

Francesca Spencer

Mr

BEST

FRIEND'S

BROTHER

Gamma



Mr
BEST
FRIEND'S
BROTHER
Grump

Francesca Spencer

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'FS' with a decorative flourish underneath.

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For all you salsa dancers.

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Thank you!

Chapter 1

Rosa

I know one person in the whole of New York, and that's my best friend, Kendra. I can't wait to see her.

I could do with seeing a friendly face. When you're walking the streets with a backpack, it's hard to look like you belong. I am conscious of blending in, but as I notice the variety of faces around me, it seems as if New York is a place of travelers and people not from here, so I relax a little when I leave the subway at 18th Street.

Alicia Keys' 'Empire State of Mind' is playing on rotation in my head: New York, the concrete jungle where dreams come true. I take a moment to look up at the tall shiny glass towers pointing skyward, glinting in the sunshine. Clouds gallop overhead colliding with their own reflections. The streets are inspiring me already. I even smile at an old man who is slumped against a wall, begging. But I regret this straight away as he shouts at me to leave him the hell alone. His howling obscenities follow me down the street. He has problems, I think. You just don't know what some people have been through.

The shouty street man experience makes me wary, and I scurry on my way to The Chelsea Coffee Company, where I had arranged to meet up with Kendra. I check the map on my phone. 'Can't miss it,' she said.

I'm early, so I order a latte and a cream cheese bagel with sesame topping and take up position at a table near the

window. An ideal spot for watching the world go by and looking out for my best friend.

When Kendra told me she had a place in Chelsea, Manhattan, I laughed. No one lives in Manhattan. No one real anyway. Or no one that I would know. Manhattan is reserved for the rich and famous only. People who have made it. The winners at the top of their game. Maybe in the past real people could afford to live here, but not now. Or so I thought. Or I totally underestimated the socio-economic level of my best friend from law school. She was living here in Manhattan. And I did know her. So that dispelled my ‘rich and famous’ theory.

A group of suits come in and order a late lunch. They are young, confident, and easy-going with each other. They chat and share a joke. I make up names for each of the three guys and two women and imagine my future self, dressed in city clothes, joining them in their lunchbreak chat. Could they be my new friends? I sip my coffee and nibble a corner of my bagel. I thought I was hungry but the reality of moving to New York is beginning to finally sink in, and I’ve lost my appetite. I think about taking my almost complete bagel and giving it to the homeless man at the subway when Kendra appears.

“You made it!” she squeals into my ear as she hugs me.

There’s only one other person in the world who hugs as good as Kendra and that’s my grandma who hugged me this morning when I left Miami.

I pull back from Kendra, and she looks me up and down. Her eyes shine and she gives me a wink.

“Damn you look good, girl,” she says, smiling. “Got your curves back now you’re not stressed out with trying to be the lawyer that you’re not.”

“Are you saying I’m fat?” I laugh. But I know what she means. At the University of Illinois College of Law, where we met, I had almost put myself in hospital trying to get through class. Kendra was the one who made me see the light.

“Why are you doing this when your heart clearly isn’t in it?” Kendra asked one day when I had done yet another all-nighter, cramming for a test.

The question made me rethink... everything. And I dropped out after my second year.

Kendra on the other hand was born to be a lawyer. She aced everything, finishing with top scores. She had the pick of law firms begging her to start her golden career with them. I swear, there was a bidding war, although Kendra being Kendra, she always played it down. She weighed up her options, of which there were many, and signed on the dotted line, for an unbelievable sum, at a swanky New York office. Which is why she lives here and has a couch for me to crash on for a couple of days, while I find my feet.

“My apartment is just across the street,” Kendra says and picks up my backpack. We leave the café. “Okay, so it’s not my apartment. I share with my bro.” We walk briskly up to the crossing at the lights and dodge pedestrians who all seem to be

late for something, they walk so fast. “It’s his apartment, but he’s hardly ever there,” Kendra says over her shoulder as I follow. “We’ll get you settled in, then I’ll show you around.” City noise makes it difficult to hear what she is saying. “You’re going to love New York. It’s so great to have you here,” Kendra yells as she pushes open a glass door. I’m close behind. “This is it.”

We’re inside an elegant lofty foyer of grey marble. A huge sculptural light fitting is suspended overhead: a statement piece made up of frosted glass tubes of varying lengths. Two sets of elevators are on either side. My eyes are wide, and I have to contain my ‘Wow!’ Kendra stands by an elevator where she swipes a card over a sensor pad. The door slides open.

“We’re on the twenty-first floor,” Kendra says. “The views are great, and we get the afternoon sun for about half an hour.” She laughs. “But Nathan says that’s only in summertime.”

Down a corridor, at the end, Kendra enters some numbers on a keypad beside a door.

“Ah yes. Nathan. How is he?” I ask, as casually as I can. Flutters of nerves in my stomach flap heat up to my cheeks.

Nathan, Kendra’s older, enigmatic brother, whom I had never met, but only ever heard about, is a hugely successful photographer. He spends most of his time in exotic locations snapping gorgeous models in skimpy outfits and gets paid gazillions, according to my bestie.

“Yeah, he’s good, I think. He’ll be back in a couple of days, so you’ll finally get to meet him.”

Kendra had shown me photos of her tall, handsome sibling pictured arm in arm with her at family gatherings. They are close, despite the age difference. She was hurt that he couldn’t make it to her graduation. He was in Hong Kong, shooting for some magazine or something.

“So, I’m maxing out Nathan’s guilt about that by living here, virtually rent-free.” Kendra flashes a cheeky grin my way and stands aside to let me in. “Until I start my proper job, anyway.”

I walk through to a stylish open-plan living area with floor-to-ceiling windows across the far wall, framing the outline of buildings opposite and flooding the space with natural light. A spiral staircase leads to a mezzanine above the industrial-style, stainless steel kitchen. It’s all moody greys and browns. Rich hardwood floors complement colorful Moroccan rugs. A large framed black and white movie poster for *On the Waterfront* hangs perfectly on an otherwise empty side wall: the only piece of artwork on show. I feel as if I’m on set for film or TV. If the cast of *Gossip Girl* appeared, I wouldn’t be at all surprised.

“You get the couch on the mezz.” Kendra points up to the balcony as she dumps my pack. “I’m in here.” She points to the nearest door. “This one’s the bathroom.” Kendra opens the door which clicks on the automatic light and extractor fan. She closes it again. “It’s just for us because Nathan has an ensuite,

of course.” Kendra indicates the door at the far end. “He also gets the city view. It’s a really nice room.”

I wander over to the enormous window and look down at the scurrying people and queues of traffic waiting at the lights below.

“This is wonderful! Pinch me. I can’t believe I’m here and this is real,” I say holding back grateful tears. “Thank you so much.”

“You are most welcome, BFF,” Kendra says, smiling. Then she throws her hands up to the ceiling and shouts, “We’re going to have the best time!”

Soon we’re settled onto the soft grey plush contemporary corner sofas for a long over-due catch-up, mugs in hand. Kendra’s job doesn’t start for a few days. She’s been doing some temp hours through an agency to earn some cash. Odd days here and there. She was even offered a permanent position, which she turned down... twice.

“I’ve helped out Nathan a couple of times when he’s needed an assistant.” Kendra sips her tea. “He pays well and it’s easy money. And I like working with my bro. Although some people might think he’s got an attitude.” She laughs. “He’s just super meticulous about what he does. He has very high standards... in everything.”

“Not another perfectionist in the family?” I put on my worried face.

“Yep.”

“Oh no. I’m surrounded by pedantic over-achievers. How am I going to survive?”

We’re giggling away on the sofas and I’m conscious of spilling my chamomile infusion, when the apartment door opens, and I hear a man’s voice.

“Yes. I’m here now... Uh-huh. Sure. Yeah. We’re good to go. Tomorrow? Fine. See you. Bye.” The handsome man hangs up the call and puts the phone in the pocket of his cargo pants. His Hollywood leading-man looks fit perfectly with the film set interior of the apartment: casual, chic, accidentally stylish.

I recognize Nathan instantly. Only I wasn’t prepared for my best friend’s brother to be quite so gorgeous in person. Eventually, I remember to close my mouth and pretend to be the cool girl I’m not.

“Well, hello Nathan,” says Kendra. “You’re back early... This is Rosa. Who I told you about. Remember?” Nathan’s face is blank, then questioning. He runs a hand through a mop of dark blond hair, silvering at the temples, and puts down his bags and camera case.

“Yes, of course. Rosa. Nice to meet you... And welcome.” He almost smiles and walks over to shake my hand. Then his phone rings and he answers it as he walks off into his bedroom, collecting his things on the way, and closing the door behind him with a soft clunk.

“That’s Nate,” says Kendra. “Busy, busy, busy. But he wasn’t supposed to be back until tomorrow. I swear he is a

super spy or something, and being a photographer is just a cover. It's hard to keep up, so I don't even bother."

Kendra and I resume our chat. But we're soon interrupted by Nathan who calls out from his door, "Ken. Can you do a shoot with me tomorrow? Pretty, pretty, please, please?"

Kendra looks at me with big sad eyes and she is about to say no, but I interject, "Sure, she can."

"No. Rosa. I promised to show you around and tomorrow was going to be our day."

"She'll do it," I say over my shoulder, not at all put off by Kendra's remonstrations.

"Great! Thanks, sis," Nathan says as he disappears into his room again, talking into his phone.

"Look. We'll have plenty of time to hang out," I say leaning towards Kendra. "Your brother needs your help. I'll be fine. So..."

"Alright. It's only one day. I'll get paid, then I'm taking us out clubbing. And maybe we'll take Nate, and he can pay!"

"You're so bad. I can't believe I'm friends with such a manipulative person." We laugh. Then, when we've calmed down a bit, I add, "Also, I'm interested to find where I'll be working."

My purpose for being in the Big Apple was not only to see my best friend but to start work at a Cuban community center, across the river, in Union City. Since redirecting my life path, I had hung up my dreams of being Erin Brockovich, but with

better fashion sense: uncovering injustice, sticking up for ordinary folk, and generally sticking it to the man. This idea was why I had enrolled at law school in the first place, but I soon realized that I could help people in a more practical way. My purpose, it turned out, is more grassroots and down to earth. And I didn't need to struggle through university to do it.

I stayed with my grandma in Miami when I dropped out of law school. And, while I was figuring my life out, I volunteered at the Cuban community center, where my grandma, or Tia as she is known in our neighborhood, worked. I quickly moved into the management team and was even paid, eventually. That's where I heard about this job, off Bergenline Avenue. I had a Skype interview and they liked me, so here I am. Excited, and ready to give it my best shot.

Staying with Tia showed me my purpose and reconnected me with my Cuban roots and culture that I hadn't explored and really didn't understand. Before moving to Miami, I didn't speak Spanish and I couldn't dance salsa.

“Go and be brilliant,” Tia said to me at the airport as I fought back salty tears. “And remember whose granddaughter you are.” Well, that finished me off and bawled my eyes out for most of the flight.

Chapter 2

Nathan

I had totally forgotten that Kendra's friend was staying over. But, no worries, I'm flat out with the swimwear shoot tomorrow and I probably won't even see her again. So, yeah, fine. No need to put too much effort in. I'll try and be nice though.

It's great to be back in NYC. I always like coming home. I even enjoy the rude taxi drivers and say stuff to get them going on a rant. I'll mention something about the Yankees not being up to standard this season and away they go. Some people might find that annoying for the forty-plus-minute trip from the airport, but I think it's entertaining. I just sit back, not really listening, and know that I'm home.

It's good of Ken to help me out again. I have other assistants I can call on, but with Kendra, she knows me. I'm going to miss being able to use her when she starts being a lawyer. Having Kendra as an assistant means I don't waste energy communicating. I don't need to pretend to be polite. Some people get huffy with me. I get it. But I don't have time for chitchat. When I'm working, I am totally focused on the job and I don't pay attention to distractions, such as conversation or being concerned with other people's feelings.

The shoot for Poolside Exclusive Resort Wear, a company supplying high-end leisurewear to people who can afford luxury cruises, is on a yacht in the harbor. The date has been brought forward, so I had to skedaddle back from The

Maldives, sharpish. I check the weather forecast app on my phone. It looks good, at the moment, but there's a lot riding on this job. The clients want the Statue of Liberty as a backdrop against a clear blue sky. I suggested they could Photoshop it in afterwards, but they were adamant about authenticity. Fine. My plan is to get out on the river as early as possible, get the shots of the collection I need, and get back asap. No mucking around. I have the run sheet and brief. I've booked the lights and extra stands, that I'm picking up in the morning, before heading down to the marina.

My kit is spread out on the bed. It's the best way to check everything. I always arrange cameras, lenses, light meter, filters, battery packs, reflectors in the same order. If something is missing, I can see straight away because there will be a gap. It's second nature now. I plug in my laptop, recharge the Canon and the Nikon. Put in spare batteries for the flash. I clean each lens meticulously. One tiny speck of dust could wreck a whole day's work. I check the tripods and pack the reflectors and a couple of diffusers. I have a mental picture of my equipment. Check, check, check. We're all good to go. Everything looks set. I leave my bags all ready for the morning and check the time on my watch.

I could take the girls out for dinner. That would be a nice thing to do, wouldn't it? I'm starving. We could go to Marcello's for pizza.

I open the bedroom door. Kendra and her friend are still on the sofa deep in silly girl chat. I don't know if I should interrupt. They're laughing. The friend, what was her name?

Rosa? She has beautiful hair. She really does. She could feature in a shampoo commercial. Kendra catches me peeking.

“Nate, we were just thinking about food. Do you want to join?”

“I was just thinking about food too.” I exit my room, shutting the door behind me. “Marcello’s? My treat.”



We sit at the curved booth seat at the back of the cozy Italian restaurant, which is handily located just around the corner from the apartment. Gino says hi and opens a bottle of house red. He pours a measure into my glass for me to taste. I nod my approval and he fills each glass halfway, then places the bottle on the table.

“Nice to see you again, Mr Nathan. And with two beautiful women. You lucky man.” Gino winks then turns his attention to other customers.

“Italians, huh?” I say, a little embarrassed when Gino is out of earshot.

“He right though,” says Kendra not missing a beat. “We are beautiful, and you are lucky.”

I glance over at Rosa who also seems a little embarrassed by the waiter’s comment. She catches me looking and smiles shyly. Gosh. She has a bewitching smile. Very natural. Soft. Warm. She could do commercials for toothpaste. Or lipstick. Maybe perfume? Who would she wear? Something exotic.

“To New York and new beginnings,” says Kendra raising her glass and looking from me to Rosa. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” we say together as we clink our glasses.

