucker for sad. Still waters and all that ...

“It’s none of your business,” she said.

Ayana’s face stiffened, though her tone kept up its gentle Big Sister thing she hated. “Oh, Rayen. Please, tell me no. Especially if you don’t know his intentions.”

“Isn’t this the wrong century to be asking his intentions?”

“No. It’s not.” She grasped her sister’s biceps and squared them. “Look, I worry about you.”

“You don’t need to.” Almost twenty-six years old and Ayana couldn’t stop mothering her. Rayen waved her hand and twisted free. “I have errands to run.”

Ayana sighed, kicking off her heels. “Well, if you stop at a grocery store, we’re out of creamer.”

“I got it.” She matched her sister’s exasperated sigh.

Ayana got under her skin like nobody’s business. She knew she had good intentions and only wanted the best for Rayen, but Rayen was so tired of no one thinking she knew what she was doing.

Of course, it made little sense that Knox was into her. He wasn’t into anyone. She’d seen first-hand how much he hated dating like it was a chore.

But she liked him, even when he talked about balance sheets and profit and loss statements.

Why not just have some fun? She would *not* be like all those other women he was convinced fell too fast. So, she’d approach the situation in a Knox Michaelson way. Compartmentalize. Wasn’t that what successful people did? They also negotiated, asked questions, and didn’t leave things up to mystery.

She knew what to do. She didn’t go shopping. Instead, she drove over to Knox’s building.

His guest parking space was taken, so she took one of the visitors’ spots, then stared at the shiny, closed elevator doors for a solid five minutes, debating.

She could be a big girl, couldn’t she? Go see if he was home. Ask her questions. Take whatever answer he gave.

She managed to brave the elevator, now more times than she’d ever thought possible. The doors opened in a whoosh on his floor, and she strode up to his front door.

Men’s voices cheered on the other side. He had company. A sudden shout

—something about “come on, man.” Her diaphragm kicked in, and with it, her brain.

What was she doing there? Only her sister could make her that crazy. Trying to clear up a mystery that Ayana had planted in her head?

She spun and stalked back to the elevator. Furiously punched the down button. The doors opened, and she ran smack into a pizza delivery guy, almost splatting the pizza against his chest.

“Fuck me,” he shouted, staring down at his vinyl heat pack, now on its side.

“Oh, no. I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He righted it and jogged to Knox’s door.

The elevator doors closed behind her. *Shit*. She punched the down button again, but the car lift was gone.

Of course, right then, Knox’s door opened. “Guys, do not fucking touch that bottle,” he yelled back into the apartment.

Knox stared at her. “Rayen?”

“That’ll be \$55.80,” the pizza guy said.

“Wow. Seriously?” she asked him.

One side of Knox’s mouth inched up. “Yeah, for pizza?” He arched an eyebrow at the guy, then handed over some bills.

The guy took the offered cash. “Take it up with management. And if there’s anything wrong with this pizza, it’s her fault,” He hitched his thumb back to where Rayen stood.

“The pizza’s not smushed,” she stupidly said.

“Sabotaging my gluten fix?” He laughed for a moment before growing serious. “You braved the elevator.”

She shrugged. “Desperate times.”

The pizza guy shook his head. “Peace out,” he said, scooting around her.

Knox balanced the pizza in one hand. “Leave something behind, Rayen?”

Maybe her sanity. “I have three questions.” The words blurted out.

“Okay. Come on in.”

She steeled herself. “Why do you want to mentor me?”

He naturally looked puzzled. “Thought I could help you. As I said —”

“Yeah, my idea was pretty brilliant. Ayana says you say that to all the girls.”

He laughed. “All the girls?”

“Knox, get your ass in here with our food,” a guy’s voice boomed.

She'd interrupted a guy thing. Great.

"Cool your jets," he called back as he set the pizza on the side table inside the door. "Come and get it if you want it."

He closed the door, crossed his arms over his chest, and widened his stance. "Don't listen to them. Football thing. They're ten sheets to the wind. I will not subject you to them. You have two more questions?" He looked far too amused.

She didn't know what to do because coming there was stupid.

"Rayen?"

"I need to do something first." She stepped forward, rose on tiptoes, and put her mouth on his. Instantly, he encircled her in his arms and met her kiss, full force. Oh, God. Yep. The chemistry was real.

When she broke the kiss, she was panting a little. "Please tell me you didn't drink too much today, and this is an alcohol-infused moment."

He slowly shook his head. "One beer."

"Oh, good." She kissed him again. She had to. The pull toward him wasn't like anything she'd felt before. Like he was her gravity.

He bent down, lifted her so she could wrap her legs against him, and mushed her against the far wall. He was so solid.

"Your third question?" he asked against her mouth.

She had a question? Who could think? Then her conversation with Ayana came back. A date. They had a date planned.

"Why jazz? Because that might be a deal breaker." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Not a fan?" He ground himself against her, waking up every feminist-ruining hormone in her body. He could have stripped her naked right there, and she'd have let him.

"I hate it." At least something must have been working in her brain to answer his question.

"Okay. No jazz." His tongue swiped inside her mouth. "And I said your idea was brilliant because it is." He put his forehead against hers.

She sagged against him, his kiss taking all her strength from her. "And here I thought you were a hopeless bachelor."

"I knew it. But now ..." He lifted his head and set her on her feet. "You're going to let me prove it." He swiped hair from her face and traced his finger down to her chin. "Go home, Rayen."

It took a few seconds for her brain to hear the words. Was he literally

telling her to leave? After mashing against her like that, waking up every sexual part she had?

He tucked some hair behind her ear, his finger grazing the shell of her ear; the fire it lit in her sizzled down to her clit. “You’re not a one-night stand kind of girl.”

“And you don’t date,” she said.

“We’ll do something in between. Saturday, ten in the morning. I’ll pick you up. No jazz.” He leaned forward and whispered, “And I promise what we do will be close to the ground.” He spun her toward the elevator. “I’ll ride down with you.”

He did, and when they reached her car, he kissed her so hard she was sure she’d left a wet spot on the garage floor.



## Chapter Nine

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**K**nox wasn't usually a big kisser. With Rayen, he couldn't get enough of her lips—and it was becoming a problem.

When they'd kissed at Bishop's Garden, he'd convinced himself it wasn't wrong. She knew what he was about and was still into it. He figured they'd just had a moment. The fresh air and her sexy comebacks piqued his interest.

But then his mouth opened, and he was asking her out. Something he still couldn't believe he'd done. He was on the verge of canceling because the next day, he woke up thinking about her lips again. Her sexy little laugh. How she always had a comeback. He couldn't afford to be preoccupied like that.

Then she showed up at his place unannounced. She was too adorable—all that hemming and hawing—*not* to kiss. He was serious about not dating anymore, but the urge to see her chewed at his insides.

His head filled with all the things he could show her.

Then throughout the week, things got even weirder. He caught himself thinking about her at the strangest times.

During a meeting, one of his firm's assistants brought in a plate of cookies, and he asked if any were gluten-free. She'd blinked at him as if he'd been possessed. He was—about food knowledge he hadn't known before.

Right after an unwelcomed call by his father—out of the blue—asking to meet with him, he had the strange sensation to call Rayen. Just to hear a

friendly voice.

He never did those things. Nor did he usually fight a hard-on all day, every day.

It was her freshness. He wanted to inhale her, like a man who'd been in a coal mine for a year and was suddenly back under the sunshine.

Then, there was the fact that he *was* the right guy to help her with Gentleman's Gourmet. DC would eat her alive if she didn't continue to hone her business practices.

Instead of going to Georgia Brown's, he took her to the fish market at the Wharf, where they could talk about her business. It excited her so much that she couldn't stop talking about recipes. Something about cedar-smoked salmon and serving it with pumpkin cornbread.

He'd learned much about her during that trip, like how her grandmother gardened with the moon, planting certain foods in their family garden based on moon quarters. Asparagus during the first quarter, beans and pumpkin during the second, beets during the third, and finally, turning the sod and weeding in the fourth.

More knowledge came: How to place a slice of potato in an over-salted soup to absorb some of it. How to insert pieces of drinking straws into pies to run off excess juice and let steam escape. How to grow and dry herbs, root cellar food, and other time-tested methods for preserving. It made him hungry—mostly for more information about her and her life, so different from his own.

He hadn't meant to kiss her in the car when dropping her off at her apartment, a relatively newly refurbished building in Logan's Circle. But he'd held her hand all day, which did little to ease the strain on his zipper.

Then, there was the trip to Under, a speakeasy very few people knew existed. They talked food and wine pairings, and he introduced her to a Kir Royal. It was obvious she didn't drink much as she started giggling halfway through, and her breasts ended up mashed against his chest in that tiny back corner booth. Her mouth was so greedy that he nearly pulled her onto his lap so they could dry hump like kids.

After each outing, he dropped her off in front of her house, not asking to come up, and she never offered it. Though their goodbye kisses in his car lasted long enough that people on the sidewalk smiled and laughed at them.

He'd miscalculated the pull toward her—badly. He was breaking a new record at jacking off every day.

He decided not to care. If he knew one thing about life, it was that everything ran its course.

For one, Rayen had told him Ayana wasn't pleased about her spending non-professional time with him. That knowledge stung for about one second. He didn't need to be liked by everyone.

But to make sure Rayen got something out of their time together, he doled out business advice as well as referred her to others who enjoyed personal chef services. It worked. Soon, she was booking more private dinners and a few cooking lessons. Charity hired her for a private cooking lesson for Paul's birthday.

He'd never spent so much time with anyone, let alone a woman.

And that night, he was once again in front of her apartment building, not wanting her to get out of his car yet. He couldn't seem to stop touching her, kissing her. His mouth had learned so many things about hers—how she loved to have the skin below her ear nibbled, her kisses deep and long.

Her phone buzzed for the fourth time. She was ignoring someone. "Someone wants you," he said into her mouth.

"Ayana."

At the sound of her sister's name, he pulled back. "She checks up on you a lot."

"Constantly." She fidgeted a little. "My sister thinks you just want in my pants."

He did, though he'd shown restraint worthy of the Pope. He knew once he went there, it would mean something. He wasn't ready for meaning. "Ah, but then you just want me for my kitchen."

"Truth."

He peered up at her place through the windshield. "Is that why I've never gotten past the front door? Because Ayana was home?" His discipline really slipped around her.

"Yes. Is that bad?"

He grinned over at her. "Wise. Though I thought I was one of her favorite donors."

Grabbing his hand, she threaded her fingers through his. "Oh, you are. She's protective of me. And ..."

"I get it." He didn't, not ever having that himself. But it worried him that she'd clearly been worried being with him would piss off her family. Which surprised the hell out of him. He rather liked pissing off family members. His

own, anyway. Not hers. “Well, tomorrow, then? I know a great little bistro.”

“Knox. If I did ask you up, would you?” Her voice was so tentative he felt like a heel. She thought he didn’t want her? After the mouth gymnastics they’d engaged in?