“Nathan?” It’s Kendra.

“Yeah.”

“You’re staring.”

“Oh. Sorry... I’m ummm... preparing for tomorrow... Mentally.”

“Rosa. Please don’t be offended by my brother,” Kendra says, sipping her wine. “He’s photographing you... in his head.”

“I’m not,” I lie. “Okay... I was just looking at your angles.”

“My what?” Rosa says. Is she alarmed? Or interested?

“Nathan sees the world through a lens... all the time... whether he’s holding a camera or not,” says Kendra laughing. “He can’t help it. It’s a mental disorder.”

The pizza arrives. We share one of Marcello’s Super Gigante Funghi e Prosciutto with extra cheese and a Super Gigante Capriciosa with extra olives. Marcello’s pizza never disappoints. We agree that there’s far too much food, and we’ll never get through it. We can take the leftovers home in a doggy bag.

“Well, yes, Kendra. I see what you mean,” I say, addressing Kendra’s rather cruel observation of me, as I help myself to a piece of pizza loaded with ham, mushrooms, and long strings

of mozzarella. “It happens in my mind, so yes to mental. But disorder? It’s more like the opposite. When I look at anything, I order it. Or organize it into frame...” I take a sip of wine as I think, then I try to explain how composing images is hardwired into my brain. “It’s not a conscious thing... I don’t even know I’m doing it.” I turn to Rosa who is tucking into a cheesy slice of heaven. “Have you ever considered modeling?”

“No! No...” Rosa says, wiping her mouth with a serviette. “Are you kidding?”

“You have good facial bone structure.”

“Thanks.” Rosa looks across to Kendra quizzically.

“You do, though,” says Kendra reaching for another slice of pizza.

“You could be a plus size model... You have the right dimensions.”

Both girls put down their pizza, mid-bite, and stare at me as if I am Voldemort.

“Oh yeah. Well, maybe I am more than a set of dimensions...” Rosa says, her eyes flaming in the candlelight. She is so animated. I wish I had the Nikon and the Z 85mm f1.8 S. I am captivated. Her words are flowing in a tirade, but I’m not really engaged with the content. The lighting is perfect. If she lowers her chin, that would be the money shot. “... and maybe I am a total person and not just a body.”

Silence pervades our booth after that. There are no leftovers, unfortunately. I get the check. We walk back to the apartment.

I am behind the girls who are arm-in-arm a few steps in front of me. I get the feeling I've done something wrong, but I can't imagine what it might be.

Back at the apartment, it's not that late, but I have an early start, so I say goodnight.

I have only just closed my bedroom door when I hear a high-pitched yelp. I rush out to see what's going on. My sister is lying on the kitchen floor, her face is contorted in pain. She's clutching her ankle.

"Do you have any ice?" asks Rosa who is bent down beside Kendra.

I launch myself across to the fridge freezer and pull out a bag of ice cubes.

"What happened?" I ask as I wrap some ice in a tea towel.

"I'm an idiot. I just slipped over. Whomp! And I'm down," Kendra says pushing herself up to a seated position against the cupboard.

I kneel down and gently press the icy tea towel against her ankle which is already swelling.

"I don't think it's broken," Kendra says taking off her shoes. "I think I've just sprained it. Ouch. But it hurts."

"We should take you to hospital," says Rosa.

"No. No, it's not that bad. I'll be okay," says Kendra attempting to stand. "I just rolled it. Look... I'm fine."

"Doesn't look that great, sis."

Rosa and I help Kendra hobble to her bedroom. She lies down on her bed. Then I dive into my bathroom to fish around for painkillers. I grab a packet of something that could do the trick and a bottle of anti-inflams. I take her a glass of water. Rosa is sitting on the bed beside her.

“Nate. I don’t think I can do the shoot tomorrow,” Kendra says looking up at me with apologetic eyes, and I suddenly remember what she is talking about. “Can you get someone else?”

She’s right. This has left me in a bit of an inconvenient fix. There are a couple of people I know in town, but... “Gosh. It’s a bit late, er...” I pull out my phone and scroll through possible contacts. “Look, I can manage on my own. Don’t worry. I’ll figure it out in the morning. Get some rest, okay.”

I turn and walk out of the room, but when I get to the door, Kendra says, “Rosa. Would you be able to help out?”

“Well, I’ve never been on a photo shoot before. I wouldn’t know what to do.”

“It’s easy. Isn’t it Nate?” Kendra looks directly at me. “You could show her.” Then she turns her attention to Rosa. “It’s just carrying his stuff around, really. And, you know, following orders. Most of the time you’ll be standing and waiting, not actually doing anything at all.”

There’s a moment as this idea hangs in the air like a bubble before it pops. Taking Rosa would save me ringing around trying to get someone on such short notice. She’s totally inexperienced, but she looks strong enough to carry the kit.

And she obviously has initiative and a functioning brain. Communication could be an issue. I hope she doesn't bring that attitude I saw at dinner. But honestly, there's not much she can mess up.

“Okay,” I say still standing at the door. “I have a taxi booked for six a.m. Be ready. I'll talk you through everything when we're in the cab.”

“Ah, Nathan. Kendra...” Rosa sighs. “If you really can't get anyone and you think I can do this, I'll do it.” She looks at me with resignation, then turns to her friend. “How can I refuse and not help out when you have both been so kind.”

Chapter 3

Rosa

The alarm was harsh this morning. But my eyes pinged open, wide awake, in anticipation of the day ahead and it didn't take long to get ready. I'm in the lounge waiting for Nathan when he surfaces at 5:50. Morning dialogue is minimal.

I'm slightly nervous about what's in store for me. I have no idea what I'm going to be asked to do, but I resolve to do my best to be helpful and not get in the way. I help Nathan with his bags and, as we stand side by side, going down in the elevator, I attempt to erase a niggling resentment left by his comment about me being 'the right dimensions for a plus size model'. I mean, what the hell? Let it go, Rosa, I tell myself. Let. It. Go.

The taxi is waiting on the street outside. It's early but traffic is mounting up already and we get honks on the sidewalk as we load in the gear.

"Right. Rosa. Listen. Count the bags every time we get in or out of a vehicle. There are six. Make sure there are six at the end of the day. That's your number one task. Got it?"

"Got it."

We drive to an address not far from the apartment to pick up more equipment. I stay in the cab while Nathan disappears inside and comes out a few minutes later carrying two long bags that look heavy. He lays them along the floor behind the

driver's seat. I have to lift my legs so he can slide them under. Nathan gets in and turns around to face me.

“Right Rosa. How many bags do we have now?”

“Eight.”

“Excellent. You're doing well.”

Really? Is this how he's going to be the whole day? I'm so close to snapping out, 'Excuse me, Mr Best Friend's Brother Grump, I am not five years old.' But I don't. I bite down hard on my lip and send out a silent prayer to my grandma to give me patience and strength. It's only one day. I can handle it.

At the marina security check, Nathan presents his ID. The officer checks his computer, then lifts the barrier allowing us through. We unload the eight bags. The taxi drives away. Nathan runs off to find the yacht we'll be working on, and I wait with the bags.

The yacht is called Esmerelda and she is beautiful. Her sleek streamlined hull is white with blue stripes. She has two entertainment decks: upper and lower. Esmerelda is a billionaire's boat. I can't imagine the price tag. I hope I don't break anything.

Nathan helps carry the gear on board where there's already the buzz of activity. The crew are easy to spot in their smart blue polo shirts. There are other people too. Models, hair and make-up people, dressers, and technicians, I guess. Nathan leaves me on the lower deck with the bags, while he goes to find the art director and Poolside reps.

The sun is glinting on the calm morning water, evaporating wisps of mist. Ferries and other boats chug by against the New Jersey skyline. I breathe and take a moment to wonder at the beauty around me. I'm smiling and having to suppress my inner 'Wow'.

"Rosa! What are doing? Get those bags up here..." No prizes for guessing who that is. Nathan calls down to me from the top of some steps. Right. I see how this is going to be. I'd better keep my head down and get through to the end of the day without being thrown into the harbor.

Esmerelda is released from the jetty, and we slowly make our way out into the mid-channel. No more time for sightseeing. I help Nathan secure the light stands with sandbags, and tape down the cables. He clips a diffuser to each lamp and turns on the power releasing a flood of sunshine onto the back of the upper deck. I stand up too quickly cracking my head against a tripod, catching my hair in the adjustment screw of the heavy steel bar. I wrangle free, leaving a trail of dark strands still stuck in the mechanism, hoping Nathan hasn't noticed my humiliation, but, of course, he has and doesn't say anything. He rolls his eyes and walks back to where his camera is set up for the first shot. I rub the sore place of impact on my head where I'm sure a small mountain is beginning to grow. A sound system pumps out thumpy dance music. It's not helping my aching scalp.

A tall, ultra-thin woman in high heels sashays over and kisses Nathan on each cheek. "Hey Nathan, I was hoping it would be you." Her shiny blonde hair flows over her

shoulders. She flips it and pouts, catching me full in the face, making me flinch. My eyes water immediately.

“Ingrid!” says Nathan at the same time as my ‘Ouch’. “Great to see you.”

“Ahhh, sweetie!” Ingrid looks down at my streaming eye. “Do you have an allergy?”

“No. I...” I’m blinking rapidly, shielding my face away from the hair and the bright lights.

“I have eye drops,” Ingrid says, cutting me off. “I’ll get it for you.” But she doesn’t move. “Nathan, is this your new intern? She’s super cute!”

Nathan glances over to me briefly. “No. This is Rosa. She’s my sister’s friend. She’s helping out today because Kendra has hurt herself. Tripped.” I raise a hand in greeting but Ingrid’s eyes are firmly fixed on Nathan.

“Oh no! That’s awful. Is she in hospital?”

“No. Sprained ankle. Nothing serious.”

I tidy the empty bags, stuffing them one inside the other, then hanging them up, out of the way. The lump on my head is throbbing: my eye, still streaming.

“Give her my love, won’t you?” says Ingrid as one of the stylists comes over and says something about lip gloss. “Catch up soon, okay?” Ingrid holds a hand beside her head, telephone-like, and smiles as she walks away. “Call me!”

“Sure...,” says Nathan, peering through the viewfinder of the camera mounted on a tripod.

The boat gains momentum and continuous rising and falling motion in the surging river currents. Nathan places me approximately where the models are going to be, between the spotlights, so he can get a light reading. I’m a lot shorter than the three leggy girls who are lined up to one side, so I stand on tiptoes, wobbling slightly, trying not to fall over. I feel ridiculous and it seems like an age until Nathan gives me a thumbs up, and I scurry away behind the camera again, where he hands me the round flat bag.

“Okay. This is the reflector. The idea is to stand out of camera shot and angle the light where I tell you. Mostly at the model’s face, but... just listen to what I say, and yeah... We’ll be fine.” He doesn’t sound convinced but nods over at the art director and Poolside rep. “So, the first outfits are almost ready.” Nathan checks his watch. “We’ll do each one separately, then I’ll group a few together... Got it?”

“Got it.” I unzip the bag and what looks like a mini spring-loaded trampoline falls out onto the floor. One side is gold and the other is white.

“Rosa. What are you doing?” Nathan frowns as I grapple with the reflector, trying not to look like a dimwit, but the shiny circle seems to have a mind of its own. Finally, I have the pesky disk under control, and I go over to stand beside a spotlight ready for instructions.

Ingrid is the first model. She is poised on the mark between the lampstands. She tosses her hair around which streams out on a soft breeze. I stand well clear, but Nathan waves his hand at me, indicating I should get closer. He scowls as he looks at the screen on the back of the camera.

“Yes,” Nathan says to Ingrid and not me. “Just like that. Tilt to the left. Good. Now turn to me. And flick your hair. Once more, please. Good... Rosa. Give me light on the face please.” I try to get the reflector to angle the light. “No. higher. Today, if that suits?” Some onlookers start giggling. I’m at the front, getting hotter and more flustered under the lights, trying to get the stupid reflector to behave. “Alright. Hold that. Lean forward... a little more. That was great. Thanks... Alright. Next one.”

Nathan clicks through the images on his camera while the next model gets into position. He makes some adjustments. The morning light magically illuminates the blue-green Statue of Liberty against a New York backdrop. I see why we are here. It’s a stunning location. The wind starts to pick up. The reflector is acting like a sail and flaps around. It’s like a skittish horse and I’m holding its reins.

In the next shot, the models lean backwards over the shiny chrome rail. Click. Hair streaming out, carefree, cherry lipstick smile. Click. Click. Oversized sunglasses, red, white, and blue; stars and stripes. Click. Painted red fingernails reach high; high-pitched laughing. Click. So gorgeous; so glam. Click, click, click.

I watch Nathan in action. He is a perfectionist alright, directing the models with precision and capturing every moment with cool confidence. Despite his grumpiness, I can't help but admire his command. He is captivating; in his element; driving the show. And I am in awe. I surprise myself with the attraction of his manly form. I notice the width of his shoulders and his muscular arms and the way his combat pants fit around his...

“Rosa! Can you concentrate for five minutes?” Nathan's voice borders on exasperation. “I need light on her face, now, please!”

Holding up the reflector again and I give myself a shake. I couldn't feel more out of place. Surrounded by the tribe of Barbie long-legs who are all size zero and absolutely drop-dead, I feel fat and ugly. Did I regret having the extra slice of pizza at dinner last night? Maybe. But, as Tia says, we are all beautiful in our own way and we shouldn't compare body types. Still, I feel awkward, dowdy, and not pretty at all.

The models have all had their individual shots. Now they group together. The art director, who is introduced to me as Sebastian, talks with Nathan. These are less formal. The models are supposed to be guests at a yacht party. They are given colorful liquid in elaborate glasses. When the models aren't being photographed, they stand to the side looking bored and sulky until they get the signal, then they smile and laugh and pretend they are having the best time imaginable. Nathan moves among them, taking low-angle shots, close up. He's like a prowling lion. The models show him what they've

got, creating shapes with each other, leaning out over the shiny chrome rail, using it to push and pull on. Nathan nods to Sebastian who calls 'break', and the models go back to bored and sulky.

The wind is very brisk now and the models are beginning to shiver in their skimpy outfits. Esmerelda sways with the undulations. The models huddle together in hoodies and jackets, then they are herded inside to the cabins.

Clouds are scudding over the clear blue perfect morning. The increased motion of the yacht causes a strange wooziness to wash over me. Nathan tells me to pack the lights away. It helps to have something else to think about apart from the rise and fall of the boat. He tells me he has the outside shots he wants. The sky quickly darkens, and raindrops splat on the deck as I struggle to get the reflector back in its bag. It clearly doesn't want to miss out on anything and springs back when I squish its sides together. Nathan bounds over.

"Like this," he says and with one elegant movement, he has twisted the reflector in on itself and, magically, it is a perfect size and shape to slot into the bag. Zipping it up, he briskly hands it to me.

"Right. Set up in the master cabin for some close-ups. Just one lamp on a low stand." He checks his watch. "We'll have time before we get back to the marina." He gives my shoulder a hearty slap as if I'm in a sports team.

"Great." I try for enthusiasm, but I don't quite hit the mark. I'm exhausted. I'm feeling seasick and I just want to lie down

in a room that's not moving. Why did I agree to this? To help Kendra out, I remind myself. It's only one day. I can do it. It doesn't matter about Mr Grump with the camera and his bad manners. I'm not trying to impress him. This is not my life. I am doing a favor for a friend. That is all.

Inside the cabin, a huge round bed dominates the space beneath a massive sparkly chandelier. I resist the urge to curl up on the shiny peach, ruched, tasseled bedspread and, breathing deeply, begin setting up the lamp and tripod. Cautiously, I unzip the reflector bag. The folded-up disk springs to life, but like a longstanding adversary, I'm ready for it this time.

The models are marshalled in one at a time and are directed to sit or stand. I'm more confident with where the light should be, and, without wind, I'm able to angle the reflector accordingly.

"Great, Rosa. That's good. Hold it there. One more... And thank you." Nathan's words of praise resonate way more than they should. The illogical disproportionate weight and meaning create an inner glow that I can only explain with my emotional sensitivity and growing weariness.

The models are dismissed. I pack up the equipment into, what I hope are, the correct bags. I send up a silent prayer to whoever may be listening that we are heading back, and my obligations to Mr Grump are almost complete. If I wasn't so exhausted, I would be excited about being soon released from my servitude as photography assistant dog's body lackey.

Nathan sits on the edge of the bed and reaches for his laptop. He flicks a memory card from one of the cameras and clicks it into the side of the machine. His movements are swift and elegant. His face is impassive; attention laser focused on the photos displayed on the computer screen. The rain taps lightly on the window. I'm aware of my breathing. We are alone. I stand near the door not sure whether to leave him to it or not.

“Want to see the shots we've taken this morning?” he asks, indicating the computer screen in front of him. I nod shyly, trying to ignore my unsettled stomach. I sit beside him on the bed and watch the images flash up on the screen. My heart races. Could it be the onset of motion sickness or this grumpy, yet sexy man being so close? I'm acutely aware of his presence beside me. Despite his abrupt aloofness, I can't help but feel drawn to him. We are very close now, and I'm almost breathless at the way our thighs are touching. I struggle to focus on the images displayed on the screen.

Nathan coughs slightly and turns to me. “Thanks for filling in today,” he says, his voice softer than before.

A blush creeps up my cheeks at the unexpected intimacy. “You're welcome,” I mumble, my heart pounding. His kind words take me by such surprise that I blink several times to recover. I swallow hard, feeling both elated and self-conscious. Nathan smiles, causing creases to fan out from the outer corners of his clear, intelligent eyes. What color were they? Green? Hazel? A mixture of colors radiating from a golden-brown center. He holds my gaze, making my heart race even

faster. The smile disappears as he looks away to the screen again.

The intensity is broken by a knock at the door. Sebastian pops his head in to announce we're almost at the marina. The rain has stopped drumming on the window, but my heart still drums fast in my chest. Nathan closes the laptop and slides it into its sleeve. I stand and start collecting the bags, hoisting them onto my shoulder, one at a time. The boat lurches and I stumble, almost losing my balance.

"Careful," Nathan says quietly, reaching out to steady me. I feel his hand linger on my arm for a moment longer than necessary before he withdraws it. He coughs slightly and says in his usual gruff tone, "We should probably get the gear on deck." The shutters of professionalism come down as he regains composure. The moment between us dissipates like the swirl of mist on the morning river. Was there a moment at all, or had I just imagined it? Am I simply overreacting to a few kind words from a very grumpy man?

Chapter 4

Nathan

The Poolside shoot went better than expected. Rosa wasn't as much of a hindrance as I thought she was going to be. To be fair, she was actually helpful and managed to get everything back in the correct bags without me having to say anything, so yeah. Good for her.

We're in a cab on the way back from the marina. Thinking about what needs to happen next. I'll stop by the studio to drop off the lights and stands. Then I'll have time to go through the final selection for Poolside and print off the hero shots on the large format printer.

I turn to Rosa to fill her in on the plan for the afternoon, but she's out cold on the back seat. Her mouth is slightly open, and her cap has slipped across her eyes. There's something about her that reminds me of a kitten, all curled up and cozy. I decide not to wake her. Whatever I have to say can wait.

It was awkward seeing Ingrid today. She's pulling the 'Let's still be friends' card. It's inevitable that we're going to run into each other. I mean, New York is a big city, but not in certain circles. It's not like I can vet the models I'm going to be working with. I'll just keep my distance and pull the 'oh-so professional' card if we do run into each other.

The taxi stops outside the photo studio. Rosa snorts herself awake.

“Good morning Sleeping Beauty,” I say as I open the rear passenger door. Rosa almost flops out onto the parking lot. “Wakey wakey. Let’s get this gear inside.”

Rosa shakes herself and grabs the bags which are on the seat beside her. She slings them onto her shoulder and follows me through the side door. I flick on the lights and turn on the printer to warm it up. It hums to life and alternately blinks green and red lights.

“I’m sorry. Did I miss something?” asks Rosa as if she’s in a dream. She blinks and looks around the high-ceilinged industrial space.

“What? What do you mean?”

Rosa seems bewildered by my response. “I thought we were done for the day and going back to the apartment.” She squeezes her eyes tightly shut and rubs her head.

“No. No, the shoot was just the first bit...” I thought she knew. Then I remember that we hadn’t had that conversation. “Right. We just have to put the gear away. I’ll go through the best shots, get the go-ahead from Sebastian and the marketing people at Poolside, then we’ll print out the top ten that are going to be displayed at the launch party. Then we’ll head back to base. Got it?”

“Ah. Well.” Rosa sighs. “I had plans to sort my life out today.” Rosa takes her phone out of her pocket, turns it on, and studies the screen.

“Sure. Absolutely. We’ll be done here in... ooh, about an hour.” I don’t know why I say this when I know full well, we’ll be here for at least three. That’s the time slot I’ve booked anyway.

Rosa purses her lips together, bitter displeasure bristling. “Alright,” she says through gritted teeth. “One hour.”

The studio is a shared space and part of a photographer’s collective. The fifty-something members who set it up have access to rental equipment, darkrooms, and studio space. There’s a kitchen and coffee machine. It works out well for networking and professional support. All members are specialists in particular fields of photography. We have mutual respect. Sometimes I catch up with the others while I’m in New York, but this usually happens by accident here at the studio.

Rosa puts her phone away in her jacket pocket and rubs her head again.

“Do you want a coffee before we crack on?”

She nods with resignation and follows me down the hall.

Later in the afternoon... or is it early evening? It’s hard to say. Because of the lack of windows in the studio, it could be day or night. Sebastian and the Poolside reps seem happy with the end results, and I email the final file when I hang up the conference call. Rosa is coiling cables and putting away the last of the equipment that’s been checked, cleaned, and zipped up for the next job.

All we need to do now is print out the nine selected images OA size. This is a two-person job because when the print comes out, the paper is delicate, and the poster-sized photo needs to be laid flat to dry.

I'm also going to hang some black and white prints that I'll start today and finish tomorrow. It's amazing what you can do with digital photos and prints, but there's nothing like getting in the dark room and mucking around with developing solutions.

When you see the ghostly picture appear on the paper, it's like magic every time. I have huge respect for the pioneers of photography, such as Cartier-Bresson, Man Ray, and Ansel Adams. These people trailblazed the way forward. When I'm working in the darkroom with the same technology as them, I feel connected to the past and my heroes. You can always tell a darkroom print. There's something in the light quality and depth of black, you don't get with digital.

My phone rings. It's Ingrid.

"Hi Nathan," she says casually. "It was so great to see you today." I don't say anything but wait for her to fill the gap in conversation. "I was wondering if you're going to the launch party."

"Yes. Yes, of course, I'll be there."

"I'm so pleased. Maybe... well, we have a lot to talk about, so I guess I'll see you then."

She hangs up and I'm left wondering what she means. We do not have a lot to talk about. She walked out on me, as I remember. And I didn't try to get her back. End of, in my books.

Ingrid is the picture of perfect girlfriend, but man, she's hard work. When she left, I realized the effect she had on my life. It was as if she wanted my attention All. The. Time. It was exhausting. I have moved on. And I have filled any space in my life, vacated by Ingrid, with work. I literally don't have time for a romantic attachment, at all. Even if the most perfect woman in the world walked through my door today, I wouldn't notice. I am too focused on my career. Photography is my world and there's no room for anyone else.

Chapter 5

Rosa

I want to sleep for a million years. It's past ten p.m. and we've only just got back to the apartment. The day just went on and on. Nathan kept telling me we were just about done, and then there was something else that needed doing. Oh my. Then, instead of coming straight back here, we had to go to the event company office and drop off the prints for the launch party. And, of course, Nathan needed to chat with Sebastian about where to hang them and how the black and white photos were going to fit. And what was I doing this whole time? Standing there like a prize lemon.

I can't wait to see Kendra and have a shower. And something to eat. I feel faint. My blood sugar has hit such a critical low, that an internal alarm is sounding, Danger. Danger. You are about to pass out. Danger. The emergency granola bar that I had found in my jacket pocket disappeared hours ago. Nathan ordered a takeaway in the taxi, and we picked it up on the way home. The tantalizing tangy smells of sweet and sour sauce are causing me to salivate. I feel as if I could inhale the entire contents of all the neatly packaged foil trays stacked in the brown paper bag.

When we get back to the apartment, I gently knock on Kendra's door.

"Hi, it's just me..." I hear her rustling about in her room. A muffled voice asks me something about my day. I push open the door, go in, and flop down on the bed beside my friend.

“Kendra. Your brother is not human,” I say with a sigh. She laughs.

“Oh no! Look at you. Rosa. You’re broken.” I rub my head where I hit it on the light stand. I imagine a lump like a Tom and Jerry cartoon, red and pulsating.

“I feel broken.” My whole body aches. Then, remembering I am starving, I drag myself to the kitchen, telling Kendra, “We have Chinese food. I’ll bring you some.”

Nathan disappears into his room answering a call. I load up a couple of plates and take them into Kendra’s room. We eat in silence and I try not to shovel in the tasty fried rice and sweet and sour sauce, too quickly.

“I feel bad, Rosa. I should have warned you,” Kendra says, after a while. She hands me her plate and I finish off her leftovers. “He’s a bit of a workaholic.”

“Is that his only problem?” I put the empty plates on the bedside table.

“Well... It’s the main one...” Kendra leans back on her pillows. “I suppose, I’m used to him and his regimented ways. He’s that much older. He’s my big brother. You know, someone I’ve looked up to all my life. It’s true, I idolize him. And he’s always been there for me... But, yes, he’s a nightmare.” Kendra laughs. “I wouldn’t want any of my friends going out with him. Imagine? That would spell disaster.”

“Well, don’t you worry,” I say falling sideways on the bed beside my friend. “There’s no chance of that!”

We laugh too loudly, and I accidentally knock Kendra’s sore ankle, which makes her yelp and makes us laugh some more. I say good night to Kendra, and I head for the shower and bed. While I’m tucked up in the sofa bed on the mezzanine, I check my messages. There’s one from the community center coordinator.

Hi Rosa,

Sorry for the short notice but your position has been postponed until the end of October. Apologies for any inconvenience caused. We’ll be in touch soon.

I had to read the words a couple of times, and because I was tired, the impact didn’t hit straight off. The job that I had come to start within the next couple of days, is not actually starting for another couple of months. Even though I am more tired than I can ever remember, my head is buzzing with, What happens now? I thought my life was on track. I had a plan; a job; a new start. Now what?

Then I must have fallen asleep.

— e e —

The following morning. The apartment is quiet. Nathan’s probably gone already. I listen at Kendra’s door then knock gently before I go in with two mugs of tea. I sit on the bed and tell her about my job situation.

“So, I guess I am going to head back to Miami tomorrow.”

“Oh, Rosa,” Kendra says softly. “Do you really?” She puts down her mug on the bedside table and sits up. “Let’s weigh up your options.” Kendra says ‘options’ as if they are tarot cards laid out on a table, each one with a possible future for me, when I turn it over. I could only see one option, and that was going back to stay with Grandma. “You can go back if you want,” says Kendra. “Or you could sign up at a temp agency.”

“Okay. I’m listening.” I sip my tea, beginning to feel more positive.

“There are a few around here, but I’ll give you the number of one that I’m signed up with. They’re really helpful and they have loads of different kinds of jobs. It’s not just admin-type work. They do all sorts. It could be fun and you’ll meet people.”

“Yes. And I might look for an apartment close to the center,” I say, fully cheered up. “So, when they are ready for me, I’m there.” The possibility of not going back to Miami is taking shape. “And maybe I can volunteer some hours a week before I start my job there. That would be good, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah. That’s right. And you can hang out with me some more.”

“Kendra. I love you. You’re a genius!”

“Yes. I am. Thanks.”

Kendra gives me the details of StellarTemp, the temp agency she was signed up with, as well as a couple of others that she

says have a good reputation.

I feel so much better. My energy has returned, and I am looking forward to my future. I am in New York where options and possibilities are endless. All I have to do is reach out and grab what I want. Alicia Keys is singing in my head once again.

Buoyed up on my wave of optimism, I make an appointment at StellarTemp, polish up my CV, and print it out on Kendra's printer.

The StellarTemp office is a couple of subway stops away. It's easy to find on the first floor above a shop front. I press the doorbell button which is clearly marked beside the StellarTemp logo. The door is released with a buzz and a click.

Up the stairs, StellarTemp is one of two doors on the landing. I knock, turn the handle, open the door, then tentatively enter. A friendly middle-aged woman smiles up at me from her desk. She is typing something on a laptop as I approach. Holding up an index finger, she mouths, "One minute." I wait, respectfully, by the door.

"Now, how can I help you?" says the woman, peering over the rim of her frameless glasses.

I say who I am, and that I have an appointment. She reaches over to a stack of clipboards and hands one to me. It's a questionnaire. She asks me to fill it in. I have my CV printed out, but she says to hang on to it and give it to the personal agent directly.

“Take a seat over there, and when you’re done, I’ll pop you through to Magda, one of our agents. Alright, sweetie?”