Still, for once, he felt like he had a bead on a woman.

Rayen had confidence in her cooking but little else. She even talked about Washington not truly being her place a few times, which did strange things to his heart. Then, how Ayana was constantly questioning her about her business and her decisions. It irritated.

But what did he know about family? He’d never even so much as had a hermit crab growing up. He raised her hands to his lips. “I wouldn’t want to upset your sister.” Or himself. He’d drawn a good boundary between them. Kissing. Hand holding. No more.

“She’s out of town. So ...” She smiled seductively. “Want to come up?”

Having Rayen look at him like she wanted him was mesmerizing. Worse, it threatened to rearrange his decision about keeping her at arm’s length.

“It’s okay. I understand,” she said quickly before pulling her hand free and cracking open her door. She was hurt. She might as well have punched him. He was used to disappointing women. God knew why most of the time. But with Rayen, her fragility was so evident it made him stop her.

He grasped her arm. “I don’t think you do.”

She closed her door again. “You think you’re going to hurt me. You’re not. I’m a grown woman. No one seems to get that around here.” She let her head fall back on the headrest.

He reached over and put his mouth on hers, needing that connection to her. Let her see and feel how much of a woman he believed her to be.

When he broke the kiss, she blinked at him. So many questions filled her eyes, and he wanted all the answers to be “yes.”

The truth was, by then, an interest that strong in a woman would have had her nude, under him, long ago. Why was he holding back?

“Knox.” Her voice held a plea—something he felt in his groin.

His resolve crumbled to dust. “Let’s go up.”

SHE’D NEVER BEEN SO happy in her life that Ayana traveled.

The second Knox opened his car door, she sent a little gratitude prayer out that things were moving along—finally.

It'd been pure torture to kiss Knox, hold his hand, be so close to scent his aftershave, yet have it go no further. He smelled like expensive wool and rich coffee. And the storms in his eyes were really several shades of gray and blue mixed together that shifted and changed depending on the light.

It was insane how much of her mind space he took up.

For one, there were the dreams. Many. Hanging on to Knox, underneath Knox, head banging into the headboard because of Knox.

Now Mr. I Don't Date was coming up to her apartment. For sex.

That wasn't like her at all, and she couldn't care less.

As she climbed the one flight of stairs up to her apartment, he followed. "I have wine if you'd like some. And champagne. Not Louis Roederer, but still good."

"Whatever you'd like, Rayen," he said softly.

"And if you're hungry, I can make you anything. Pancakes. Burger. Whatever." God, she was rambling.

When they got to the top of the stairs, he pressed his body to her back. "I meant it, Rayen. It's whatever *you* want."

She twisted to face him. "I want." She did.

Her words earned one of his genuine smiles—not the one she'd seen him use on women to appear agreeable.

"You say you have champagne?" he asked.

His voice sent shivers up her spine. She nodded, scooted over to her apartment door, and inserted the key.

Once inside, she dumped her purse and coat and strode to the fridge. Despite her need to *move things along already*, a little liquid courage would be useful. Knox Michaelson was in her house. Ready to do whatever she wanted.

"Hungry?" She reached for the champagne bottle as she felt his presence appear behind her.

"Yes." He spun her, his large hands spanning her waistline. "Starving." He walked her backward until her hips hit the countertop and hoisted her onto her island. "You?"

He expected her to answer questions? He yanked her forward so her crotch hit his hard stomach. He would look amazing naked, wouldn't he?

He took the champagne bottle from her hand because she'd stupidly been

holding it, set it down before encircling her neck with one of his hands. “I thought about having my countertops raised to thirty-eight inches over thirty-six. I might not now.” He glanced down. “Seems sturdy.”

A flash of their first night together broke into her mind. “Are you going to tell me about how much load it can take?”

“How about we just test it?”

So. Onboard. “Good plan.”

His mouth latched onto hers and kissed her long and deep, getting her so hot she didn’t mind his smug face when he broke their lip lock.

He brushed the hair off her face. “Look at my little vixen, luring me to her lair.”

Now she understood why so many women threw themselves at him. He made her feel so much more desirable than she thought possible.

She bit her lip. “Is it working?”

The storm returned to his eyes, and goosebumps chased up her legs and arms.

Rayen never felt like she was a super sexual being. No fantasy dreams about celebrities or devouring steamy books. She felt downright ordinary about such matters. Until him.

The way he looked at her like he was a few seconds away from unleashing a sexual fury on her had her panting—and wet. So, so wet.

She hooked her calves around his thighs and pulled him to her. Any good girl thoughts were drowned out by a rising lust for him.

“Eager little vixen,” he whispered as his mouth descended on hers again. That time, while his lips and tongue worked her over, he bent his knees a bit until his crotch ground against her. Holy hell, he had a steel girder in his pants. And she wanted it inside her immediately.

She moved her hips a little, making him groan. She couldn’t get close enough.

Words she’d never uttered in her life came out of her mouth. “Fuck me.” Maybe because being wanted was the greatest aphrodisiac of all time. It blanked the mind, logic, and anything else that might dare to interrupt them.

“Bedroom?” he asked.

She pointed down the only hall. “So much for testing the counter.”

He grabbed her ass and hoisted her up to his waist. “The things I’m going to do to you require more room.”

She may not have ever seen him in action, but she could already tell he

had sex down pat. *Bring it.* She clung to him with her legs and arms as he made his way to her tiny bedroom.

For the first time ever, she was glad Ayana was such a neat freak, insisting Rayen adopt the same habit. Bed was made. Cookbooks neatly stacked on her small desk by the window. Clothes hung up.

Not that the room would stay neat. Not by how he was tugging at her top and she was dropping her jeans to the floor.

She worked the buttons of his shirt. "Tell me you have a condom."

"Been carrying them around for weeks."

Oh, anticipation. She liked it.

He yanked his shirt off, not bothering to unfasten his cuffs. The skitter of a button across the floor gave her pause. Not him. He sat down on the bed, grasped her hips, and yanked her between his knees.

He drew down her panties, now soaked and clinging to her. His nostrils flared like he was scenting her. The expected embarrassment never came. Instead, she ran her hands through his hair and stared down at him. His chest, dusted with blond hair, rose and fell.

"Beautiful," he whispered.

He licked his lips and rose only to twist her and push her back on the bed. He was on his knees in seconds, spreading her thighs. When his mouth latched onto her, she sucked in a long breath.

She clutched her comforter as he licked and sucked on her. Knox had mouth skills, alright. His kisses before had been merely a preview.

He stopped abruptly and climbed her body. He still had his pants on, and his belt buckle bit into her belly. "This is how it's going to go. I'm going to make you come. Then, you're going to tell me exactly what else you want. How you want it. And where."

Holy shit. She swallowed, her mouth dry from panting. A quick nod from her, and he was back down between her legs, making her legs quiver. Her eyes drifted closed, and little sounds bubbled up her throat. For a man who didn't date, he knew his way around a woman.

Not like she knew what the standard was. No one had ever gone down on her before.

His tongue continued to draw circles, then suck on her clit. Over and over again until she couldn't have held back if she'd tried. She let go and came. And she kept coming because he didn't stop, lifted her ass a little higher with his big hands to get his face in deeper.

Finally, he let go. His belt was through his belt loops in a long whoosh, the belt buckle blanking to the ground. When he lowered his pants, taking his boxer briefs with them, she gasped.

The man was beautiful. Her heart raced as she imagined doing all kinds of things with him.

He held up a condom and had it on in seconds.

When he lowered himself, it was so evident how much smaller than him she was. He covered her whole body with his. His hard length pressed against her thigh as he nibbled under her ear. “Do you have any idea how much I think about your taste?” His hushed voice sent tingles down every inch of her body.

“No, I don’t.” She didn’t know why she was being so honest. Maybe because men didn’t talk to her like that, touch her like that.

“All the time,” He pressed his hips down. He was so hard. “I never thought you’d be so hot and ready for me, though.”

Her, hot? One thing was for sure. “So ready.” Her legs began to quiver.

His mouth was back on hers as his cock slipped between her thighs. Protest, fear, worry, it all dissolved inside her, and she kissed him back.

“Tell me,” he growled into her mouth.

Oh, what she wanted. What did she want?

She wasn’t usually run by her vagina. But right then, a million things she wanted to do with him cascaded into her mind. On top of him, under him, in his office, on his kitchen countertops, out in the woods.

The usual insecurities threatened to rise, too. Was she beautiful enough for him? Skilled enough to make a man excited in bed?

When she didn’t answer right away, he lifted his head to gaze into her eyes. “I want to be good for you.”

Was he worried he wouldn’t be? Not at all what she expected.

She put her hand up to his cheek. Honesty had served her well so far. “I want all of it.” *All of you.* That last bit she wouldn’t voice for anything.

A slow smile spread across his face. Then he was at her entrance and inside in one long slide. A moan escaped her throat as he filled her. He had “all” down.

But he didn’t stay buried inside her. His hand on the back of her neck tightened as he thrust into her. Even better. “Tell me about all.”

“That ...” Her voice strangled as another moan formed in her throat.

He murmured as he pitched his hips again, their bodies hitting exactly



where she needed it. “Yes. That.”

Electrical currents ran up and down her legs, her arms, her spine as he kept going. Moving in and out of her with such confidence, she lost all sense of inhibition.

His tongue dove deep into her mouth as his arms slipped behind her back. He held her close as he rolled, taking her with him. Her thighs split on either side of his hips. She was riding him.

“I need to see you.” His gaze roamed over her body. She desperately wanted to reach over and turn off the small lamp—and even glanced over at it.

“No way,” he said. “The light stays on. This body,” his hands spanned her waistline, “was made to be adored.”

She almost laughed at that, except his tone was so soft and caring she had to believe him.

His hands cupped her breasts, which hung heavy, and his thumb flicked a nipple. Way to distract her.

“So good.” Oops, said aloud.

He pinched, and she gasped. It made her even wetter.

As she circled her hips, his nostrils flared, and his hand curled on her hip. “Fuck, baby.”

She clenched hard, and his mouth fell open.

“Jesus ...” His eyes locked on hers. “That’s right. Now ride me.”

They found a rhythm, his hips pitching upward, hers circling. The wet sounds of their bodies rubbing together grew louder. It was so raw and primal.

He rose so his mouth could claim hers again. She wrapped her legs around him, clinging to his back and continuing to move her hips.

“You need to come fast, vixen,” he hissed. “Now. Now.”

She didn’t want to. She wanted to stay there, impaled by him, and feel him deliciously stretch her insides.

“Can’t. Stop it.”

She got a little drunk on the fact she had that effect on him. Watching him come undone.

But then he regained the upper hand. With both hands on her hips, he took control of their rhythm, slowing her down and grinding her harder on him. Her orgasm came on her fast, and she nearly rose to the ceiling.