The questionnaire is straightforward enough. The first page asks for personal details and contact information. I write Kendra’s address in the box provided. The next page is concerned with education. I fill that in. On the next page, there are several sections requiring details of experience. I fill in the top section with details of the Miami Cuban community center. Then I think for a bit to see if I can come up with anything else. My mind is blank. I write the details of the community center where my job will be starting, and note beside it, ‘starting soon’. On the next page, there are a series of questions about ideal job type, hourly rate expectations, and what skills I have that I could offer a prospective employer.

I read over my application and take it back to the receptionist. She smiles, nods, and indicates that I should leave it on the desk, while still typing. I go back to my seat and wait. After a moment, the friendly receptionist stands, walks around to the front of her desk, picks up my clipboard, and flips through the pages. She smiles over to me and walks through a door to adjoining office spaces. She doesn’t close the door behind her, and I can hear low murmuring voices. I can’t make out what they are saying.

The receptionist appears again and escorts me through a glass door to another office. I nod hello to a younger woman who is seated behind a desk. Her dark hair is cut short over her ears, but a long fringe sweeps low across her forehead. She looks up when I come in.

“Ahh, Miss Martinez, thanks for coming in. I’m Magda. Take a seat.” I sit on the chair in front of her desk. “I’ll be your personal agent at StellarTemp. Tell me what you’re looking for. What’s your ideal job?” She flips over the pages of my clipboard. “And what’s your current rate? I don’t see it here.” I tell her my role at the community center in Miami had been mostly voluntary. I hand her my CV. She makes a growly noise in her throat as she scans her laptop screen. “Currently, we have openings for receptionist, administrative, warehouse, customer service, event staff, retail, data entry, marketing, IT Support...” She trails off as she peruses my CV.

“Maybe events?” I say with a bright smile. “I’m good with people and I have experience serving food and beverage.” This was sort of true. I had handed out slices of cake wrapped in serviettes at my cousin’s wedding.

“Great,” says Magda without looking up. She takes my clipboard, flips over a page, and writes something on it.

“Just looking at the calendar here.” She points to her screen. “This opening was popped in this morning... Urgent... Yadah, yadah. There’s an event tomorrow night in Greenwich Village... venue, art gallery. The caterers are looking for wait staff. Seven hours... Time and a half if it runs over.” Magda lifts her head, refocusing her gaze on me. “Would that be of interest?”

“Yes. Sounds great,” I say with my best enthusiastic, confident voice, hoping I don’t sound desperate or manic.

Magda grabs a Post-it note, scribbles down the address, contact name, phone number, and some other numbers. She hands it to me saying, “Here are your login details. I’ll make a note in your profile about your outstanding commitment to customer service, alright?”

“Thank you.” I look down at the scribble to make sure I can decipher it before I leave.

“Okay, Miss Martinez. There’s your start.” Magda stands to shake my hand. “Do well and we’ll have more work for you.” She sits down again and twitches a half-smile my way. “We post jobs every day, so be sure to log in and check vacancies every morning before eight a.m., okay?”

Out on the street, I message Kendra with my news. She replies with a smiley face. I walk slowly, thinking about how great it is to be in New York. I have a job. For one evening, at least. Like Magda said, this was a start, and I will be fine until my real job begins. It’s going to be fun, and I’ll meet people. Next thing on my to-do list is to find my own apartment. I didn’t want to feel like I had overstayed my welcome at Kendra’s. Although I knew she would be horrified if she thought I felt any pressure to move out. It’s just that I need to stand on my own two feet and properly arrive. It’s hard to do that when you’re kipping on someone’s couch. Even if that someone is your best friend.

I smile to myself, feeling positive and upbeat. I’m trying to remember something I heard about steering your own ship or being the star of your own movie. This is me, Rosa Martinez.

Living my best life and making my way in NYC. I treat myself to a chili dog with extra mustard and onions and eat it on a bench in the park across the street. I am here in New York and I'm feeling wonderful.

Chapter 6

Nathan

The studio was empty when I turned up early this morning to print out the black and whites. Then Jarrod turns up when I'm in the kitchen. We chat over coffee. He's working on marketing material for an architect. Very sleek. Contemporary industrial. Berlin brutalist almost. It's a big break for him. He's excited. I tell him about the Poolside job.

"Luxury yacht and a cruise around the Statue of Liberty? Sounds like fun," Jarrod says between sips of his cappuccino.

"The launch party is tomorrow if you feel like coming," I say, leaning against the kitchen counter. "There'll be drinks and entertainment. The fun continues."

"Ah thanks, buddy, but I'm busy. Got a hot date." Jarrod beams. "One of Ingrid's friends, Greta. Do you know her? She is gorgeous. Woo."

"Great! No, I don't. Maybe..." I say, vacantly, not wanting to pursue a line of inquiry. I wasn't even interested in my own love life, let alone anyone else's. But Jarrod is obviously keen to divulge and I feel trapped and compelled to listen.

"Well, we met some time ago, but I've only just plucked up the courage to ask her out." Jarrod smiles, not picking up on my prickly discomfort. "Hey, maybe we could meet up somewhere after? You know, you, me, Ingrid, and Greta?"

"Umm, that's probably not a good idea," I say looking to end the conversation. "Ingrid and I broke up. Some time ago,

actually.”

“Aw, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“No. It’s fine. Don’t be sorry. I’m not.”

I change the subject before Jarrod can probe for more details, then I wish him luck before removing myself to the sanctuary of the dark room.

Under the naked red light bulb, I use tongs to submerge each print in a tray of water, the final stage in the developing process, before hanging them up to drip dry. I’m happy with the way they’ve turned out. I found a pack of thick textured paper. The edges are rough and look torn, which adds interest. The images have an aged appearance as if they are from a fashion magazine from the sixties: all sharp contrast and funky angles, yet still glamorous. The models have a Brigitte Bardot quality in the way their hair is big and wild, billowing out in the wind. A memory of Rosa struggling with the reflector causes an involuntary smile to cross my lips. She tried her best against the wind. Was I too hard on her, I wonder? Why was I having that thought now? The low viewpoint, with the chrome rail on a dramatic diagonal across the page, is visually strong. Dynamic. Then it rained and we were alone in the cabin, Rosa was beside me on the bed: her thighs against mine. Her soft, dark brown eyes: so disarming, yet strong and fearless; trusting yet challenging. There was that moment when I felt completely under her spell. I had to shake it off before my heart melted. And when she was curled up asleep in the back seat of the taxi, well, I just wanted to...

The photos will look great at the gallery, hung with bulldog clips as an installation, on steel wires that I've crisscrossed in a small room off the side of the main area. It's going to look amazing. And they will complement the ultra-glossy, high-color prints of the Poolside launch party. It's great to be given free rein artistically while doing a commercial job. Sebastian trusts my judgment. He basically sold the idea to Poolside Exclusive, and they were all for it. And the venue is perfect. Not too flashy. The One Two One Gallery is the right mix of edgy sophistication and smart business sense located upstairs in a converted warehouse in the Village. It really doesn't get much better than this. I'm buzzing.

The final part of this job is photographing the guests and company bigwigs at the launch party itself. I wouldn't bother going if it wasn't paid work. Launch parties tend to be a parade of wannabes all trying to get noticed; clickbait for followers; getting snapped with A-listers to improve ratings; tweets and squawks for Titter or Pretend Friendbook. It all gets a bit cynical. Or could that just be me? My brief is to get some good marketing shots of famous faces and entertainment for Poolside and for placement in fashion magazines and social pages. I'm happy to be behind the camera, and it's only for a few hours, until I can slide away unnoticed.

Chapter 7

Rosa

The contact at the catering company, Signature Dish, said I should arrive at the venue at five p.m. for a staff meeting and run-through. I had to wear black trousers, not jeans, and black shoes, not sneakers. They provided the shirt and apron. No phones. No jewelry at all, and that includes rings, necklaces, bracelets, earrings, nose studs, etc. Staff could leave personal items in the van which will be locked throughout the event. Everyone would need to sign a non-disclosure agreement. Staff are strictly not allowed to talk to anyone about guests or activities at the function. Privacy is paramount at Signature Dish.

There were other items, on the online information, about staff expectations. Courtesy not friendliness. When serving guests, behave as if you are furniture. Do not enter into conversation. You are here in a professional capacity representing Signature Dish. Leave your personality at home.

I'm early at the venue but the Signature Dish truck is parked where they said it would be. I introduce myself to a young man who is checking regimented racks of glassware inside the open door.

"Welcome, Rosa," says the man as he hands me a black polo shirt and black apron. He says his name is Ricardo. He tells me it's a good idea to change in the truck and leave my things there. "Don't worry. Your crappy phone and bag will be quite

safe.” He laughs and shakes his head. Then he directs me to a door and tells me to go up to the first floor and ask for Kim.

Upstairs, The One Two One Gallery is written in lights above an ornate Art Nouveau-style glass double door. The space is high-ceilinged, airy, and has whitewashed brick walls. A DJ is setting up in one corner. There’s a runway podium and banners. I look up at the large glossy photos and almost fall over with surprise as I recognize the bikini-wearing models in their red, white, and blue, stars and stripes outfits against the greyish green of the Statue of Liberty, murky brown Hudson River, and scudding grey clouds. Their hair whips around their faces and their bodies make fluid shapes against the rigid chrome boat rail. The pictures capture the energy of being outside on the water, in the elements. And, of course, the models look fabulous in the clothes.

“Excuse me, miss,” says a gruff voice behind me. I stand aside allowing two men to carry in a trestle table. They set it up against a wall.

Someone notices me and says, “Over there, love.” I follow their direction and join a small gathering around a short woman with tall bright red hair.

“We’ll wait for a few more before I begin,” she says, looking at her watch and then the screen of her iPad. I gaze around at the gallery bustling with activity. I recognize Sebastian from the photo shoot, but I’m too shy to say hello. He is busy simultaneously directing someone, checking his phone, and signing something.

“Right, it looks like everyone is here. Let’s start. I’m Kim. I’ll be here at the refreshments table. This is my spot. I don’t move from there. Guests don’t come here. This is for staff to load up the trays and to circulate. If a guest comes to the refreshments table, it means that you are not doing your job. Do not let that happen, okay?” There are noises of assent. “Good.” She smiles. “Guests are expected in thirty minutes. There are one hundred and eighteen who have RSVP’d, but that doesn’t really mean anything.” She snorts a laugh. Her eyes flick down to her iPad. “They get a welcome glass of prosecco and canapés. Then they get topped up by you. Understand?” She makes eye contact with each of the six staff members. “Good. This is the run sheet. Here we go... There’s mingling, drinks and canapés for thirty; speeches for fifteen; then the fashion parade, which will be up and down the podium here. A photo op followed by a drag show for thirty. More mingling, drinks. Everything done by eleven. Pack down, clean up and we’re out of here by twelve.” Kim checks her phone. “Make sure you get your timesheet signed before leaving tonight. Anyone new? Come see me now.” Kim scans the faces in front of her. “Great! Have fun,” she says with a smile, which instantly turns to a stern frown. “But not too much.” A collective laugh bounces around the gathered uniformed staff.

I hadn’t seen Nathan for a couple of days. I wondered if he would be here tonight. We hardly saw each other at the apartment and when we did, either he was leaving or I was.

We passed each other in the kitchen and said hi or bye. There was no conversation unless it was a conventional pleasantry.

My focus was finding a new home. Kendra was still housebound, so I went out exploring the city by myself. I had signed up on a few rental property sites and met with agents to view prospective apartments. The range and standard of 'inhabitable' was loose and free from set guidelines, I was learning.

As I help unpack the glassware and place bottles of bubbly wine in ice buckets, the thought of seeing Nathan causes a wave of excitement that makes it difficult to line up small bottles of mineral water in tidy rows. Kim tells me to help bring wrapped platters of tiny hors d'oeuvres from the truck. The DJ cranks up some drum 'n' bass beats. The floor is cleared. Boxes and crates are tucked away under the starched white tablecloth of the trestle table. Sebastian has changed into a plain dark blue shirt and is mentally composing himself to receive guests. The Poolside representatives arrive and shake hands with Sebastian. They seem pleased with what they see. All smiles and bonhomie congratulations on a job well done.

I'm relieved that Sebastian is too distracted to notice me. I certainly didn't expect him to. He is a busy and important person. We only met that one day at the photo shoot and then briefly afterward at his office.

A group of sophisticated well-dressed people arrive. The women have salon-perfect hair and makeup. I try not to stare at their glamorous outfits with coordinated heels and bags. I

circulate with my tray loaded up with Champagne flutes. One by one the tray is emptied, and I go back to reload at the refreshment table. Kim gives me an encouraging smile before I'm off circulating once again.

More guests arrive in twos and threes. Then a man enters alone. I stop and stand still. It's Nathan. He's wearing a khaki green flight jacket and jeans with Doc Marten boots, reminiscent of Tom Cruise in 'Top Gun'. His camera bag is slung across his body. He is so handsome it takes my breath away. My tray wobbles and I almost lose the eight full glasses that teeter and clink together, before I breathe and steady myself. Get a grip, Rosa. You are here working, remember.

Kim didn't notice my potential disaster, and glancing around, I don't think anyone else did. Feeling more composed, I glide around the room without making eye contact. I'm doing my best to be on the opposite side of the room to Nathan. But then I accidentally look straight at him. He catches me and does a double take. And, oh no, he's coming over. Waves of embarrassment are rising to my cheeks.

"Hey Rosa," he says surprised. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Hi Nathan," I whisper, trying not to move my lips like a ventriloquist. "Ummm. Look. I'm working..." I hiss as if I'm a spy. "... and I'm not meant to talk to anyone, okay."

"Yeah, sure. I understand. No problem. I'm working too." He walks away.

More people arrive and, from the way other people respond, I assume they are important in the world of fashion. Is that the editor of Vogue? And, gosh, could that be Cara Delevingne? Zoe Saldana? And some of the Kardashians? I try not to stare.

The DJ stops the music and introduces the host of the evening, Patti Driver, CEO of Poolside Exclusive Resort Wear. The crowd politely applauds.

“Welcome, and thanks for coming out to the sneak peek of this year’s fabulous Poolside Exclusive collection. The theme this year is, of course, Red, White, and Blue, celebrating the indomitable spirit of this great country, America.” She pauses here for more enthusiastic clapping. Someone whistles. Teary-eyed, she mentions the company’s commitment to quality and design, and how she has so many individuals to thank, it would be impossible in the limited time slot available, “So you people, just know you are one hundred and ten percent appreciated. Muah”. More noise of applause. “Don’t forget to pick up your goody bags from Javier by the door.” She waves at a young man who waves back. “Everyone gets a complimentary limited edition Poolside Exclusive designer scarf... So, without further ado, let’s start the show!”

The overhead lights dim, and spotlights shine down the podium runway. Music pumps out of the speaker stacks. Dry ice plumes atmospheric mist and a projected backdrop plays a loop of ocean waves and a scudding clouded sky. One by one, ten models enter the gallery space and strut onto the stage like living breathing red, white, and blue carnival bunting. They each pose, turn, flip their hair that streams out in front of the

industrial-sized fan stationed off to one side. They strut some more then arrange themselves in a group against the shiny chrome pretend yacht railing underneath Nathan's poster-size photos.

The crowd seems impressed and shows their appreciation by clapping, stomping, and whistling. A horde of photographers snaps away at the guests and the assembled models who are still posed on the podium. I notice Nathan who is photographing the photographers and the reaction of the guests. He moves with stealth and ease. And I'm off in the opposite direction, circulating with a platter of mini quiches using the loud, excited guests as a barrier. I'm avoiding Nathan on purpose. But then I turn, and I know that I am caught in his viewfinder. I hold my breath and Nathan slowly lowers his camera. Then I'm surrounded by people who help themselves to the contents of my platter. In a moment it's empty apart from a sprinkling of crumbs.

The models form a line and prance off the catwalk and out of the gallery space to rapturous applause. The music changes and three drag queens climb onto the vacant stage. Two of them re-enact the seminal scene from Titanic, which causes the room to howl with laughter.

"Now that we have your attention," one of the drag artists purrs into the microphone. Then she laughs and says, "Maestro. Hit it!" The intro to 'I am what I am' plays and the queens assume the start positions for their routine.

I want to watch the show, which is hilarious. I'm trying not to laugh. My platter is empty, so I make my way back to the refreshments table. Kim exchanges my empty plate for a chilled bottle of prosecco and a folded white linen napkin that I drape over my arm mimicking the other wait staff. I'm on the lookout for glasses that need refilling.

Halfway through the drag queens' next song, 'Native New Yorker, I notice the gallery doors open and the models come back in, this time they are in their own clothes. They mingle with the guests and receive hugs and kisses.

I'm standing beside an elegant older woman, wearing improbably high stilettos, who has handed me her glass to refill. I'm pouring out the bubbly wine, conscious of the effervescence racing to the rim, trying to control it with the angle of the pour, when someone knocks my elbow and a great whoosh of fizz explodes from the neck of the bottle and shoots over the glass, missing it completely, and causing the elegant woman to shriek with alarm. Horrified, I watch the splash of prosecco spread out a soaking, dark wet patch on the woman's skirt.

"I'm so sorry," I gasp almost in tears, using the white napkin to dab away the wetness. "Let me dry that for you."

"No! Please don't. It's a Chanel, dahling, and it's ruined!" The woman throws up her manicured hands.

I'm trembling with remorse and distress. The commotion has instantly drawn attention from the drag queen show on stage to my desperate, miserable mopping.

Fortunately for me, Kim is at the scene and intervening. “Ma’am. Please accept our deepest apologies. We are more than happy to compensate for any cleaning bills or garment replacements.” She gives me a nod and I seize my opportunity to remove myself from the excruciating situation.

Someone has been quick with a sponge to address the puddle on the floor and most eyes are now directed at the entertainment, once more. I head back to the refreshments table where I steady myself and take a breath. I am mortified by the experience and glance back to the spillage area where I notice Ingrid laughing with one of the other models.

“Just stick to the hors d’oeuvres, babe.” Kim is stoney-faced.

“I’m so sorry. It was an accident. Someone knocked my arm.”

“I know. It’s okay. It happens all the time. I’m on it. We’ll pick up the dry-cleaning tab. It’s fine. Now...” Kim smiles at me. “Take that tray. Put on your happy face and go circulate.” She winks.

Very carefully, I negotiate the tall groups of chatting fashion people, like an obstacle course, eyes down, trying to predict potential danger, balancing my tray on one hand. I turn a corner and there’s Nathan. He’s talking to Ingrid and the other model.

I try and backtrack away, but Ingrid exclaims, “Hey, isn’t that your assistant from the shoot, Nathan?”

Nathan catches my attention. He looks tense and uncomfortable.

“Yes. Rosa. Kendra’s friend,” says Nathan. “She helped me out.”

“Oh. Rosa. That’s right. So nice to see you again. How’s your allergy?” Ingrid asks me, flicking her long straight blond hair back over her shoulder. A reminder of it whipping my eye causes me to flinch. Then she turns to her friend and says, “Last time I saw Rosa, her eye was all puffed up. She could hardly see. Poor thing.” I offer the group the prawn tail vol-au-vents without making eye contact. They all refuse. “Yeah, so Kendra,” Ingrid goes on. “How is she? She broke her leg or something.”

“She’s fine,” says Nathan. “It was only a sprain. She’s back on her feet again now.”

I move along on my way, but I can hear the conversation continue behind me.

“Ah, Kendra. She’s so amazing.” Ingrid’s voice cuts through the party noise. “She’s the little sister I never had.”

I see Nathan just once more. He’s chatting to a gorgeous woman who could be an actor or model. She tilts her head and looks fiercely into the lens of his camera. He takes her picture several times from different angles. Are they flirting? I’m doing my best not to notice, but I keep looking over. What is wrong with me?

Chapter 8

Nathan

I leave the launch party early. It's not really my scene. And I don't want to be around Ingrid. She's behaving as if we're still together. It's a bit awkward, but I'm polite and I try and keep her at arm's length. But photos of us pictured together will be in the magazines and social pages, so anything I say is sure to be discredited. The camera never lies? Well, sometimes it does.

I walk home rather than take a cab. It's only a few blocks and I enjoy walking sometimes. It's a good way to clear my head. I'm restless. Walking in the city at night is serene. I like watching people. Well, of course, I do. I'm a photographer. I notice things. Stories are playing out all around me. There are infidelities and betrayals. A man follows a woman out of a bar. They argue on the sidewalk. Her face expresses pain. He lowers his voice and reaches out to her. She turns and walks away and doesn't look back. He stands watching her go for a moment, then returns to the bar.

Further on I pass two people kissing in a doorway. Did they meet tonight? Have they been together for years? They are in love, I think. A new love. They are wrapped in that perfect fleeting feeling when your eyes meet another's, and you are captivated by them, and you want to know everything there is to know about them and all you can think about is kissing them... I stop.

That was what it was like for me tonight when I took that photo of Rosa. She looked directly into my lens. And my soul. It was like a bolt of lightning. An electric charge. There was a moment there in the crowded gallery where there were only the two of us. Nothing else existed.

She is so beautiful. She has no idea. And that is part of it. Her eyes challenge and protect, and yet they are vulnerable and defensive. There is something so real and honest about her. It's as if she can see right through the fake and the phony. And it's as if she can see the real me. The man behind the camera.

I wanted to grab her and kiss her and take her by the hand and say something crazy like, 'Let's get out of here! Right now!' What would she say? She would think I'm a madman. Maybe I am.

Also, she is my kid sister's best friend. Not a good idea. In fact, isn't it an unwritten law? Your kid sister's best friends are out of bounds for anything remotely romantic.

At the traffic lights the signal says, 'Don't walk' in red. I wait for the command 'Walk' to light up in green, then I cross the street. In my head, Rosa is laughing at me. I feel like a fool. I am an adult person in charge of my emotions. I can deal with this. On my own. Solo. It's best for me to live without messy entanglements. I'll delete those photos of Rosa. Not tonight. But soon. It's best. For me.

Distance is the best way I know to reset and get myself together. Thankfully, I have to leave for another assignment in

a couple of days, a fashion shoot in Milan. I'll probably hang out in Italy for a few days then I'm off to one of the Hawaiian Islands. It's a good thing I'm out of town for a while. I might take a few days' vacation while I'm in Hawaii. Chip the rust off my surf skills. Chill out in a beautiful place. On a beach. And when I come back, Rosa will have moved out of the apartment, and everything will be... normal? Boring? Bland? Colorless? No. Everything will be as I want it. Clean. Clutter-free. Uncomplicated. Living my best life in my bachelor pad. Yup. Sounds perfect.

Chapter 9

Rosa

Things are falling into place for me. I found a place to rent close to the Cuban community center. It's a shared apartment with three other women who seem really nice: friendly. My room is tiny, but I can make it like home. I don't need much. And I'm excited that upstairs from the center, there's a dance studio so I can keep learning salsa. I'll probably be there every minute that I'm not working.

Volunteering was a great idea. I got to know everyone ahead of time, so now I feel like family. I was a little shy about speaking Spanish, but if there's a word I don't know, I just say the English word, and someone will translate for me. Everyone is so kind. I am improving every day.

Now I have regular hours, I'm not serving at events so much anymore, although I'll do the odd one. The money is good and it's after hours, so it fits in with everything.

Kendra has fully recovered from her sprained ankle injury, and we meet up for coffee or drinks sometimes. She's loving her role with Langwood Law. She says it's hard but she's getting loads of autonomy and has full support of a mentor who, she says, is brilliant.

Last time we met up, she had the latest edition of Vogue with her. She showed me the swimwear feature with Nathan's photos of the Poolside Exclusive range: stars and stripes; red, white, and blue. Then she flips to the social pages.

“And look! Here’s Ingrid with Nathan. Aren’t they just the most adorable, glamorous couple?” Kendra says, sparkling.

I nod and try to smile. Of course. Why wouldn’t I? They are ‘Mr and Mrs Perfect’, just like it says in the caption. The photos remind me of how just out of reach Nathan is. I have put him out of my mind. And my heart. He is a world-renowned photographer, pictured in the celebrity pages of international magazines, and I am a community worker. You’ll see my picture on the staff noticeboard or community newsletter. We’re poles apart in every way. I don’t even know why I’m unsettled and sad about seeing his picture with Ingrid.



I’ve been to the market and bought a ton of vegetables. I’m planning to cook for my roommates tonight. I call Tia to get her recipe for Ropa Vieja. She makes it the best.

“Hola, Abuelita,” I say when the call is picked up.

“Who are you calling ‘abuelita’? You make me sound old, Rosa.” We laugh. It’s good to hear her. I miss my grandma so much.

We talk about what’s happening in her world and we exchange news.

“Enough about boring stuff,” says Tia. “Tell me about your love life. What’s going on there?”

“Nothing, Tia! Gosh.” I’m taken aback and defensive. There’s absolutely nothing to report in the romance department.

“But you are salsa dancing,” she goes on. “This is the recipe of love. Salsa and hot salsa make super hot salsa.” She thinks this is hilarious.

“Grandma,” I say in the most serious voice I can manage. “Romance is not on the menu at the moment. I am way too busy anyway.” I think for a moment about the guys I meet at the dance studio. A few of them are attractive and I enjoy dancing with a man who knows how to move, but most of them are gay and those who aren’t are in relationships so, No Go.

“You’re still hung up on whatshisname... the brother of your friend, whatshername?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.” I’m suddenly flustered. “Okay, Tia. Speak soon. I gotta go.” Grandma can be so annoying. Why did she have to bring up Nathan? I am doing absolutely fine on my own. More than fine. I am thriving. It’s only when I hang up the call that I realize I’ve forgotten to ask about her recipe. I don’t want to call back. I’ll make it up.

My apartment building is in the back streets of West New York, a short walk to the river where a grand expansive view takes in Manhattan, across on the opposite side. That’s the other New York. The one that people imagine. The New York that I inhabit is not Manhattan. It’s the suburbs of small-time, humble families. People who scrape together a living. People who sometimes need help. That’s where the Cuban community

center fits in. And where I have found a job that I love because it is more than a job.

It's hard to put my finger on exactly what I do. I begin my week by printing out and displaying the weekly planner, which is loaded with activities and classes for adults and children. The center has a main hall, which is in continuous use, from seven a.m. for Breakfast Club when working parents can drop off their kids for a nutritious breakfast before a courtesy bus takes them to school. Then the space is set up for Young at Heart craft projects or Fit 'n' Fab until lunchtime.

The commercial-grade kitchen is also a training center, offering a pre-apprenticeship certificate in catering and food tech. It's for anyone, but most of the attendees are high school kids who don't get on with high school. We have a great track record of our kids going on to full apprenticeships or paid work. We even get our success stories coming back to give inspiring talks to teenagers who might, otherwise, be getting into trouble.

“Stick with the program,” Carlos says, smiling broadly. “I didn't think I could boil an egg and now I'm working with the best chefs in Hell's Kitchen. It's hard work, but so cool.”

The new intake of trainees sits with their arms folded in resistance.

“I was just like you when I first came here. But you have to give it a chance. What have you got to lose, anyway? You just might end up loving it!”

“Thank you, Carlos,” I say turning to the six-foot-six giant, sometime basketball player, sometime chef. “Vamos chicos. Let’s go boil some eggs!”

I help out with admin in the office. There are all sorts of hoops to jump through in running a community center and annual expenses that need to be funded including my job. So, whenever there’s a possible grant opportunity, Liza the center coordinator, calls me in and says something along the lines of, ‘Hey, Rosa. You’ve been to law school. Can you put together a proposal for such and such?’ And I respond with, ‘Yes. I was at law school for two whole years. I’ll give it a go.’ Or Liza says, ‘Hey Rosa, we have our fifty-year anniversary. Can you write something for the local paper about what we do here? Maybe interview some of our people? I don’t know... Something upbeat.’ And, of course, I say, ‘Sure. I’ll give it a go.’

So, I’ve been pretty busy at the center since I started. I like to think that what I’m doing means something: has a positive impact, no matter how small.



In my apartment kitchen, I prepare the Ropa Vieja, the traditional Cuban dish made from shredded beef, onions, tomatoes, red bell pepper, pimientos, parsley, garlic, and olives that I bought from the market. I’m guessing the proportions of my grandma’s recipe, but I think it looks alright when I’m stirring it in the pot. Then I remember grandma sloshes in

some white wine, so I slish it too, plus an extra bit, just because.

Ropa Vieja's literal translation is 'old clothes'. I was little when my grandma told me, and I refused to eat it for months.

"I don't want to eat old clothes," I'd wail at the horror of chewing away on my grandma's cotton dress and the imagined taste of it in my mouth. When you're five, everything is literal.

I tell this story to my roommates as I'm serving up our dinner. They laugh.

"It's really delicious," says Delores, from Puerto Rico. She's a fitness instructor, working at the gym down the road. She sends most of her money home to her parents.