As she was coming down, he finally released. She gazed at him as his jaw

tensed, his head thrown back as pulses went off inside her. Her insides did a little victory dance that she'd caused that. Not just drove him wild with her body, but that they'd connected. Something she didn't know she'd been missing.

As he fell back onto the bed, her hands landed on either side of him. He panted and stared up at her. "Wow, that was fast," she teased.

"Not my fault you're a sex goddess."

She giggled. He wasn't serious. "What can I say? I live to drive you crazy."

He pulled her down onto him, and her cheek met the hair on his chest. "Give me a bit. I'll show you how long I can last."

Round two did last longer—a lot longer.

## Chapter Ten

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Voices swarmed outside her window downstairs. Her mind, heavy with sleep, didn't make out words, only a low buzz like the bees that used to light up the summer sweet bush under her bedroom window at home.

She tried to roll to her back but was trapped under something heavy—and hot. It was a warm body. Her eyes popped open. *Knox Michaelson*. Her business advisor, who she kind of sort of dated over the last two weeks. Whom she let get out of hand with all the kissing business. Who she, out of the blue, invited to her place. Which then led to mind-bending, feminist-ruining sex. Of course, it had. The man's lips should be bronzed.

He also may have broken her vagina, having worked her over half the night.

*Not sorry.*

She waited for her conscience to catch up. The one that said she was a professional, dammit, and sleeping with a client who Ayana had warned was a womanizer was very, very bad. Instead, her ego—the one she didn't even know she had—gloated. He'd called her a *vixen who lured him to her lair*. Best moment ever, her pride sang.

Twisting to face him, she let her pride win even further. He was still there, nude, on his side. A lock of blond hair fell over his forehead while his lashes, three colors of blond, rested against his cheeks.

She cupped his jawline, now dusted with a five o'clock shadow. He didn't

wake but pulled her closer to him so her cheek rested against his pec. Mr. No-Dating was cuddling her.

Why?

She tried to break free, to sit up and assess that preposterous situation. Instead, he tightened his hold on her. How was she supposed to think logically with his big manly muscles under her, around her? His scent was muddling her brain. Worse, the sheet had slipped, and she now had an eyeful of his cock against his thigh. Half hard even in sleep. That spot between her legs—where he nearly ruined her for anyone else ever again—woke up.

She had to get up. Now. Or she'd wind up straddling him to test her vixen power. Make sure it hadn't vanished in the middle of the night.

The only way to extricate herself was to slip lower, putting her dangerously close to his equipment. She managed to free herself and grabbed the first bit of clothing she found on the floor, his plain white T-shirt. It hung to mid-thigh, so she didn't bother with underwear.

She tip-toed out the door and to their minuscule kitchen. A strong cup of coffee might help her think and put the night into perspective.

While the coffee brewed, she pulled herself up on the countertop. Last night, they'd almost had sex right there. She'd never chop vegetables or stir flour in a bowl there and think of anything else ever again.

As she poured her first cup, female laughter filled the hallway on the other side of the front door. Then the click of a lock being opened. She nearly choked on her coffee when Ayana strode in, followed by her sisters Winnie and Kasa.

Winnie always dressed to stand out—particularly with the male species. God forbid anyone miss her ample cleavage, which was displayed rain or shine. She did Pilates, worked at a bank, and made an effort to ensure every man in the room believed he was God's gift to all womankind. In other words, she sucked up all the flirting genes their mother might have doled out among her daughters.

Kasa was more conservative, but only slightly, coordinating her eyeglasses with her brightly colored outfits. She got a discount since she worked at Eyes On You spectacle shop in their hometown.

Their faces lit up at seeing Rayen. "Surprise!" Kasa made jazz hands at her, then rushed over for a hug.

"Ayana? I thought you were in Atlanta?" Rayen rasped, still sore from screaming out Knox's name. Shit. Knox was one closed bedroom door away.

Ayana's eyes grew wide. "You're wearing a man's T-shirt."

Kasa turned back to look at their sister, forehead wrinkling. "Rayen? In a man's T-shirt." She made an annoying pfft sound. "Please."

"Let me get a look." Winnie pushed passed her, put her hands on her hips, and inspected Rayen from head to toe before pulling her in for a hug. "Don't worry," she whispered. "I got you." She pulled back and held Rayen's shoulders. "I've got some under-eye concealer for those bags."

Rayen pushed at her. "What are you all doing here?" Please let Knox be a heavy sleeper. And please let no one notice she was bare-assed.

Kasa strode to the coffee maker. "Cups?" She began to open cabinet doors, then helped herself to a mug. "Ayana said you're not coming this weekend. We're here to drag you back."

"No one's dragging anyone anywhere," Ayana said, her eyes still narrowed and assessing. "We thought it high time for a sister reunion. It's been a month."

"Your new place is cute. So much nicer than the other apartment." Winnie strode into their tiny living room. "With a view, too." Their balcony overlooked the next building, so there wasn't much to see.

Kasa groaned as she sipped her coffee. "God, getting up at five a.m. to drive here was the worst." She leaned against the counter and tilted up the champagne bottle, which was left out. Reading the label, she raised an eyebrow, murmuring, "Fancy ..."

Rayen grabbed it and yanked the refrigerator door open to put it back. "What about your conference, Ayana?" She still couldn't understand why they were all there, especially Ayana.

She waved her hand. "Boring. I cut out early. Then got a call from Winnie, saying she wanted to come up for the weekend. So ..." She shrugged.

The whole weekend? "Listen, let me change. Then we can all go out for breakfast." Once she'd put on underwear and shoved Knox out the window.

She headed down the hall and got there just in time for the door to crack open. The sound did not go unnoticed by her sisters.

As three sets of eyes peered down at her, Rayen pushed at Knox's chest, stopping his advance. "Be right back, everyone!" She muscled her way in, sending Knox backward.

"What's going on?" he growled as his legs hit the bed, causing him to fall backward. His manhood bounced a little, and she cursed herself for noticing

it. From that moment forward, however, every part of her body would likely zero in on his crotch.

She grabbed his jeans off the floor and threw them at him. “Quick. Get dressed.”

The door opened behind her. “Rayen, what’s ...” Kasa stood there, slack-jawed. “Fuck.”

Winnie peered over her shoulder. “I think that was last night. Hi.” She waved. “I’m Winnie. Rayen’s sister.”

Rayen slammed the door shut in their faces and leaned against it. “You’ve got to go.”

Knox pushed himself up to sitting, stifling a yawn. “Relax.”

“You’re *naked*.”

Winnie’s laughter on the other side of the door. “Listen to him, Rayen. Relax.”

Snapping his jeans in front of him, he pushed a leg through. “I like your sister already.” He had the nerve to smirk.

She pointed her finger at the sex god on her bed. “I might have a heart attack right here in front of you.”

He rose and zipped up his jeans. “Hungry?” He moved to the door.

She covered the doorknob with her hand. “Don’t you dare.” She pointed at the window. “Out.”

“You’re a story up, which I still can’t believe, given your fear of heights.” He yanked Rayen against his muscled chest, his cock’s semi-hardness pushing through his jeans against her belly. “Good morning.” He lowered his head, putting his mouth on hers.

She usually didn’t fall for distraction kissing. Then again, no one had ever tried doing that to her before, let alone kissed her the way he could. Lips that moved in the right way, tongue reaching out as if seeking her very soul.

She spun on her feet as the door cracked open. “Knox,” she hissed. She had to prepare him for the coming onslaught. The questions. The humiliating disbelief that Rayen was with someone like Knox. Her sisters would voice it all.

She sighed heavily as the door swung open to reveal all three of her sisters. Winnie grinned. Kasa remained slack-jawed. Ayana scowled, her arms crossed over her chest.

Knox Michaelson might be a fool.

“Ladies, do I smell coffee?”

Kasa bit her lip and nodded.

“Excellent.” He winked at her and strode past them all toward the kitchen.

Kasa, usually the sensible one, mouthed, “Wow,” as Knox strode away. She then cocked her head as her gaze landed square on his retreating butt.

Winnie swatted at Rayen’s arm. “Nice job,” she whispered.

Ayana stepped in front of her. “You and I are going to talk about this.”

“Oh, let her have some fun, Ayana. She’s a grown woman,” Winnie defended.

Ayana scoffed and walked in the direction of Knox. Rayen would have followed, except Winnie grabbed her arm. “Quick. Name, occupation, month he was born.”

Honestly, she didn’t know when the man was born. Rayen jerked free. “I-I don’t know.” She had to get to Knox—now. She wasn’t about to let him spend any time bare-chested in jeans alone with Ayana.

Kasa looked over at her incredulously. “You don’t know his *name*?”

“One-night stand. *Nice*,” Winnie’s smile grew wider. “It’s about time, baby sister.”

“Knox. That’s his name,” she said quickly before racing out to save the man, though part of her wanted him to handle the fire *he* started. Did nothing she said last night about her sister matter to him?

As Rayen entered the kitchen, she saw Ayana facing the coffee maker. It was her I’m-counting-to-ten stance.

On the other hand, Knox leaned against the counter, a cup of coffee already in his hand, looking like he had just bagged a sixteen-point buck his first morning out.

“So,” Rayen clasped her hands together, “everyone, this is Knox.”

He waved and sipped his coffee before reaching over and pulling Rayen close. “Ladies, good morning.”

Rayen hopped on one foot and fell against his chest, her hand landing on his bare abs, sending a rush of heat through her whole body. “Knox,” she whispered, peering up at him and praying he’d read the plea in her eyes.

He set his coffee cup down, circled her with both his arms, and placed a kiss on top of her head. Okay, the man had no eye-reading skills.

“I’m Winnie. Again.” Her sister rushed forward and held out her hand, which he took. “That’s Kasa. And Ayana.”

Knox’s smile widened. “Morning. Good to see you again, Ayana.”

Rayen tried to wrestle free, but Knox held on. Her nipples hardened.

“Good morning, Mr. Michaelson,” Ayana said, still pointedly at the coffee machine. Oh, she was mad, alright. Her sister cracked open the cabinet and reached for a cup. Probably not wanting to look a half-naked donor in the eye. She always was the most conservative of all of them.

“Call me Knox. I’m happy to meet all of you. I can see Rayen’s beauty comes honestly.”

That broke Ayana’s trance. She spun, her hip cocked against the countertop. “Oh, flattery. Use that line often?” She wasn’t smiling.

Knox and Ayana held each other’s gazes for a long moment. It didn’t move Knox’s smirk from his face to be stared down so hard by her sister. And she’d seen Ayana’s wrath practically fell trees.

It was Kasa who broke the staring contest. “Knox, we were thinking of getting some breakfast. Want to join us?”

“Yes, please do,” Winnie said brightly. “Then you can tell us all about how you met.”

Rayen gave one more effort to free herself from Knox’s clutches, but he held on to her steadfastly. “Oh, I don’t think he —”

“Sounds good.” His grip on her tightened, and she dug her nails a little into his chest. He seemed not to notice. “And we met through Ayana. I donate to her center. I’m impressed by the work it’s doing. It’s about time people start to understand our history—our real history. And support Native cultures in the present day.”