Donna and Marlene are a couple. They share the biggest room at the front of the apartment, overlooking the street. Both nurses at the hospital, they made a pact never to bring work home. Delores and I are grateful.

We all agreed to cook for everyone once a week depending on the nurses' roster, which is set in stone. Delores and I can easily accommodate and organize our times around them. We eat our shared meal sitting on cushions around the coffee table in the lounge. The kitchen is too small for table and chairs and there's no dining area, so this is the most comfortable option.

I invited Kendra, but she's busy tonight. Never mind, there will be other times for sure.

"How's the article coming along? The one about the center." Donna asks me, bringing my attention back into the room.

“Good. I think. I’ll need to read it over tomorrow and let Liza take a look, but I’m pretty happy with it. I even tracked down the woman who started the center fifty years ago. She still lives around here. She’s a cool lady. Tough, you know.”

“She must have seen some changes,” says Marlene.

“Sure has. She says that it all started from her apartment. She says that she almost closed her doors and shut people out, she was so overwhelmed. But then other people helped out and they got organized, became a registered charity... eventually. An amazing story.”

“I think it’s the sort of story people want to read,” says Delores.

“I hope so.”

We finish our dinner, do the dishes, and tidy up. There’s a salsa class starting soon, so I grab my bag and my dancing shoes and head out.

Chapter 10

Nathan

Hawaii is wonderful. I could have easily stayed here longer. But my vacation has come to an end and I'm in Honolulu waiting for my flight back to JFK.

I feel good. I've been surfing every day. Eating good food and watching the most amazing sunsets on warm beaches with nothing to bother me except the soft sea air and the endless waves, rolling in steady sets, from the endless blue Pacific. I had forgotten how much I love beach life.

The shoot, marketing content for The Lanai Island Wellness Retreat, a purpose-built luxury eco lodge, was pure pleasure. The structure, mindfully making use of a natural curve in the hillside, offered photogenic angles at every turn, making my job a breeze. I don't think there was a dud picture on the roll. There were no bad angles or areas I needed to block out. The extensive grounds include a beautiful garden full of exotic flowers and trees that backs onto a wild native forest and the Koloiki Ridge Trail. The trail winds up to a viewpoint with 360 views down to the ocean and islands beyond. Being up there makes you feel like you really are on top of the world. The owners of the resort are aiming to appeal to the high-end market; eco-tourists who want an authentic natural experience with all the spa resort extras. The peace and serenity were, at once, invigorating and draining. I stayed an extra night after the shoot wrapped because I realized how tired I was, and also

because it was such a beautiful place, it was hard to drag myself away.

With no other job lined up, I rented a 4x4 and a board and bummed around with the surf crowd. Met some cool surfers from El Salvador. It was insane what they were able to do on boogie boards.

I was staying in a beach shack where the only Wi-Fi was in the restaurant area. It was only available a couple of hours each day. I checked my messages. Most of them weren't interesting, but there was one from Alfie which caught my attention. I checked my watch and calculated if it was a good time to call him in New York.

Alfie's an old friend whom I've known since we were both hustling for work years ago. When we first arrived in New York, we were roommates and would often work as a team: him as a journalist and me as photographer. In a time before people called us to check availability, we would phone around agencies, magazines, and newspapers, trying to get our work noticed. We did so many freebie jobs, and work on spec, in the hope that someone would read our pieces and like them enough to pay us money. When that happened, it was such a buzz seeing our work published in print, especially in national or international press. What we submitted was always high quality, so, although it took way longer than we thought it would, we got to the point where editors would start calling us. That's when we knew we had made it. Alfie got snapped up by The New York Times Magazine, while I chose to stay freelance. But there's always the next new bright kid on the

block, so I hardly ever turn work down because, you never know – the phone might stop ringing.

Alfie says hi, and we catch up a bit on what's been happening.

“I saw you in Cosmo,” he says. “... with Ingrid, looking gorge.”

“Ah, yes,” I respond remembering the Poolside Exclusive launch party with a sense of unease. “We're not together anymore.”

“Ah, shame. You look like New York's most stylish couple. Should I be sad?”

“No. I'm not... She's doing her best to get me back, though. It's a bit awkward.”

“Okay, buddy. I get it. So that's why the extended leave in Pe'ahi?”

“Kind of.” Trust Alfie to read between the lines. He was right, in a way.

I steer the conversation back to the point of the call and he asks if I'm available to cover a piece about the New York Cuban community. He fills me in with some details.

“Sounds interesting,” I say, sipping my cold beer and watching the surfers catching the waves.

We arrange to meet up when I get back to New York and go over the layout. He's mapped out a double-page spread.

“I’d like some candid shots of real life,” Alfie says. “Up close and personal with what it means to be Cuban and a New Yorker. Capish?”

“I’m there.” By the time I finish my beer, I’ve already said goodbye to Hawaii and looking forward to my next assignment.

Chapter 11

Rosa

The fiftieth-anniversary celebrations of the Cuban Community Center are planned and prepped. The activities and events are based on a survey I sent out to our regular members and facility users, to gauge interest and expectations of how we should mark the fifty years.

Feedback was overwhelming. And now it's down to me, because I was the one who asked the question, to organize a program of events for the whole year. I did not think that I was capable, or indeed worthy of such a task, but I am loving it. Although I feel as if I have created a monster that is taking on a life of its own.

Of course, I was a mess at the start. It seemed as though I was chasing my tail until I got my systems in place and some kind of plan to coordinate the various ideas. Now I even have a team of helpers, who are amazing. But still, I'm running around trying to keep on top of everything.

Turns out the article I wrote about the center turning fifty has sparked interest in the wider community. Yesterday I received a call from a guy at The New York Times Magazine who wants to come to the center and interview people. Nothing formal, he says. He wants to see what it's like raw, real, and everyday. I ran his idea past Liza and got the green light, so he's stopping by later this week.

I call Kendra and we arrange to meet up for a drink after work at a Mexican rooftop restaurant we both like in Midtown.

I have so much to tell her about what I'm doing, but mostly, I just want to relax with my best friend, laugh, and talk about nothing. I treat myself to a ferry crossing from Edgewater. It's more expensive than taking the bus but, when I cross the water, it always makes me feel like I'm going to another place, even if it is just the Hudson River. Being on the swirling choppy waves, the color of cold coffee connects me with Nathan. I know it sounds corny and I know I should just leave his memory in the past. But it's almost as if he is still with me. I carry him in my heart. I'm not sad about it. It's comforting somehow, and warm. Of course, I would never admit this to anyone. Especially not Kendra, which seems disloyal because she is my best friend.

When I disembark at Midtown, I lock away my images of Nathan and tuck them in a secret part of my inside world, like a photo or a cut-out from a magazine, that I can come back to any time, unfold at my leisure, and gaze at. No one needs to know.

Kendra is already perched on one of the brightly painted stools at a high table on the outside terrace, overlooking the river and surrounding rooftops. We've both been so busy lately, this is the first time in a while that we've managed to coordinate our times.

"Hey, chica," Kendra says as she envelops me in one of her monumental hugs. "I've missed you."

"Me too." I pull away and look at her. She's as pretty as ever, but she now has an added layer of sophistication that suits her.

“You would think that now we live in the same town, we would get to hang out all the time... but, no! Damit!” We laugh.

“Yes, Señorita I’m-Running-The-Show-Now Martinez,” Kendra says settling herself back on the stool. “I feel as if I’m the one who is being shelved.”

“Lies, lies, lies.” I brush her words away with my hands and we laugh some more. The waiter comes over to take our order.

“Two margaritas, por favor,” says Kendra, without consultation. “What?” she asks when she sees me looking wide-eyed. “That’s what you were going to ask for, wasn’t it?”

“Well, maybe. But it’s the only one,” I say with gravity. “I have a big day tomorrow.”

“Oooh, do tell.” Kendra leans forward on her elbows, giving me her full attention.

“A journalist from The New York Times Magazine is coming to do a piece about the Cuban community and wants to do and kind of ‘day in the life’ thing about the center.”

“That’s fantastic! Rosa, I’m so proud.”

“Thanks. He even read my article and said there’s a bigger story to tell with a wider appeal,” I say excitedly.

Kendra beams at me and shakes her head slowly from side to side. I can tell she is so happy for me. “Okay then. You need one fancy drink, some tacos, and an early night.”

“Yes ma’am.”

We talk about what Kendra has been up to. She tells me she is going to a conference in Washington for a few days.

“It sounds more exciting than it is,” she says. “It’s a requirement of Langwoods. They have their head office there. It just ticks a few boxes. I really just need to attend the meetings and workshops. Show my face and that’s about it.” She flies out in the morning but not too early.

I want to know about Nathan, but I don’t ask. If Kendra offers information, I have practiced a look that says, ‘I’m mildly interested because he is your brother, and he is nothing more to me than that. Ever.’ The cocktails arrive.

“There’s one more thing,” Kendra says. “And I hope you don’t mind.” I lean forward, thinking she’s about to tell me that Nathan is on his way and will join us for a cocktail. “Do you remember meeting Ingrid? She was one of the models at the photo shoot you helped out on.”

My heart sinks, but I try not to show it. “Ummm, vaguely,” I say, enjoying the salty rim of the frosty margarita glass.

“Well, I’ve seen her a couple of times recently and I think she could do with some solid girl support.” I wait for Kendra to continue. “She’s really down about her breakup with Nathan. She feels as if she’s made a terrible mistake and wants him back.”

I want to say something like, ‘There, there. Boo bloody hoo.’ But I don’t. I say, “Oh dear.” I try to arrange my face into an expression of concern.

“She’s so nice, Rosa! And generous,” Kendra goes on, although I really want her to shut up now. “And I think, if Nathan has half a brain, he will open his eyes and see what he’s given up and get back with her asap.” As I twirl a loose piece of hair and stir what’s left of my drink, sadly considering this idea, Kendra jumps up and says, “Ahh, here she is now.”

Kendra greets Ingrid who looks as if she has stepped out of a beauty salon or off the pages of a magazine. She has on huge dark, square-rimmed sunglasses, even though the sun went down a while ago. Her long hair is parted in the middle and hangs loose like a pair of curtains. She’s wearing a long camel-colored wool coat over a sheer white shirt and beige figure-hugging pants. Multiple strands of gold chain loop around her neck at varying lengths. She is the icon of drop-dead gorgeous. I compare Ingrid’s outfit with what I’m wearing and instantly regret it.

“Rosa! Hi,” says Ingrid reaching for me like a Death Star tractor beam. “When Kendra said you were coming tonight, well, that’s a two-for-one deal, right? Lucky me.” She air-kisses me at a distance, laughs, and pulls up a stool. She looks around, appraising. “What say we go someplace a bit more fancy?”

I’m just about to open my mouth and say, ‘You know, we like it here’ when Kendra chirps up with, “Yes. Let’s go. Where did you have in mind?”

I check my phone and make excuses about getting back and having an early night before my big day.

“Well, you are allowed to have a life outside work, aren’t you? And Kendra tells me you’ve been doing so well in your job,” Ingrid says with one of her front-cover smiles. “Ladies, I think we should celebrate little successes in life, no matter how small, don’t you?” She bestows her glow onto Kendra and then me. “In fact, this was the subject of my podcast last week.” She pauses and smiles to herself for a moment. Then, she says with renewed vigor, “Let’s go. My treat. What do you say?”

Kendra is looking at me as if I have thrown a bucket of water on her birthday cake. I feel like I’m a big fat stick in the mud, party pooper. I swallow the bitter pill of jealousy as I witness Ingrid hijacking my precious one-on-one time with my best friend. I squirm in a conflicting pang, as I’m made to look like the less-than-generous mean girl. Come on Rosa! What is wrong with you?

“Alright then. Just one drink. It’ll be fun.” I say forcing a smile and grabbing my bag.

Down on street level, Ingrid hails a cab. She has absolutely no difficulty in getting one to stop for her. The contrast between us is thrown into stark relief on the Manhattan street and a derisive snort escapes from me, which I cleverly turn into a cough.

“Ah, sweetie, is that your allergy again? Have you seen a doctor about it? You should, you know. It could be something as basic as your... diet.” Ingrid looks me up and down before she opens the taxi’s rear passenger door and climbs in. Kendra

follows, and I briefly think this is my chance to escape when Kendra grabs my hand and pulls me in after her.

Ingrid leans forward to tell the driver the address, then settles back into the seat. She says something to Kendra that I can't hear. The traffic noise muffles their conversation. I gaze out of the window at the night-time pedestrians hurrying along, up and down the sidewalk.

Kendra turns to me and squeezes my arm. "We're going to a private club," she says, her eyes shiny with excitement. "Ingrid's a member and is going to sign us in! So exciting!" She squeezes my arm again. "Ingrid says that she's seen Beyoncé there with Jay-Z, and Bruno Mars, and Justin Bieber, Scarlett Johansson, and Drake, and who else did you say, Ingrid?"

Kendra turns to Ingrid who says something I can't hear. Then Ingrid leans forward and says, directly to me, "There's a lot of people who try and get in, you know, to see their favorite stars, so... try not to stare." She smiles benignly. "You have to respect their privacy. They're human too, you know." Ingrid sits back in her seat again.

The taxi roars south down the freeway and I'm chewing my lip. I don't care about celebrities. I don't want to go to an exclusive snobby club. I want to eat enchiladas with my best friend and not be caught up with anyone else's stuff. I'm feeling let down by Kendra, who seems delighted by the prospect that I'm appalled by, which is making me shift in my seat with discomfort.

I should be the bigger person and just go with it. I should accept whatever 'it' is and stop being a negative Nelly. The cab stops outside a tall old-style red brick building somewhere in SoHo, I presume, although I'm not really sure where we are.

"The entrance is around the side," says Ingrid as the cab drives away. "You wouldn't know this place was here unless you were... in the know." Ingrid taps the side of her nose and huffs, which could have been a laugh. It was hard to tell.

At this point I'm thinking about peeling off and disappearing, saying good night and goodbye. But I don't. I feel swept along with the pretense of a 'good time' and, as if I am in a dream, I follow Ingrid and Kendra through the door, that has buzzed open, and up the stairs.

Ingrid pushes through a grand double door that opens into a stylish bar - a blend of flamboyant decorative and industrial chic in heavy dark-stained wood and dazzling chandeliers and mirrors. There are a few customers in, but it's not crowded at all. Atmospheric soft jazz burbles away in the background. We approach the bar across the polished marble floor. Ingrid perches on one of the plush deep red velvet-cushioned stools. Kendra climbs up next to her and I struggle to get a leg up on mine. The stool wobbles a bit and I have to clutch the bar to steady myself. The barman comes over.