That statement even made Winnie slack-jawed.

Ayana’s face softened a bit. “We appreciate your support.”

“Supporting people you believe in is important,” he said.

“That’s why we’re here, actually,” Winnie said. “To check on our baby sister.”

“She’s certainly my baby.” He nuzzled her hair, and her thighs began to ache.

That elicited a long “aww” from Winnie while Kasa’s face remained stunned.

To make matters worse, Rayen was painfully aware she was panty-less and now wet, which could lead to all kinds of embarrassing things. “I’m not a baby, and I need to get dressed.”

“Yes, clothes would be good,” Ayana said.

He finally let go. “Let’s grab a table at Ted’s. It’s on me.”

“I’ve always loved breakfast,” Winnie breathed, not hiding her awe of the



man at all.

How on earth would Rayen get through a meal with all three of her sisters? She didn't know which was worse: Ayana's judgy face, Kasa's humiliating disbelief, or Winnie's staring at Knox as if assessing a prize bull at the state fair. For the first time ever, being an only child was looking pretty good.

As soon as her bedroom door closed, she spun to face him. "You can't let them think we're dating." She jumped the shark, but desperate times ... If any of her sisters thought it was serious, her family would swarm like mosquitoes in July.

"Prefer they think I'm a one-night stand?" He slapped his chest and grinned. "I feel so used."

"You have no idea what you've done."

"Made sure they saw you as a grown woman who could possibly be desired?"

At the word "desired," her whole body froze. Air died in her lungs. In fact, all the air in the room might have vanished. "But you don't ..."

"Don't date? I told you the truth. But with you?" He ran his fingers over his chin.

"Yes?" Now she understood the statement *she held her breath*. She hadn't dared think he might seriously be interested in her.

"We're casually dating. Not serious. Just ... listen, it's no one's business what we did in here last night."

A wave of lust washed over her. He stared down at her with his beautiful blue eyes, and something loosened inside her. "Casually dating."

He kissed her forehead. "Yep."

Who was that version of Knox? Who cared?

"Now, let's go out before I have you on your back again, and they have to listen to your headboard put more marks on the wall." He picked up his shirt off the floor.

Oh, no. "What are you doing?"

"Protecting your security deposit."

A laugh burst out of her throat. "Who's going to protect you?" She threw one hand up in the air and let it fall to her side. "I need a shower." And more than a few minutes to prepare for the interrogation.

She headed to her bathroom, and he followed. She stopped in the doorway, holding up a finger. "You can't come in. We only have about ten

minutes to come up with a plan, and I need to shower fast before they think —”

“I’m holding my hand over your mouth when you’re coming hard on my dick?”

A slight trickle started on her thigh. Damn him. “No time.”

“There’s always time for you, vixen. I’ll just have to make sure you come fast.”

Knox may have been a fool for setting them up in front of her sisters, but at least he was honest. He made her come in the shower in under two minutes. She was shocked she could, given who waited for them in the living room. Knox most definitely had skills.

Twenty minutes later, she, her three sisters, and one sex-crazed billionaire were inside a black SUV courtesy of Uber XL on their way to Ted’s Bulletin. She was squeezed between Ayana and Kasa as Knox pointed out Washington, DC monuments to Winnie, who looked like she was framing his bull score in her head. Never mind that each had been to the nation’s capital a dozen times and didn’t need to be staring at monuments.

But it was the last calm moment they all had.

## Chapter Eleven

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Even if Ayana’s eyes threw icicles his way the entire time, Knox was in a surprisingly good mood during brunch. Sure, getting Ayana riled up by wrapping his arm around Rayen while he ate one-handed was probably not the most diplomatic move. But the woman needed to drop the whole get-thee-to-a-nunnery position when it came to her sister. Rayen wasn’t a baby—not by a long shot.

For one, the woman had some surprising skill—not only in the kitchen but at testing his ability to hold his libido in check. The way she chewed her bottom lip when searching the menu had his balls tightening like a twelve-year-old boy peeping into the bedroom of the girl next door. Not that he’d ever done that.

Then, when her bare thigh touched his leg, he was dangerously close to sliding his hand up her denim mini skirt to see if she was as wet as he was hard.

Unlikely. The chilly looks Ayana gave her sister were probably enough to keep Rayen as dry as the Sahara. And despite the good mood Rayen’s presence gave him, her obvious negative opinion about them being together irritated the fuck out of him. He may not be shopping for rings—ever—but he wouldn’t be dismissed outright.

Normally, he felt one emotion at a time—being happy and irritated simultaneously was ... odd.

Rayen yawned, catching her sister’s eye. “Late night?” Winnie looked

directly at Knox and winked.

All four sisters were most definitely related, given their looks. But within three minutes, he knew that was where the similarities ended.

Winnie was an unapologetic flirt.

Kasa serious and focused.

And Ayana was, well, Ayana. Overprotective, unwavering in her obvious opinion of what he was doing with her sister. Did she think Knox would knock Rayen over the head and drag her by her hair to his cave? Now that he thought about it, Ayana's grim face was the very look Rayen had given him at the end of their first evening together.

"More bacon?" He handed the plate of the thickly-cut slices of heaven to Winnie, who grabbed it enthusiastically. The woman could eat—and clearly wasn't as interested in the pre-colonial dining options that Rayen espoused. Kasa, either, considering she was doing a damned fine job of downing a Belgian waffle.

"So," Winnie said, "when did you two love birds meet? It was through Ayana, right?"

"Yes. Knox is one of our donors," Ayana said wearily.

He'd given her over two hundred thousand dollars over the last six months, and that was all the excitement she could muster? At least she'd used his first name.

"Oooh," Kasa's mouth dropped open, and she nodded slowly. "Good looking and wealthy ... Hey!"

Rayen had slapped her sister in the belly. "Knox is a developer."

"Of?" Winnie set her chin on her hands and batted her lashes at him.

"Real estate."

She straightened. "And you're with ..." She pointed.

"He uses the highest environmental standards." Rayen was defending him. He hated that she felt the need to explain him.

"I specialize in environmentally sustainable, cradle-to-grave building design and development," he filled in.

Winnie and Kasa blinked at him like not a single word landed. Kasa spoke first. "So, Rayen cooks for you."

"I cater events," she emphasized. "Gentleman's Gourmet, remember?"

"Oh, right. How goes it?"

"Great. I've made some new contacts lately."

He took Rayen's hand. "Rayen's cooking is spectacular."

“She’s definitely good in the kitchen,” Kasa said definitively.

Ayana sniffed. “And clearly good in other places, too. Who knew?”

Rayen looked stricken by her sister’s words and glanced at him as if to check their impact. If she thought he couldn’t handle a little derision, she knew nothing about him.

Winnie leaned forward. “Rayen, you’re coming to Margaret’s baby shower, right? She’s having another girl.”

“Win,” Kasa exclaimed. “We’re not supposed to tell.” She set her gaze on Knox. “One of our cousins, four girls —”

Winnie waved her hand. “Man, Ben will be upset. He had his heart set on a boy.”

“But,” Kasa warned, “we’re supposed to find that out tomorrow. You know when the balloon explodes with pink confetti?” She was clearly asking Knox the question, and the hair on the back of his neck raised.

“Do you want boys or girls, Knox?” Winnie asked.

A knot formed in his stomach. He’d rather field Ayana’s anger than that topic.

“I can’t make it,” Rayen said quickly. “But I’ll send a great gift.”

Kasa and Winnie gasped in unison. “Not coming? Bring Knox with you,” Winnie said.

His belly lurched again. A baby shower was not how he would be spending his Saturday.

“Or if not this weekend, there’s always Bea’s shower in two weeks. And then don’t forget the engagement party for Donna. They’re also cousins,” Winnie said directly to Knox.

Nausea was definitely forming in his gut.

Rayen gave her sister a hard look. “I need to run to the ladies’ room.”

He scooted over so she could get out of the booth and moved to follow. He needed to feel more than just the skin of Rayen’s thigh—perhaps in an attempt to return to the bubble he’d been living in with her for the last twenty-four hours. Away from baby shower talk, family gatherings, and disapproving looks from her oldest sister.

A hand grasped his forearm. “Knox.” It was the first word Ayana had said to him directly since leaving their apartment and only the second time she’d used his first name.

He sat his butt back down.

She sucked in air and leveled her gaze on him. “You’re a very important

donor to me. But I will give you up to protect my sister.”

Kasa pushed at Winnie’s arm to move her out of the booth. “Um, we’ll go see what Rayen is up to.”

Great, being left with Ayana for The Lecture written all over her face. He should have had that second Bloody Mary.

He leaned back and fiddled with his coffee cup handle. “She can protect herself.”

She steepled her hands and looked down at the tablecloth as if searching for patience. It irked him. He was the one who had to steel himself for those types of conversations. He put people in their place, not the other way around.

“She comes across as brave, but she’s quite naïve,” Ayana finally said.

He could see it. Rayen was in awe of everything—a sure sign she’d not experienced much. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“Don’t I?” Her dark eyes swam with concern.

“Yes,”

Ayana grabbed his arm again. “Don’t hurt her.” Her eyes changed. Now they pleaded with him and held a healthy dose of I’ll-kill-you-if-you-fuck-it-up. It raised something in him. Maybe a bit of jealousy, if he was truly honest. Had anyone ever done that for him? No.

“I’m not planning on it.”

“Don’t plan. Stop.”

“No.” Like hell would he be told what to do. “I promise you, Ayana. I won’t hurt her.” He didn’t go out of his way to harm anyone. Why was she worried?

“Is that a promise you can keep?”

Ah. Ayana was observant—irritatingly so. The truth was, he didn’t know what the future held. No one did. They’d agreed to date casually—and that was how it’d stay. But Ayana’s lack of faith in him in that department was borderline insulting.

He slowly lifted his coffee cup to his lips and took the last sip. “With all due respect, if I’m good enough for you to take my money, then I’m good enough for your sister.” He shouldn’t let it go any further. He moved to stand—to go find Rayen.

Ayana’s hand was on his arm again. “Mr. Michaelson ...”

“Now it’s back to Mr. Michaelson? Look, I understand you have a close family. I’m a little in awe of it, to be honest with you.” Being that vulnerable

wasn't something he often did. Even if he had no interest in spending his weekends eating barbeque surrounded by screaming children, he wouldn't have her think he wasn't good enough for Rayen.

"She wants one, you know. A family. Kids. House with a yard. You into that?"

Way to land a javelin in his gut. What was it with women rushing to conclusions? He and Rayen had known each other for weeks. Sure, she was amazing. The sex was spectacular. But baby showers and cousin's engagement parties?

She didn't stop there either. "She's already in love with you. I see it."

Love? They were having fun, getting to know one another. He enjoyed spending time with her. Hell, he couldn't get enough of those lips. And he admired how she couldn't pass by a flower without sniffing it, how she could talk about food for hours.

But he didn't know shit about love. Never been in it before. In fact, he often thought it wasn't possible for him ever to go there. Did that mean there was nothing in between?

Then again, she could be just saying all those things to get rid of him. It didn't matter. His ego wouldn't let her insinuation slide. "Is that a bad thing?" As if he didn't already know the answer.

She crossed her arms. "You've always struck me as an honest person, Knox. You tell me."

He let a puff of air leave his lips. "Exactly what do you think I'm going to do to her? She's a grown woman. Smart. Hard worker. Handles her clients very well. She makes good choices."

"And you're a good choice?"

Jesus. Was it an overprotective sister thing, or was he that awful? He supposed his bed did appear to be a revolving door if one gave stock to gossip and magazine articles.

Winnie swept up to the table like a butterfly lighting on a bush. "So, all is well?"

Following behind, Kasa smirked. "What do you think?"

Rayen muscled her way past her sisters, took one look at him, and narrowed her eyes at her sister. "Ayana." Her warning tone did little to wipe the I-know-everything look off Ayana's face. "I was gone for five minutes."

"We were just talking." Ayana calmly lifted her coffee cup.

Winnie placed her hand on his bicep. "We're all a little protective of our

baby sister.”

Rayen spun on her other sister. “I can take care of myself.” A woman at the table next door glanced their way.

Rayen grasped his hand and squeezed. “He’s a good man. I’ve learned a lot about him in the last few weeks. You can all drop the overprotective act.”

“We’re looking out for you,” Kasa said. “When Ayana called —”

“What?” Rayen’s eyes sliced to her sister. Now the table next door was definitely interested. Their eyes darted over the group. “You told me Winnie said *she* wanted to come to visit.”

“Oops?” Winnie shrugged.

Knox didn’t do that kind of family drama. “Let’s go.” He tried to pull her away, but Rayen fought him.

“For once, you three,” Rayen said. “Stop telling me what I can and cannot do.”

“Yeah, come on.” Winnie raised her arms and let them slap to her side. “If she wants to screw this guy’s brains out —”

“I will. In the bathroom right now,” Rayen said rather loudly. The couple at the table next door grinned. If a single cell phone was raised in their direction ...

Enough. “Let’s go.” He snatched the bill off the table. “My treat.” He needed to be away from all of that.

When they got into their rideshare, he told the driver they were making two stops. “We’ll drop the ladies off at their place, and then you can take me to mine.”

Rayen’s brow wrinkled. “I can go with you.”

“Spend some time with your sisters. It seems like you have a lot to talk about.”

She placed her hand on his thigh, let it drift close to his crotch. “I’m all talked out, actually. Could use a nap.” She didn’t have sleep on her mind.

She also gave him a look he didn’t recognize—not the honest desire he’d seen last night. More like something practiced in a mirror. It wasn’t natural on her. She only wanted Ayana to witness their exchange. Enough of the family theatrics.

“I have work to do.”

She pulled her hand away and faced forward. He’d hurt her. He couldn’t stop himself.

He dropped the ladies off. Kissed Rayen goodbye. She clung to him a



little, which sent an uncomfortable tension through his shoulders.

“See you soon,” he said after getting back in the car. He then told the driver to go on.

By the time they’d crossed over into Virginia, he’d convinced himself a little space never hurt anyone. It’d give them all time to calm down and get things back to where they belonged. Casual. And he didn’t have to justify himself to anyone.

## Chapter Twelve

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**G**hosted. Was there anything more humiliating? Yes, one thing. Having her sister be right about a certain sex god. One minute he was calling her a vixen, and the next, he couldn't be bothered to say when they might see each other again. Worse? She broke her own promise. She'd fallen for him.

When the dreaded "I'll be busy for a few days" text came in an hour after he'd dropped them off after their disastrous brunch, she might as well have swallowed poison.

She'd called him that night anyway. He didn't answer. He didn't answer the next day, either.

Then she learned what Ayana had said to him at brunch. She'd dragged out her sister's confession after plying her with her favorite dessert—her blueberry honey cake.

Rayen could have spit nails after that, but Ayana's Big Sister routine didn't wane.

"If he's into you, he'll call in a few days," she'd said. At least she hadn't said, "I told you so." What she did was tell everyone back home what happened.

Cousin Bea's call came in first. "Welcome to the world of men, babe."

Her mother, who rang right after, was typical. "Come home. I miss my baby girl."

Then her brother Jacob called. That meant the news that Rayen had fallen

for an unattainable billionaire and gotten cast off made its way through the entire family grapevine. “Ray, you’ve got to come out here. They appreciate good food. You won’t have much in the way of distraction. It’s, like, I dunno, one thousand women to every man?”

*Jesus.*

There was only one thing left to do: Keep going. But to where? Home? Stay in DC? San Francisco? Someplace new entirely?

Her mind whirled in endless circles and loops. That was the thing about being maybe dumped. You were left with too much time to think.

Rayen peered up at Charity’s house in Georgetown on Volta Street. It was white stone, narrow, surrounded by large leafy trees with a cute little bistro table on the front terrace.

She had no choice but to take on the cooking lesson for Paul’s birthday. Too much time had been spent with a certain panty-melter. She had no other gigs lined up. “At least no elevators or death balconies,” she muttered.

At the door, Charity greeted her in a sunny yellow dress and was all smiles. “Come in, come in.” She gestured for Rayen to stride inside. “I hope you don’t mind. I invited a few extra people. We’re light eaters, so don’t worry about not having enough food.”

Two steps in, and she found another couple and a familiar blond head with broad shoulders facing away from her. The air in her lungs left with a woosh. Of all people, Knox Michaelson.

Why did Charity have to turn the “private” cooking lesson into a party?

“Everyone, this is Rayen Johns, our cooking instructor for the afternoon.”

Murmured hellos sounded. Knox turned, his blond wavy hair looking as casually coiffed and perfect as ever. His face was blank. He might as well have slapped her.

She ripped her eyes from him. She didn’t know what to say to him anyway. Where the ever-loving hell have you been? Why did you give me such great orgasms only to push me away? “I’ll take everything to the kitchen,” she said instead.

Charity brought her to the back of the house. The kitchen was all white with the usual stainless steel appliances, and it looked as if no one ever cooked in it.

An image of her grandmother’s kitchen sent a sharp pang through her chest. Her old stove leaned to one side, but she always had something simmering in a big yellow ceramic pot. Sprigs of drying herbs dangled upside

down in the window over her sink. Anyone who entered got a big smile, her gnarled hands patting the back of the wicker chair around the Formica table. “Come sit and tell me what’s happened today,” she’d say. She always wanted to know what was going on with you.

Maybe her mother was right. She could slip home so easily. A big part of her wanted to turn, march back to her car, and head south.

*Be a big girl*, she thought. Knox would not chase her away.

The couple, Harriet and John, entered the kitchen first. Knox trailed behind, face as stony as ever. All had drinks in hand, of course. That was what people did here as their main form of recreation.

Get through the next three hours. That was all she had to do.

Knox came right over to her. “Rayen. How are you?” His flat tone chilled her to the bone. He might as well have asked the postman whether it looked like rain that day.

“Fine. Shall we get started?”

“Yes, let’s go on this. I’m starving,” John said.

Harriett smirked at him. “My husband, the bottomless stomach.”

Each of them took a stool around a giant island. Knox took the spot across from her. He wore a deep blue shirt, sleeves rolled up to reveal golden hair dusting his arms—the ones he’d used to put her into all kinds of positions.

His hand curled around his glass, and her legs squeezed together in some strange solidarity.

*Breathe. Do not let him have the upper hand.* Just because he looked amazing and his familiar aftershave was wafting in her direction was no reason to get all swoony. The man had all but disappeared on her.

After a few of the usual niceties and avoiding Knox’s gaze, she spread out her ingredients. “Corn. Beans. Squash.” She pointed at each one. “These are the heart of most Native American cooking. But also, depending on your region, fruits, various nuts, fish, game birds, venison, buffalo, and even bear could be on the menu.”

“Please tell me you didn’t bring Paddington.” Harriet’s eyes searched the table.

She was used to such jokes. “Not today.”

Harriett took a big swig of wine. “Thank God,” she muttered.

“Go on, Rayen,” Knox’s soft tone warmed something in her chest but was quickly replaced with a wash of anger. Good.

She wouldn't be lured in by him. Not again.

She talked about brushing salmon filets with a little maple syrup as the guys crushed juniper berries in the mortar and pestle she'd brought while the women sliced chives. "A little of this syrup will bring out the natural sweetness of salmon and play down the fishy part."

"You're good with fish," Knox said.

His words only raised more anger. "And you're good at cutting bait."

Paul gave her a sidelong glance.

"Now, the acorn squash will compliment nicely here," she continued. "A pesto of pumpkin seeds, chives, a little salt and a very small dash of chiltepin." She held up the little dish holding the ground peppers. "This is really versatile."

Harriet peered into the little dish of spices and giggled. "Chill-ta-peen?"

Rayen suppressed an eyeroll. "It's very hot. You don't want to use much of it."

"It's the only wild chili native to the United States," Knox said. "It's been said the heat from it causes the brain to release endorphins, a natural painkiller. The capsaicin is an antibacterial agent. Can be used to relieve stomach disorders, too."

Someone had been listening over the last few weeks.

"Two points for you," Harriet pushed on his arm. The woman might be a little drunk, but at the mention of points, Rayen's stomach did a little flip.

"Thanks, Harriet." Though he stared directly at Rayen.

After she slipped the squash and salmon into the oven—a Viking that she hoped someday to have—she moved to dessert—sunflower maple cookies.

Paul reached over the island and poured Charity more wine. "You do know your stuff, Rayen."

"I thought that the very first time I met her," Charity said as if she wasn't even in the room. "Knox arranged for a business dinner, and I knew right away she was special."

At least someone around the island thought that. And good for Charity for recognizing what that night was about—not an impending romantic sleepover.

Come to think of it, she'd never spent the night there, either. As if she needed any more evidence that she had merely been part of his fun harem.

Paul glanced at both of them. "I understand Knox was mentoring you, Rayen?"

“Oh, no. I was mentoring *him*,” Rayen said sweetly. “But he failed, so ...” She shrugged delicately.

Paul and John exchanged glances. Charity and Harriett, too.

Knox’s eyes lifted to her and snorted. “Hardly. Someone was stingy with giving out the points.” He gave her a small smile—like they had some secret joke.

They didn’t. Not anymore.

As she fed raw sunflower seeds into the small grinder, she continued. “As I was saying, you don’t need to cook the sunflower maple cookies. You can use the dough as raw protein balls.”

“I do love me some raw protein.” Harriet swayed a little on her stool and winked at her husband. He took her hand, lifting it to his lips.

Jesus, love swirled all around her. She was happy for them, but it only showed how little of it she’d experienced herself.