"Manhattans all round," says Ingrid, taking off her coat and flipping her hair over her shoulders, without asking us what we want. I'm too surprised to say anything and just nod and

smile. I take off my jacket and look around the bar. Kendra and Ingrid are talking together. It's clear I am not included.

"Let's get a table," Kendra says as if she has just noticed there are three of us.

Ingrid makes a noise like an extractor fan, then says with an audible sigh, "Sure, if that's what you want." She slides off her stool and saunters over to one of the round tables off to the side. "Actually," she says when we're all sitting down. "This is a good place to spot celebrities when they come in." She seems pleased, then adds, "Yeah, so in case you don't know... phones away." She flaps her fingers as if shooing a fly. The barman brings our drinks over, placing them each on coasters in front of us. "They don't allow photos here. You know, the way social media is these days... Anyway, cheers ladies." We clink our glasses together and sip our cocktails.

There's a moment's quiet, before Ingrid asks, "So, how's Nathan?" The mouthful of Manhattan almost explodes from my nose. I swallow hard and contain my choking. My eyes water and I cough. Kendra watches me with concern, but Ingrid rolls her eyes.

"He's good, I think," says Kendra. "He's coming back tomorrow for a job. Maybe I'll get to see him before I fly out to Washington."

"If you do, give him my love, won't you?" says Ingrid batting her lashes. "I still feel such a strong connection, you know. As if we're on a break and... I just need to be patient and give him some space. But..." Ingrid smiles at Kendra and

then me, briefly. "... soon he'll realize that we are meant to be together. Don't you think, Kendra? I mean, you know your brother better than anyone. Wouldn't you say that we make the ideal couple?" Kendra looks at her cocktail, thinking of how to respond.

"Yes," she says. "You are both beautiful people." Ingrid basks in this comment.

"Thanks, Kendra," Ingrid says, beaming. "I loved that shot of us at the launch party. The one that was in Hello! that shows us about to kiss. Gosh, they caught such a special moment. I had no idea that picture was being taken. It really is magic, isn't it? I have it here on my phone. Oh, sorry. No phones." She laughs. "That's right."

Kendra is right. They are beautiful people. But I can't help feeling that Ingrid is not the woman for Nathan. He deserves someone... what? Like me? I look across at Ingrid who is tall, pretty, and ultra-thin. She is the opposite of me. And is clearly the kind of woman that Nathan does want. They inhabit the same world. Why am I giving their relationship this level of consideration? Why am I considering it at all? Why is thinking about them together making me miserable? What is wrong with me? I knock back what's left in my glass, finishing it too quickly. My head begins to spin. Suddenly, I don't care about anything anymore.

Chapter 12

Nathan

I meet Alfie in a café over in Union City. We hug warmly. He is one of my oldest friends. It's always a pleasure to see him. He's intelligent, witty; and has a sharp, dry sense of humor. He's perceptive and a damn good writer.

He has set up a meeting at the Cuban community center up the street from the café.

“We're going to be shown around by the woman who wrote the article about the fiftieth anniversary of the center. She's done the research and is happy to introduce us to the people I want to feature. So yeah, that's great!”

I order a coffee, feeling the need to wake my brain up. I arrived last night and crashed out as soon as I hit the pillow. I heard Kendra come in and stumble around a bit. She messaged me sorry for waking me up. I didn't see her this morning and she won't be there when I get back today. She's at a conference or something for work, her message said, and won't be back until sometime at the weekend.

I pick up my camera bag and follow Alfie out and across the street. We walk a few blocks, then enter a brightly colored building with the Cuban flag prominently displayed in the reception area. The building is larger than I expected. There's music and noise and people talking loudly in Spanish, and laughing. A group of squealing toddlers chases each other around in front of the reception desk before they are corralled into one of the rooms down a corridor. A young woman smiles

and stands to greet us. She knows our names and lifts the receiver of a desk phone to make a call.

“Rosa will be with you shortly,” she says, still smiling. It didn’t occur to me that the Rosa she was talking about was the Rosa I knew until I saw her coming down the corridor toward us. My face must have given away all my emotions.

“Oh my! Nathan!” Rosa says, looking straight at me, like a rabbit in headlights, as if Alfie isn’t there at all. “... Sorry...” Rosa looks down, smiling, and attempts to reclaim a professional demeanor. “... I’m Rosa Martinez,” she says, turning to Alfie and shaking his hand. “Welcome to the Cuban Community Center.”

Alfie introduces himself and then he says, “And you already know Nathan?”

He waits for one of us to fill in the blanks, so I say, “Yes. Rosa and I met... Well, Rosa is my sister’s friend and she stayed with us when she first came to New York.” Rosa smiles shyly.

“That’s right,” she says, looking at me. “I was so lucky to have a place to stay and good people looking out for me. Apart from...” Rosa stops her train of thought.

“What?” Alfie and I ask simultaneously.

“I was going to say, apart from that day when I filled in as your assistant because Kendra hurt herself,” she says, sighing audibly. “I thought I was going to die.”

“Ah yes,” says Alfie, nodding sagely. “I know a few people he’s almost killed with overwork. They foolishly misinterpret the word ‘assistant’, which they think means helping out, but really, it’s a euphemism for minion.” Alfie thinks this is hilarious and laughs heartily. “Kendra should have warned you.”

“It wasn’t that bad, was it?” I ask, a little defensive.

“Yes, it was!” Rosa says, suppressing laughter, as we follow her down the corridor to her office at the end. “And Kendra did warn me. But only afterward when it was too late.”

She shows us into the office, which is a small room that she shares with two others, who are both out. She pulls over the vacant chairs for us to sit on. Then she asks if we would like some water. We both say no thanks, but she darts out closing the door behind her. It’s a few minutes before she comes in again. She seems out of breath.

“Are you alright?” Alfie asks, concerned.

“Yes. Yes, I’m fine,” says Rosa as she sits down and gathers some papers into a pile. “If you’re ready, I have a list of people here who are delighted to talk with you. Some of them will prefer speaking in Spanish so I’ll come and be on hand to translate as best as I can.” She takes a deep breath and sweat beads appear on her forehead. She blows out and coughs, then jumps up and runs out of the room. Her deep caramel skin has turned almost pale.

Alfie looks at me. “She doesn’t look well,” he says. “Maybe we should come back another time?” Rosa hears the end of his

sentence as she re-enters, waving her hand in front of her face.

“No, no, no. We’re good to go. I’ve written some background notes for each interviewee,” she says, handing Alfie the pile of paper. “Right, so, if you have any questions, please feel free to ask. We’ll begin in the kitchen. It’s the heart of Cuban family life and the heart of the community center. We’ll meet Alejandro and Valeria. They are a couple who met here at the center. They volunteered in the kitchen when they were still at school.” We stop outside a set of doors with a window in each. Rosa continues. “They’re in their forties now... It’s a true love story.” She looks down at her shoes. Then we go in.

The kitchen is gleaming spotless stainless steel. Two people wearing white aprons are peeling onions, carrots, and potatoes and chopping them on large wooden boards. They both look up and smile when we approach. I take some shots of Alejandro and Valeria working. Together and individually. They are relaxed in front of my lens and don’t seem to mind the camera even when I’m up close.

Next, we are ushered through a door off the corridor where we meet Paula, a sturdy-looking woman who runs the playgroup. Alfie tries to ask questions but is continually bombarded by three-year-olds and their toys. He abandons his interview and ends up on the floor playing with the children and the Lego set. I stand to the side and take some shots of Paula and her staff prepping the art activity. We thank the playgroup adults and children and wave goodbye around the closing door.

In another room, a Spanish language class is winding up.

“The center is not only for Cuban people,” Rosa says when we are in the corridor again. “We have classes and activities where people can come and learn about Cuban culture. And it’s social. The doors are open to anyone who needs help. Or maybe just some company. Everyone is so friendly here. We make it our mission to be inclusive. Everybody is welcome.”

Alfie asks his questions and I try and be as inconspicuous as possible with the camera. I feel as if the piece is not so much about the center, but about Rosa and how her passion and commitment are the new driving force behind the fifty-year-old legacy of Cuban culture in New York.

“And upstairs?” asks Alfie.

“Upstairs is the dance studio,” says Rosa who seems to have recovered from earlier ailments. “It’s not really part of the community center on an administrative level, but dance is an integral part of Cuban life. The saying goes that in Cuba, everyone can dance before they can walk.”

Alfie asks to go up and take a look. There’s music playing as we follow Rosa up the narrow stairs and wait as she pokes her head in around the door. She waves us in. There isn’t a class in progress, only a teacher who is practicing some steps in front of the mirror that extends the full length across the wall. He stops when we come in and walks to the stereo to adjust the volume. Rosa introduces us and he smiles hello. Alfie asks him a few questions and I wander around the space.

“You must dance!” says Raul. “Dancing keeps you young. And it’s impossible not to be happy when you’re dancing.” He laughs. “All Cubans live to be old because of music and dancing. Cuban music is so full of different flavors and elements from all over the place, most of the time we call it salsa because, like sauce, it’s a blend of everything: rumba, African rhythms, jazz, and a whole lot more. I can show you...” Raul goes over to the stereo and selects a track. Then he stands in the middle of the dance floor. “Rosa. Ven.”

“Ooh, no, Raul,” Rosa says, suddenly flummoxed. “I can’t... Not now... I’m working... We have a schedule... Don’t we?”

Alfie shrugs, shakes his head, and walks to the side of the studio to perch on a stool by the window.

Raul takes Rosa by the hand, and they begin. They move as if they have been dancing together for years. Raul leads Rosa and they glide and spin with fluidity to the music. It appears as if it’s no effort at all. I am hypnotized for a moment until I remember I have my camera. They carve out a series of lyrical curves and ‘s’ shapes through the space as if they are weightless sea creatures. They are so natural and elegant in their movements. I stop taking photos, lower my camera, and simply watch, spellbound. It’s beautiful. Rosa is beautiful.

Chapter 13

Rosa

Ouch, my head hurts. I should have escaped when I had the chance instead of being dragged around. After that first Manhattan in that club, everything was a blur. I can't even remember getting home. I woke up in my clothes. Someone has replaced my tongue with a piece of old doormat, which is stuck to the roof of my mouth and causing me to gag. Thank goodness the alarm was already set, and I hadn't lost my phone. How could I get so wrecked when I knew what was riding on today? The New York Times Magazine interview, for crying out loud! What is wrong with me? There are no excuses. I hate myself.

I have time for a quick shower, but my hair will have to stay tied up today. No time to shampoo or style. I turn off the hot water and shiver under the flow of frigid cold to wake me up, but also as a kind of punishment. Remember this, you idiot! And don't do it again!

I pick up a double espresso on my scamper to work. My heart rate is way up as it is, but I need a short sharp caffeine fix and a mallet to the head to properly kick things off. I zoom past Inez at reception. She smiles and asks me how I am, obviously wanting a casual morning chat, which is our norm, but I say, 'Buenos dias amiga', and hurry on to the office.

I only have time to slug back what's left of my coffee and dump my coat and bag, when the desk phone rings to say my guests have arrived and are waiting for me at reception. I feel

as if I'm going to faint. Fortunately for me Liza and Harry are out, and I have the office to myself. I fight back a wave of nausea and blow out a lungful of breath as slowly as I can manage. My head spins. Both hands, sweaty palms down, take my weight on the desk, which I haven't had time to tidy. I scabble around in my bag for a packet of mints, pop one in my mouth, which tastes revolting in the aftermath of the espresso. I'm wretched. I want to cry. I feel disgusting. This is probably the most important day of my life and it's ruined before it's even begun.

Maybe I'm still drunk? I don't know, but I totter down to reception trying not to veer into the walls. I'm fine. I'm fine. But then I look up at the two people waiting for me. One is unfamiliar but the other one is Nathan!

My heart jumps into my throat and I physically have to wrestle it back down where it belongs. Even when I feel it hammering in my chest cavity, it threatens to jump up again. I consciously relax my shoulders and try to act normal and pretend I'm not slowly dying from alcohol poisoning. This is horrible.

I put on the best confident smile I can and greet the highly acclaimed talented professionals.

"Rosa! Hi," Nathan says and moves in to kiss me on my cheek. I duck away conscious of my less than fresh... anything.

"Hi, Nathan! How nice to see you! And what a surprise," is all I can say.

I sneak a sideways glance up at Nathan, hoping he doesn't notice. He looks incredible. Fit. Tanned. Healthy. Not hungover or suffering in any way. Why, oh why does he have to be so damn gorgeous? It's not fair.

I show Alfie and Nathan around the center and introduce them to the wonderful people here who keep things going: the paid and the voluntary. Pretty soon, I forget I have made myself ill and I'm surprised by actually enjoying the morning. I feel very proud of the center and what it stands for. And I do my best to honor that.

Alfie wants to know about the dance studio upstairs, so we take a detour.

Raul is practicing on his own and doesn't mind the intrusion. He's one of my teachers and has won a load of competitions all over the place. He's telling our guests about the history of Cuban music and why he dances. Then, he turns to me and says, "Rosa. Ven."

After my initial shock and protestations have worn away, I take Raul's hand and let his experienced body guide mine. The music carries me and, without conscious thought, my feet step in time through the basic back and forth, side to side, then on to more advanced complex moves. Raul's expertise means I don't need to think: I just follow. Dancing with Raul is magic. I am light. My movements are free and easy. We spin and Raul twirls me out to the side, then pulls me back into his embrace. I want to dance forever. I am so happy.

When the music stops Raul pulls me in for a final dip. My arm extends over my head as he supports me before I regain a standing position to finish. Raul kisses my hand and I'm laughing. When I look up, Nathan is watching. He smiles and doesn't look away.

Chapter 14

Nathan

Outside the center, Rosa, Alfie, and I stand together on the street. It's been a great shoot. I have so much material. My job is going to be hard choosing what stays and what goes. Rosa says how much she appreciates us coming to see the center and says she's looking forward to reading all about it when the story goes to press.

"It's scheduled in a couple of weeks, but I'll email you the date when it's set in stone. You never know. It all depends on the editor," says Alfie, hitching his bag onto his shoulder. "Right then. Rosa. It's been a pleasure and I wish you all the best. We'll be in touch... Nathan. Do want to head back to Manhattan, or..."

Alfie's question hangs in the air for a minute. "Ah, thanks, Alfie. I'm going to..." I absentmindedly sweep my fingers through my hair as I think about what to say. "You go ahead." We hug. "I'll see you soon, okay?" Alfie smiles and waves as he walks off to find a cab leaving Rosa and I standing together outside the Cuban community center. I look at Rosa, who seems distracted although shows no signs of moving away, so I say, "I'm free for the rest of the day. Would you like to have lunch? With me?"