Once all the food was cooked and more bottles of wine were emptied, the couples and Knox sat down to eat what they’d (sort of) prepared. The group made all the appropriate murmuring sounds. Knox hardly touched a bite, which was unusual, but he chatted away with John—something about an impending shortage of steel and concrete.

Rayen couldn’t watch. She excused herself to go to the ladies' room.

She held on to the sides of the vanity. “You can do this. Another thirty minutes or so. It *will* be over.”

In fact, she was ready for it to be over now. Maybe Jacob’s offer to join him was a message to redirect her life. She’d gotten so off the rails.

After splashing cold water on her face, she cracked open the door to see Knox there.

He pushed her inside. “We need to talk.”

“Now you want to talk? Fuck you.” All the frustration and anger—mostly at herself for getting into a situation where she pined for a man who was essentially unavailability incarnate—bubbled up and found its way out.

His hand ran through his hair. “Sorry I haven’t called. I’ve been ... busy.”

She scoffed. “Sure thing, Knox.”

He shook his head. “There it is. The female indignation.”

“Excuse me?” Rayen had to muster up every ounce of patience she had left because she wanted to hurl something at his head. She didn’t get that angry—ever.

She jabbed him in the chest with a finger. “You can’t handle strong

women, fine. But ghosting me? Come on. Coward move.” Everything tumbled out at once. She never could play footsie around words that needed to be said.

“I’d hardly say taking a break —”

“A break? Ha.” She jabbed him again for good measure. “Ayana cowed you.”

His nostrils flared. “First of all, I don’t get *cowed*.”

She crossed her arms. “Then, what? Tell me to my face. Tell me you don’t want me. I’m just like every other woman. Charm. Melt. Dump.” She held up a finger for each, the words like little knives on her tongue.

He put his fingers to his temple like a headache was forming. “That is not what was going on.”

“Oh? What was?”

“We were having fun. And you loved it,” he growled.

She wanted to slap him. “You loved it more.” God, she sounded like a petulant child.

“But then your sister and her ideas ... I just needed some space and —”

“I knew it.” He *had* dumped her. “I know all about my sister. Ayana wants to run my life. The rest? Just want me to come home and make babies.”

“And you want a family.”

She blinked at him. “Someday. But ...”

“But what? You know I’m not a family person. You knew the score.”

Oh, he’d scored alright. A stupid lump formed in her throat. She cleared it. “You know what, Knox? It doesn’t matter. You’re off the hook.” She tossed her hands into the air and let them fall to her sides. “I’m leaving.”

She hadn’t fully made up her mind. But after today, her decision was clear. She didn’t belong in DC. She never had. The games. The veiled innuendos. The facades.

He stepped closer. “What do you mean, leaving?” If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was upset about her news. But she *did* know better.

“My brother is in San Francisco, and he’s invited me to stay with him.” She wouldn’t run home, go back to the same old thing.

“For how long?”

“Indefinitely.” The word hung in the air, so heavy she could almost see a curtain rise separating her and Knox.

His chin jutted backward. “You can’t move to San Francisco.”

He took the cake. “Yes. I can.”

Running his fingers over his mouth, he stared down at the floor. “West Coast.”

“Yes. San Francisco is in *California*.” She bent her knees so she could peer up into his face.

He growled a little, his hands wrapping around her arms. His chest was rising and falling, his eyes searching her face. “Don’t.”

Her heartbeat drummed inside her chest. “I will.”

He pulled her into him, and his mouth was on hers in a second, stealing her breath.

Oh, God, he knew how to blank her mind in seconds. She knew nothing but his kiss, his hands snaking their way around to her back, down to her ass.

He yanked her up, placing her on the vanity, and a little cry left her throat. It was humiliating how easily her body caved.

“What are you doing to me?” he growled.

To him? She pushed at his chest, but he barely moved. “You self-involved ass.” It didn’t come out at *all* angry. More like a whisper. “What are you doing to *me*?”

The blue in his eyes morphed, growing darker. He pushed his crotch into her, and God help her, her legs squeezed around him. “What do I do to you?”

She sucked in her bottom lip as if that would help her steady her heart.

His gaze dropped to her mouth. “Fuck,” he whispered. He engulfed her in his arms, and his lips crashed down on hers. His kiss was urgent and hard, and she wanted him down between her legs.

She fisted his hair and tried to pull him in even more. He met her, his tongue working the inside of her mouth like a conductor and she was his personal orchestra.

His hands trailed around to her waistline, then to her jean’s buttons.

Reality hit her like a truck. What the hell was she doing? “Stop it, Knox.”

“I can’t.”

She broke free. “Then answer my question. Why can’t I move?” There it was. His time to recall the damage from the last week. Tell her she meant something to him, that maybe he’d miss her at least.

He ran his hand down his face, then let his head drop back to look at the ceiling. He had no words.

“You can’t do it, can you?” Dammit, her voice cracked. “Tell me that you don’t want me to go.”



When he lowered his chin, he still didn't say anything—which was actually everything.

He might even be glad. He'd started something he couldn't finish.

She twisted her body to get her feet back on the ground, where they'd stay. "Goodbye, Knox." She yanked the door open and marched to the kitchen to gather her things. God help her; she was wet between her legs, a humiliating reminder of how easily he could impact her.

No more.

She found Charity inside, putting bowls into the sink. A surprise since Rayen didn't think she'd be a clean-up kind of girl.

Charity pushed off her lean on the sink. "Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine." She didn't want to talk about him. She picked up her insulated bag and set it on the chair.

Charity smiled and held out an envelope. "Thank you so much. Today was amazing."

Rayen had learned in their world that everything was called amazing. It didn't mean anything. She took her payment and stuffed it in the side of her bag. "Thanks. Glad you enjoyed it."

"And, by the way, I'm sorry you had to see me at Knox's like you did. A few weeks ago?" She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and cocked her head back and forth. "When you're in love, you kind of do ... a lot of crazy things to move matters along."

"Oh, don't worry. Client privilege," she whispered.

"Thanks, Rayen. Now," she clapped her hands together, "I hope you don't mind ..." She moved to the freezer and cracked open the door. "But I got Paul a birthday cake that is most definitely not dairy or sugar-free." She reached in and pulled out a white box.

"It's a Carvel ice cream cake. I know it's silly, but Paul said that as a kid, he always got one of these for his birthday. You would not believe what it took to run this flavor down."

Any bit of anger left from her bathroom encounter with Knox dissolved.

"That's so sweet." And real. "I'm so happy for you." Dammit, her voice strained. She swallowed the lump that had risen.

Charity threw her a sympathetic look. "Can I give you a word of advice?"  
*Please, no.*

Charity lowered her voice. "I've known Knox a long time. Since we were teenagers actually. Belonged to the same country club."

“That right?” She really didn’t need yet another reminder about how different they were.

“Knox has always been ... difficult. In the man-woman thing.” She waved her fingers between the two of them.

Her chest ached. “No kidding.”

She slipped the cake out of the box and licked her finger that dipped into the side. “So, here’s the advice.”

Great. Unsolicited advice from a supermodel about a man who didn’t want her. It wasn’t needed now.

“Have some fun,” she sang. “Let yourself enjoy the good parts of him. And then ...” Her head bobbed.

“Just drift away.” No, thank you.

Charity grimaced, pity swimming in her eyes. She looked down at the ice cream cake. “He didn’t have a great family life.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” She finally looked up. “Did he tell you the part where his father never once said he was proud of him? Not when he captained the lacrosse team. Not when he graduated with honors from Stanford. Not even when he built entire neighborhoods.”

Charity sighed heavily. “It impacts a man not to be admired by his own family. It makes it hard to ... love others.”

It was like the floodlights of a stadium filled Rayen’s mind. What Charity said made so much sense.

“Thank you,” she said. “I appreciate the honesty.” The wake-up call.

She smiled and picked up the cake with both hands. “By the way, I’d love to hire you again sometime. For a party.”

“Uh, sure.” Fat chance. She didn’t want to see anyone who reminded her of Knox.

Rayen hoisted her bag onto her shoulder and turned away. Didn’t bother to say goodbye to anyone else. She didn’t even glance into the living room to see if Knox was there.

Because she knew the truth about him. He didn’t know how to love. He never had.

San Francisco would be amazing.

## Chapter Thirteen

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**P**aul held up his fist and bumped Knox's with it. "I got a hundred on the Orioles, man. Tell Miller here it's in the bag," he said, striding past him into his living room.

Miller muscled his way in next. "Pussy team. Hey, Fort Knox."

Knox tightened his belly and managed not to react to the old nickname given to him by that very set of guys back in their boarding school days. That was because twice a year, he'd get a large box filled with new clothes, cakes, and sports magazines. All picked out by a professional shopper, of course, and made to look like he was well taken care of.

But he was glad to see them. Their testosterone could help his recovery from his recent insanities. Thank God that was over. No more silly pretend dates, no more being obsessed with a certain chef's lips.

That last part wasn't exactly true, but he'd managed to stuff that desire where it belonged—out of his heart and mind.

She was unique. That was why he'd gotten so attached so quickly.

Knox returned Miller's backslap. "It's Mr. Fort Knox to you today."

"Tell me you've got the Michter's open."

"Not for you."

Miller strode to the bar cart and helped himself to the bottle of bourbon. "Excellent. It's full. So, Paul. Charity turn your balls blue yet?"

Given how Paul's face lit up at the mention of Charity, they would have to deal with his puppy love all night. The guy was toast—already. "Not even

close.” He turned to Knox. “Owe you one for keeping your balls away from her.”

“She told you about that night?” An unwanted pang of regret hit him in the chest. Rayen had been right. Inviting Charity to his house only opened the door for things that never should have happened. And, shit, another pang went off in his chest thinking about Rayen.

Paul’s face broke into a grin. “Confessed in the throes of passion.”

Miller held up his glass to them. “Pauline, you’ve never heated a can of soup, let alone a woman.”

“Spoken by the man whose balls were tattooed by his wife.”

“What can I say? She loves me.” Miller took a sip of his drink. “Be sure to get that prenup signed before Charity gets your art collection appraised.” Miller never could leave well enough alone.

“Fuck you, man.”

“How’s Rayen?” Paul asked. “She cooking for us?” He peered toward the kitchen.

Miller yawned. “Who’s that?”

“Knox’s latest conquest.” Paul stared right at him, unsmiling.

Did Rayen tell him something when he wasn’t looking the other day?  
“Business associate.”

Paul arched an eyebrow. “Going into the catering business?”

“Not touching that one.” Not going there ever again. He reached for his favorite Milagro tequila.

“Heard you were doing a lot of touching.”

It had to have been Charity. She read into something that wasn’t there. She did that a lot. Then she did what women did. Overshared her assumptions.

“Turn on the game, will ya?” Knox threw the remote at him as he moved to the bar cart.

Paul caught it. “Well, I got news. Getting married.”

Knox didn’t hear that right. He slowly turned, tequila bottle in hand. “You’re what?”

“Down on one knee. Ring on finger. Wedding. You’re both in it, by the way. Jamison, too.”

Miller mock-punched him. “Congratulations, man.”

“Don’t embarrass me, and for the record, no strippers at the bachelor party you’re already planning in your heads.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Your face. Especially you.” He pointed at Knox. “No high-end hookers, either. I can see you plotting already.”

He wasn’t. At least not until that second. No complications, a business transaction. Those he could do.

“Unless ...” Paul eyed him. “You got a woman on the brain, don’t you? A certain dark-haired chef?”

Miller threw a face. “Who’s the unfortunate woman?”

“No one,” Knox bit out. He was right about Rayen being unfortunate around him, though. She deserved better.

“Rayen, a chef who specializes in Native American cooking,” Paul filled in.

Miller took another swig. “No shit. Both of you felled by love. Never thought I’d see the day.”

“I am not in love.” Knox did not do the man-woman drama thing.

Paul and Miller exchanged looks as if Knox had, indeed, done the drama thing. It irritated. He yanked the bottle stopper out of the Milagro.

“Whatever, man, calm down. We’re just ribbing you.” Paul slapped him on the back. “Come on. Game.” He threw himself on the couch and reached for Knox’s Milagro.

The next few hours passed, blissfully devoid of any more love talk. Even so, he still had trouble concentrating on the game.

“Oh,” Miller whistled at the TV. “Thought that would be a beanball.”

“Maybe it’ll knock some sense into him,” Miller replied.

Knox had only been half-watching the game. He couldn’t concentrate. He rose. “Getting some air.” He headed out onto the balcony. The wind whipped through his shirt. Wind would forever remind him of Rayen, wouldn’t it? Someday it’d have to fade, right?

The sound of the slider behind him broke into his maudlin mood.

“Miller’s wife called. Kid number forty-two is sick.” Miller had several kids, and none of them could remember exactly how many. “Headed out. Said he’ll collect his money when the game is over.”

“He always was an optimist.” He studied his friend. “You seriously want to marry Charity?”

Paul stilled. “I’d have driven to the courthouse the second she said ‘yes’ if she didn’t want a wedding.”

“Fuck.” He scrubbed his hair, then regained his senses. He should be

happy for his friend. He grabbed Paul into a man hug. “Congratulations, man. And condolences to Charity.”

Paul shoved at him. “Amazingly, she loves me.”

“How do you know?” The words just came out.

“She tells me. All the time. And entertained the idea of eloping.”

“Score.”

“Nah, she’d regret it. I wanna make sure she gets the whole fairytale shebang.”

Paul really did love her. And Charity considering an outcome where she wasn’t in the spotlight? Shit, she loved him back. His last single friend was shedding bachelorhood. Knox was the last hold-out. Why wasn’t he happy? He couldn’t understand the strange feeling that had taken residence in his chest of late.

Tequila always did make him sentimental. “No hookers, huh?”

“No.”

“Not even a few strippers?”

Paul dropped his chin. “No.”

“Man. You have changed.”

He scoffed. “We all have. It’s what happens.”

Did it? He wasn’t sure he ever could. He knew what he was good at, what he was good for. “Let’s go back in. Watch the Orioles have a blowout.”

Later that night, Knox found himself out on his balcony again. That time with a chair so he could stare through the glass balustrade over the river to the blinking lights of Georgetown, the glowing Kennedy Center, and his father’s darkened building.

It did little to tamp down the sappiness from the day. Hell, from the last few weeks. He wasn’t sure if he had dodged a bullet or made the biggest mistake of his life.

Knox wasn’t an idiot. He knew where his inability to stick around with anyone for long came from. His parent’s marriage was more like a business arrangement than anything. Hell, they didn’t even live together anymore. But God forbid they divide up the houses, cars, retirement funds, and jewelry during a divorce. His mother loved her diamonds.

He stared at the commercial space his father built. Could he live on the fact that he’d bested the man?

Then, inextricably, he picked up his cell phone. *Don’t go there.*

He dialed his father’s number, despite his inner voice berating him like he

was an errant schoolboy. He hadn't talked to the man in months. Avoided his few attempts at communication. But he had questions.

Amazingly, his father answered. "The prodigal son lives."

He could take the bait. Or not. "I don't know who that is," because like hell would he be compared to the guy who returned to his father and his ways, "but I'm alive."

A heavy sigh went off in his ear. "What can I do for you?"

"Talk to Mom lately?" The question didn't trip off the tongue, but for some reason, it needed to be asked. He honestly didn't know where she was at the moment, though she was partial to France at that time of year.

"Paris."

"Why aren't you there?"

"Eh, she's mad at me. Generally always is. What's going on with you?"

"Do you love her?" He didn't know how he was asking those questions. It had to be the tequila.

"In my own way. You drunk?"

"What way is that?"

The man chortled, the sound like fire ants to his skin. "A woman's got your jockstrap in a twist, I see. Give it up, boy. They come and go, but what we build stays."

Right then, he wanted to punch something. He shot to his feet. "I don't know how you can stay married to someone you don't love."

"Well, you're not me. Go to bed. Sleep it off."

That was the problem. He couldn't sleep this one off. "You're right. I'm not you." He hung up. His father didn't call him back.

He realized then that he hadn't dodged a bullet with Rayen. She had—with him. The realization cut like a knife.

He'd never been that interested in a woman before. Never felt a thing like what warmed in his chest. He didn't dare think about it too much—like all the hope he'd held on parents' days at school, lacrosse games he played, always hoping for a glimpse of his father's Mercedes turning into the parking lot, his imposing self, standing on the sidelines of the field, finally letting his stone face drop to whoop and holler like the other fathers.

He'd learned early that wishing was for fools.

Maybe she'd merely been defying her sister, wanting to stretch her wings with him. Had he cared? He mowed that red flag down early because when he was inside her? The way her insides fluttered around him, what choice did

he have? She was a drug.

Then, when she got so angry because he'd wanted a little space? He was never undone by the female sex, but just remembering her hurt face nearly made his chest collapse.

All that emotion was derailing him. His life had made sense before Rayen. Now? He lived inside some sort of cosmic blender.

He missed her. He picked up his phone—and prayed she'd answer.

She didn't.

He leaned against the railing, his phone dangling in his hand. His shirt ruffled in the wind. Rayen had pegged him early. He was a hopeless bachelor. He also was inextricably in love with her.



## Chapter Fourteen

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Rayen tugged at her blindfold. “I’m going to throw up if you don’t stop soon.” She grabbed the window ledge to steady herself. Ayana had been driving for about forty minutes, and between stop-and-go traffic and sudden turns, she was about to pull a Madison retch-fest.

“We’re almost there,” Ayana said.

She’d never heard her sister so happy. Almost giddy with excitement over finally finding space for her lifelong dream of a Native Peoples Cultural Center.

Ayana’s fingers closed over hers, which were gripping the edge of the car seat. “Thanks for coming.”

“Of course. I’m really proud of you. But can you at least tell me where it is?”

The car turned, wheels thunking, sound muffling. “Here.”

She reached for her blindfold, but her sister grabbed her hand, stopping her. “One sec.” The car turned, then stopped.

Rayen threw her head back on the headrest. “Can I take it off *now*?”

Ayana killed the ignition and stopped her hand from rising to the blindfold. “First, you have to make me a promise. That you’ll love it.”

“Of course, I will.”

“No, really, I mean it. When you see where we are, you have to have an open mind. Promise?”

She sighed heavily. “As long as it’s not in some dungeon, I’ll fall in love

with it.”

“Oh, no. Not a dungeon,” Ayana said brightly. “It’s going to be both indoors and outdoors.”

“Great. Now let me take this thing off before I throw up.” She whipped off the blindfold and blinked.

Shiny elevator doors stared at her through the windshield. *Familiar* gleaming steel.

She swung her face to stare at her sister. “You did not.”

For once, Ayana’s face softened. “I haven’t always trusted you to make good choices. It was wrong, and I’m sorry,” she said really quickly.

Her eyes stupidly pricked. “You rented space in this building? Why?”

Ayana faced the steering wheel. “No. I didn’t.”

“But,” she let her hand drift up and then back down, “why are we here? You hate him. And I do, too.” She put extra emphasis on her last words, which did little to stop the rising sadness.

She’d been warring with that emotion in between bouts of rage. The anger was better, which rose time and time again, thanks to his recent actions.

It turned out Knox Michaelson wasn’t just an ass. He might be the devil.

First, he’d rocked her world. Sure, he’d made no promises of anything beyond that, but then he’d not even wanted to continue *that*. He’d ghosted her. Almost nailing her again in an semi-stranger’s bathroom while making it super clear he didn’t want anything beyond that moment. Then, he began showering her with gifts to the point that their apartment looked like the Amazon returns warehouse—only in far prettier wrappings.

Flowers started arriving two days after Paul’s birthday party. Roses. Irises. Daisies and wildflowers so artfully arranged that there was no way they’d grown in the wild. Fancy, gold-lined cards accompanied them, each with the same message. *I’m sorry*.

Baskets of mushrooms were next. “I know you’ll do wonderful things with these,” read the note accompanying a pretty white basket filled to the brim with morels and chanterelles.

An herb kit also came with a note saying how “growing your own could help your profit margin.”

The note with the Takeshi Saji R2 Diamond Finish Damascus TCR Japanese Chef’s Santoku knife read, “the best for the best.”

There was more, but her head hurt even thinking about it.

The daily texts, though, were, by far, the worst. He would send a single

picture followed by a question asking how many points he'd earned.

A pot of water boiling water with noodles. "Gluten-free noodles. Who knew? How many points for using my kitchen?" The man wanted kudos for boiling water?

A picture of a banana plant sitting by the glass balcony window. "One week. Still alive. Deserves ten points, don't you think?" For a house plant?

He upped his game. A picture of a former football player posed against the balcony, holding a kitten and a sign that read, "It's safe."

She'd almost texted back. "Says you. Get that rent-a-kitten back inside." No way did he adopt a pet. The plant was probably rented, too.

Then, people called to book her. Complete strangers who'd heard about her personal chef service. Said Knox Michaelson told them she hung the moon. She was booked for three months, which was silly since she was trying to pack up and leave town.

She'd never once responded to Knox, though she'd had to sit on her hands to avoid responding. She'd been raised to write thank you notes. What had stopped her? One image kept rising in her head. Charity's ice cream cake.

Delivering what was important to someone; that was love. Her business was important to her, but even more so was being wanted, to have him say in any of his messages, texts, or gifts, "Please stay."

He never did. She knew why.

He didn't want anything serious, but he wanted to keep her on the hook. God forbid Knox Michaelson share his heart.

"Rayen." Ayana took her hand. "He's in love with you."

"A bunch of gifts isn't —"

"I was wrong about him."

She sucked in a quick breath. Who was that woman, and why was she possessing her sister? "I don't think you were."

"Just listen to him."

Him? They were going to see *him*? If her sister thought for one second she was getting in that elevator ... "Does this mean you didn't find a home for the center?"

"No, I did find it. And I think you found a home, too."

None of that made sense. And her sister didn't sell out her morals—ever. Unless he'd gotten to her.

A firestorm built inside her. "I'm not getting out of the car. No, you know

what? I am. I'm catching a cab home." She cracked open the door, slammed it extra hard to make her point, and marched toward the entrance ramp that got them inside.

Ayana followed suit, but Rayen didn't stop.

"Knox isn't building it, you know," Ayana called.

She turned. "What?"

Ayana stood with her arms crossed. "The twin to this building. He's doing something else."

They'd been talking. She was fuming so hard she couldn't form words.

The elevator doors whooshed open, and Knox stepped out, looking unfairly good. Blue shirt under a dark gray jacket. Crisp jeans that only made him look more real ... and hotter.

Her chest did what it always did in his presence. It squeezed all the air from her body.

Ayana grabbed her hand. "He's doing something better. Next door. I'll show you."

"No, I'll show you." His rumbly voice washed over her, and she nearly crumbled right there.

Her sister caught up to her. "It's not like you to run away."

"I'm not running away. The man can't love."

Knox called over to them. "I can hear you, you know."

She glared at him. "I don't care."

"Oh, you care," Ayana said. "And you're not alone in it."

Not true. If Knox had any feelings for her, he didn't want them, didn't want her. He just wanted to look good.

Knox strode up to them. "Thanks, Ayana. I've got it from here."

If Rayen had any sense, she'd spin on her heel and get herself to the airport. Catch the first flight out to San Francisco. Instead, she stood there mute as if the cloud of his aftershave had closed her throat.

"I'll meet you at the event." Ayana graced Knox with a smile, a genuine one.

Knox dipped his head once. "Thank you."

They were being so nice to each other. "What did you do to her?" She pointed at her sister, who was marching up the exit ramp toward the sunshine.

"God, I missed that about you. How you get so protective." His smug face beamed down at her.

She growled and slapped her hands at her sides. "You drive me crazy."

“That makes two of us.” His jaw tensed. “I haven’t slept in over two weeks, I’ll have you know.”

“Oh, poor baby.” She rolled her eyes. “I haven’t either. So don’t think you’re some special, gold-leafed, Tiffany snowflake—” She gasped. He’d reached over and grasped her arms.

“You couldn’t sleep either, huh?” He searched her face.

They stared at one another for a long minute. His hands wrapped around her biceps. Strong. Warm.

He broke first. “You look good. Pretty.”

She swallowed. She’d dressed up for Ayana’s big reveal. It was something she’d learned recently. Dress for how you wanted to be seen before you were viewed that way. “Thank you.” She pulled her arms free and turned away.

His touch could turn her stupid again. “Which way to the center’s home?” she asked.

He caught up to her in two steps. “I’ll take you.” They walked in relative silence. He gestured for her to move up the street, then across it, over to the park—the one he was bound to pave over.

With every step, she had to keep herself from glancing at him for fear of softening.

The park appeared to be holding a festival, a super fancy one. Edison lights hung in long rows through the small dogwood trees, soft music came from somewhere, and a few bars and food tables were set up. Easels stood around the large fountain in the center, lights changing colors in the water like a watery kaleidoscope. Ayana stood nearby with her back to her, chatting up two elderly women.

There wasn’t a building or piece of art anywhere.

She paused at the park’s entrance, just under its large black iron archway that read “Potomac Park” in crude scrolls. “What is this?”

“Did you know Potomac is the European spelling of Parawomeck. It’s Algonquin. Name of a Native American village on its southern bank.”

Mansplain much? Rayen, of course, knew this. But he seemed excited and she’d let him continue. “You’re leading up to something, aren’t you? Just say it.”

“I think we should let people know that, don’t you?”

“So, you’re building something for the Native Peoples Culture Center here.” She glanced around. Now that she looked, she recognized some of

Ayana's donors, the big ones like Mrs. Darden and Alexander Rockingham. And a woman she remembered might be named Isabel Santos, a landscape architect specializing in pollinator-supporting gardens.

"Yes, but not how you think. Come." He cocked his head toward the fountain.

"Drink?" When she turned, Lauren stood there, holding out a tray of champagne flutes.

"Oh, hi," she said. "Uh, no thanks."

"You're going to want this, trust me." Lauren eyed Knox, clearly bowled over by him. Her panties were probably sliding down her legs. Rayen was keeping hers where they belonged, though.

Knox took two flutes. "Thanks."

Lauren blushed, then winked at Rayen. "Have fun."

He handed her one. She took a sip. Oh, smooth.

"You like?" He brought his glass to his lips.

She shrugged. "Sure." Took another sip.

"It's the Louis Roederer."

She nearly choked on the bubbles. "But ..."

"Turns out I found a woman with a high enough ROI."

Dammit, her chest warmed. "Ayana's center is worth it."

"It is. But that's not what I meant. Come on, let's go sit." He walked away, not looking back.

She stood there for a second, holding a glass of champagne that cost ... *whatever*, it was too much. Still, she stupidly followed him. Maybe because she honestly did want answers from him. Then she could move on and leave it all behind for good.

She wove through people in suits and dresses holding drinks and chatting it up. She caught snatches of conversation. *Land acknowledgment. Don't understand. You should.* None of it gelled into anything coherent.

He stopped about thirty feet from a concrete wall, the river flowing just beyond it. There was a blanket spread out, an ice bucket with what looked like a champagne bottle, and a small picnic basket.

He stood for one long minute, gazing out over the water, or maybe he was staring at the buildings and neighborhoods on the other side. His hands were stuffed in his trouser pockets, his legs firmly planted.

Most definitely thinking he was an emperor.

"I don't need the eight-thousand-dollar champagne," she said.

“I know.” He didn’t turn around. “I’d like to know what you want, though.”

She joined him. “Peace.”

“Peace is the concept at the center of my new building.” Finally, he turned to face her.

Back to talking about buildings.

“It’s actually going to be more like a garden structure.” His voice held the most enthusiasm she’d heard so far. “Urban gardens, a lobby with a vertical forest. There’s more ...” He stopped abruptly, looking away.

“Tell me more.” If Ayana’s center were going to be there, she’d like to know.

He then described, in some detail, his ideas for the new structure. Rainwater harvesting, lighting sensors, sun-shading exteriors, water-efficient fittings, highly efficient air conditioning and ventilation systems, but “more importantly,” he said, “the cantilevered hanging gardens. I want people to be inside but think they’re outside.”

“Okay, so not so much paving over.”

The relief in his eyes sent a wash of shame over her. He wasn’t the devil. Maybe still not for her, but not a terrible person.

He reached over and swiped a strand of hair off her face. “Pretty much every time the wind blows now, all I can think about is lips. Your lips.”

His touch sizzled. But she’d been there before. “Knox ...”

“Before you say anything, can I apologize? For being slow on the uptake. For being ...”

“A hopeless bachelor?”

He looked down at his hands, then back up at her. “Yes. I’m sorry, Rayen. Really, truly.”

She swallowed and picked at the grass. More to keep herself from looking at him.

“I blew it,” he said.

“You did. But it’s probably for the best.” What did they have in common, really?

“Please don’t leave. Don’t move.”

Her gaze shot up. Oh, she was not expecting that. A sliver of anger—because now he told her that?—got tangled up with a burning curiosity.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re the love of my life. Because I didn’t even know how to

have a love of my life. Until you.”

Love. That wasn't a word she thought he was capable of even speaking. “You're not alone in it,” Ayana had said.

Shit. She hated when Ayana was right.

Rayen drew in a long breath—probably the first one in the last hour. “I ...”

“I understand if you don't feel the same way.” A muscle in his jaw twitched. Knox Michaelson nervous?

That was her moment. Truth time. She did love him—and for some unknown reason, he loved her back. “I ... I ...”

God, his face was so ... *Screw this*. She launched herself at him, straddling him while he gasped. But he caught her and didn't stop her when she mashed her mouth against his.

He kissed her long and deep. Fifty feet away, Washington, DC's moneyed society stood holding too-expensive champagne in their hands. Did she care? Not one bit.

When they broke, the storm in his eyes had calmed. “I love you, Rayen Johns. Forever.”

“Oh my God.” Her hands clung to his shoulders. “He used the words ‘love’ and ‘forever’ in the same day.”

“Shut up. So, does this mean you might ...?” His hands tightened around her waist.

Joy filled every corner of her heart. “No might. I love you, Knox Michaelson, hopeless bachelor.”

She kissed him soundly again. Voices penetrated their bubble. Oh, right, they were in public. Where people could see she was sitting on Knox, wholly inappropriately, even though it somehow felt so right.

He loved her. *Her*.

No one back home would believe it. “I have to ask you,” she finally said. “This doesn't exactly make sense.”

“It does to me. You make me feel more ... me. Happy.”

Best answer ever. “Oh, that's good. Ten points for that.” She eyed him, easing back. “One more question.”

He rolled his eyes. “Of course, there is.”

“How'd you hypnotize Ayana?” It was the only explanation for her sudden acceptance of Knox—and all the love talk.

“I showed up at her office and told her the truth. I mean, since a certain



someone wouldn't answer my calls.”

“That someone sounds stubborn.”

He chuffed. “Yeah. Anyway, Ayana and I got to talking. Turns out we have something in common. We both love you.”

Winning the lottery couldn't feel better than she did right then.

He brushed the hair from her face. “Then, I suggested she have her cultural center here.”

*Oh.* Better than an ice cream cake. “Rent free?” She might as well ask.

“Let's not get carried away. Low rent,” he scoffed.

“Need to fund your champagne budget, I suppose.”

His neck grew red. Something she'd never seen on him before. “Need to fund my family budget. The one I might have ... someday.”

Her heart hitched. “A family in a penthouse?”

“Probably not. The woman I'm in love with is afraid of heights. I might have to move to a lower floor.” He winked at her, the blush on his neck fading.

“You'd do that for me?”

He swiped a stray strand of hair from her cheek again. “For you? Anything.”

*Anything.* She was most definitely missing her flight to San Francisco.

Thank you for reading *For You, Anything*.  
A review of the story is always appreciated.

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# Acknowledgments

Many thanks in advance for reading *For You, Anything*. This story has a special place in my heart as I live in the Virginia Piedmont area, the ancestral land of the [Monacan Nation](#). Getting to learn more about this federally-recognized sovereign tribe was an honor and a privilege.

A big thank you to Sarah Clark for the sensitivity read of *For You, Anything*.

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## About the Author

Elizabeth SaFleur writes award-winning, luscious romance from 28 wildlife-filled acres, is a certifiable tea snob, and is ruled by a 17 lb. Westie.

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Find out more about Elizabeth on her web site at [www.ElizabethSaFleur.com](http://www.ElizabethSaFleur.com) or join her private Facebook group, [Elizabeth's Playroom](#). Follow her on TikTok (@ElizabethSaFleurAuthor) and Instagram (@ElizabethLoveStory), too.