Rosa's eyes dart at mine. They blink as if I have just offered her a week's holiday in Bermuda. Then she smiles broadly and says, "Yes, that would be nice. Just give me one minute... I'll get my things." She ducks in through the door, says something

to the receptionist as she rushes past, down the corridor. In a moment she's back out on the street with me.

She says she knows a friendly place close by, so we head there, side by side.

I get the feeling she is shy. We don't talk much on the way to the small, family-run restaurant in a back street behind the center. Rosa greets the counter staff when we go in. We take up position at a table for two near the window.

"So," I begin, picking up a menu and casually casting my eyes across the lines of text, not really reading, but needing a prop and something to do. "This is your local. What do you recommend?"

"Well. Everything!" Rosa laughs. "It depends on what you want in this exact moment." Her dark eyes meet mine briefly before she looks down at her menu. She smiles shyly.

"You know what? It all looks good. I'll let you order for both of us."

The waiter comes over and Rosa chats to her in Spanish. I can follow the gist of the conversation but zone out because I can't keep up. We order drinks and Rosa reads a selection, looking across to me for approval.

"Okay... let's have one bacon wrapped cassava, with the cilantro aioli and some fried plantains with the churrasco. These are delicious... and one guacamole and one chicharroncitos de Puerco, that's pork. Are you okay with that?"

“Sounds great! I’m starving.”

“And we must have the chorizo salteado and...” Rosa scans the menu biting her lower lip. “... and pechuga de pollo empanizada...” She hums and then says, “I think that’s all. Gracias.”

The waiter takes the menus and now I don’t have a prop to use. I realize that I’m probably not very good at this sort of thing, but I want to find out all about Rosa. She is so much more than my sister’s friend. I admire her for coming to New York, only knowing one person, and making a go of it. I take out my phone and turn it off. I don’t want to be disturbed by anyone. The waiter comes back with coffee for Rosa, a carafe of water, and two glasses. She pours the water.

“Salud,” says Rosa as she lifts her water glass and smiles at me.

“Salud. Cheers.” We each take a sip, then Rosa asks me about my trip.

“A Hawaiian island, Lanai. There’s a beautiful hotel that’s opening soon. And I was lucky enough to be picked to take the promo photos for the website.”

“That’s so cool. You get to go all over the place.” Rosa drinks her coffee.

“Yes. I love my job. It’s great getting paid to travel. I feel very lucky.”

“I’d like to travel,” Rosa says wistfully. “I have a whole long list of places I’d like to visit.”

“Ah yeah? What’s at the top of your list?”

“Cuba, of course!”

“Ah, of course.” My mind wanders to a picture of Rosa and I walking down a street in Havana, holding hands. My overactive imagination is infuriating but the image makes me smile. “I haven’t been there yet. It’s on my list too.” I laugh at myself for having such intimate thoughts and quickly change the subject. “I can tell you love your job too... You have a wonderful rapport with the people at the center. Really... I can see you care... a lot. It’s not just a job for you, is it?” Rosa sips her coffee and smiles at me, her head to one side. I drink some water then say, “... And you’re a great dancer.”

Rosa laughs. “I’m just a beginner. Still learning. Raul is a very good teacher and always makes his partner look good... I think dancing is the most wonderful way to connect.” Her eyes gleam as she searches for the best way to express her thoughts. “With your partner. With the music. And with yourself. It’s communication on so many levels... That is the art of salsa.” We are both distracted by a couple walking by hand in hand. Rosa turns her attention back to me. “You’re right. I love the center,” she says. “And the people. It’s all about the people and community. There is always something new. A new project or class or...” Her dark intelligent eyes reflect the light from the window. “The side of the building. Where the wall is bare brick.” She sits up straight, using her hands in enthusiastic explanation. “We are getting the whole wall painted with a fantastic mural. It’s going to be amazing.”

“I’ll need to come back and photograph it when it’s done,” I say leaning back in my chair and feeling a bit more relaxed.

“Yes. That would be great! I was thinking of maybe approaching a TV producer, you know, from an arts channel, to do a documentary or something. I need to research this and get a proposal together. It’s exciting... We have a team who are going to film it anyway. It would be wonderful to tell that story to a wider audience. And for the artists to get recognition for their work.”

The food arrives: an array of tasty dishes with mouthwatering aromas arrests my senses all at once. Rosa lights up as the table is covered with the various savory delights. She talks me through each one, then we help ourselves, heaping spoonfuls onto our plates. I watch the look of appreciation on Rosa’s face at the flavors of each dish. Watching Rosa enjoy food as a sensual pleasure reminds me how opposite she is to Ingrid.

I know it’s not fair to compare, but when Ingrid and I used to go out for food, it was never like this. She always made a comment about how she needed to order a starter size and not a main because she needed to count her calories. She would scrape off even the smallest piece of fat from a piece of bacon and complain that she had asked, specifically, for ‘lean’ and this, she would point to her half-eaten meal, was far from ‘lean’. I get it. She’s a model. It’s her job to fit the standardized measurements demanded by the fashion business. But eating out was hardly ever a relaxing, pleasurable experience. The only place she didn’t make a fuss was one of

those trendy juice bars where items are weighed, put into a blender, and served with a straw. Where is the enjoyment in that? And it's not food. I don't get it. If it can be sucked through a straw, it's a drink, surely. Of course, I didn't articulate any of these thoughts at the time. I just accepted things as they were. If your girlfriend is a model, that's how it is.

Having lunch with Rosa is a luxuriant sensory experience. She has sauce on her face and all I can think about is kissing it off. I give myself a mental kick as a reminder she is completely off-limits. Too young. And my kid sister's best friend. Rosa is a no-go zone I won't ever act on. But she is so much fun to watch.

Chapter 15

Rosa

I almost fell over when we were standing outside the center and Nathan asked me to have lunch with him. It was the best and the worst situation. The best, because we would get to hang out together alone and the worst because we would get to hang out together alone. I am still hungover and sore, but the idea of food revives my spirits. I duck into reception to let Inez know that I'll be out at lunch, then working from home. But I'll have my phone on. She narrows her eyes and says, "Ahhh si, señorita. Entiendo todo. I understand... everything." She winks and smiles at me in a way that makes me blush. Or that could still be the effects of last night's cocktails and shots. Yes. I had forgotten about the shots of tequila. Oof.

I suggest a restaurant close by. Cuban, of course. The food is good, and the people are friendly. We walk together, side by side, down the street. I'm trying to think of something insightful to say, but my brain is frazzled. I get the feeling Nathan is shy. We arrive at Mama Cubana and sit at my favorite table in the window. I am so hungry, I could eat the entire menu, so when Nathan suggests I order for both of us, well, that's a dream come true. Not only is he handsome and sexy, he can also read my mind.

I check myself. Giving my imagination a hefty kick as a reminder that this gorgeous man, sitting opposite me in my favorite restaurant, is completely off-limits. Nathan is Kendra's brother and we have already had the conversation

about how awkward it would be for one of her friends to be romantically entangled with him. It would be too weird, wouldn't it? And, even if he was the least bit interested in me, I remind myself, there's also the Ingrid issue.

She clearly wants him back. And, just look at her. She's a model with legs up to her armpits and all that hair. Kendra's right. They are beautiful people. Their photos are in Vogue and Hello magazine and Elle, and I've seen some in Cosmo too, looking so cute together. Not that I have a scrapbook or anything. But like Ingrid kept telling me last night, they are meant to be. It's written in the stars. A vague recollection of the previous night wafts through my mind, of Ingrid showing me a YouTube clip of her interviewing a man in a turban. "He's never wrong," Ingrid mouths at me because the techno music is too loud to hear what she is saying. Was that before or after the tequila shots? I don't know. But I do know that Ingrid is the opposite of me.

I realize that I am staring at Nathan, so I turn to look out of the window at a couple walking hand in hand, which doesn't help. I'm suddenly sad but try not to show it. Why am I sad about something so obviously out of my reach? He is not for you, is my mantra. I will endeavor to practice saying this out loud every morning. What is wrong with me? I smile and we talk about work. Safe unemotional subjects. I tell him about the center and the mural that is going to be painted on the outside wall. It's going to be amazing.

Nathan does this all the time, I expect. Lunch with a client, or subject, after a shoot. It's usual for professional people to

interact socially with other sorts of normal people. Me, for instance. He is just being nice, inviting me out to lunch. I feel special, singled out, but I bet tomorrow, he will have lunch with someone else who he has been photographing. Perhaps it will be Ingrid. I hope not. Or another stunning model. Depression creeps in, but I fight it.

The food arrives which lifts my mood. It is all delicious, tangy and tasty, and I try not to shovel it, aware of Nathan and his smooth sophistication. His designer shirt and stylish leather jacket.

There's probably sauce around my mouth. I check that I haven't spilled any on my T-shirt. Thankfully not.

I should feel uncomfortable having lunch with my best friend's unattainable, attractive older brother, but I don't. He is lovely. And charming. And polite. I love his hair and the way he combs his fingers through it. And his hands are so beautiful. Perfectly manicured. And tanned. Workers hands. Muscular man's hands. And I physically shake off the idea of those hands caressing my body, starting at my toes and working their way up... I swallow hard. He is not for you. I repeat. Not. For. You. Rosa Martinez.

After lunch, Nathan pays at the counter. We walk out to the street together.

"I had a great time," I say, a sad admission of its end. I look up at Nathan's handsome face.

"Me too..." Nathan says softly. Then, as if he has remembered something important, he says, abruptly, "I, um,

I'd better get back." He turns to leave.

I say goodbye and begin to walk away when Nathan calls after me, "I'm getting a cab. I could drop you off somewhere... your apartment? If you want?"

I could walk back to my apartment. It's only a couple of blocks away. The exercise would probably do me good. But the thought of a few more minutes with Nathan sways my decision. A taxi for hire approaches, stops and we both get into the back seat. Nathan turns to me, and I tell the driver my address. The taxi drives slowly along the narrow streets in between the parked cars on either side. When we get to the corner we should turn down, emergency service vehicles block the way. The road is closed.

The driver pulls over and I get out to face a barrage of noise and commotion.

"We'll wait here..." says Nathan, "... while you find out what's going on."

Up the street, I can see two fire trucks and police cars. There's an ambulance and uniformed personnel who are putting up more barriers to stop people going through. I shout to be heard, above the wailing sirens, to a police officer who is placing out road cones.

"I live here... What's happening?"

"Sorry Miss, it's too dangerous. We can't let anyone through. The street is being evacuated," says the officer, who stops his activity to come over and talk to me.

“Why? What’s going on?” I feel like a little kid in need of reassurance.

“There’s been a major gas leak and it is potentially explosive.” The policeman’s face is serious, but not unkind. “We’re on it. But it’ll be a while before we can allow anyone back in. You will have to be patient.” He was used to calming panicked people. “Do you have a place to go for a few hours? We’re doing our best to keep residents safe.”

“Of course. I’m just... It’s fine. I’ll come back later.” A wave of alarm has been and gone. I’m trying to process the situation. What should I do? Where should I go for a couple of hours? I hope my roommates are okay. I’ll call. Soon. I turn back to where Nathan is waiting by the cab. He looks concerned.

“You alright?” he asks as I approach. “What’s happening?”

I tell Nathan what the policeman has just told me. “Right then,” he says, decisively. “You are coming back to my place.”

“No. Nathan,” I say as casually as I can. As if a life-threatening situation blocking my road, happens every day of the week. “Thanks, but I’ll be fine.” My attempt to say this calmly is thwarted by the agitation affecting the pitch of my voice. “I’ll go back to the center and hang out there until it’s safe.” I wave his concern away and fix a smile to my face. “Don’t worry.”

“You could,” Nathan responds without missing a beat. “But it might be a couple of days before this gets the all clear,” he says with authority. “You might as well come back to Chelsea

now and call in the morning. Why not?" Nathan makes this sound like a sensible option. "Kendra is away. You can stay in her room. I'm sure that's fine. I'll call to ask. What do you say?"

I think I am in shock or something. Not only does Nathan make the idea of staying at his place sound sensible, but it seems like my only option. I think quickly. It was Friday, after all. I didn't need to be at the center until Monday. I had my laptop and phone with me. Nathan is my best friend's brother, so it's not like he's an unknown random guy whom I have just met. I have stayed at his apartment before. I know where the spare towels are.

After a moment, I allow myself to relax and be cared for. Nathan's offer of a safe, comfortable place to lay my head wraps itself around me like a warm blanket. I climb into the taxi again with Nathan, sinking into the back seat as we drive away from the blaring commotion.

Calls come thick and fast on our drive over to Manhattan. Delores, Donna, and Marlene were all worried but relieved at hearing I am safe. My roommates are all staying with friends for the night. The apartment is locked up. There isn't much we can do until the emergency is over and we are allowed back in.

Chapter 16

Nathan

I can't help but smile. I know it's not an ideal situation for Rosa. But it means she is in the cab with me and is coming to stay in my apartment. Which means we're probably going to be spending more time together. I try to arrange my face into an expression conducive to the somber mood that I should be feeling.

At my building, I can tell Rosa is a little shaken. She is quiet in the elevator and doesn't say much as I unlock the apartment door.

"Welcome, Rosa. Make yourself at home... You already know where everything is. So, be comfortable and don't worry, okay?" I resist the urge to hug her and hold her close.

"Thank you. Really. Thank you so much." Rosa walks in then, stops to face me when she gets to the kitchen. "It's nice to be back here... I'll try not to get in your way."

I start laughing.

"What?" she says, her head tilted to one side.

"Sorry. I'm laughing because you're about the only person I have ever met who would say something like that... 'Try not to get in your way'. Rosa. You are so... so refreshing."

She looks down at her shoes, but a blush is coloring her cheeks. "Maybe it came out wrong. I don't know. I don't want to be the needy person. You've been very kind, and I don't want you to think I'm taking advantage."

I shake my head and laugh some more, continuing past her to my room. “You are my guest, alright. End of.” I dump my camera and bags on the bed. “Now. What do you need?” I shout through the open door. “I’m sure we have a spare of everything here.”

“Maybe a toothbrush. But I can go down to the store. No problem.”

I rifle around in my room. Opening and closing drawers, I locate an airline pack of complimentary toiletries. I take it through to where Rosa is still standing in the kitchen.

“Here you go. I get a ton of these,” I say, handing Rosa the package containing toothbrush, toothpaste, mini soap, flannel, ear plugs, and an eye mask. “I keep a few, just in case of emergency. So, I guess, this is an emergency?”

“Thanks. This is perfect. There are even earplugs in case you snore.” She waves the package playfully, visibly cheered up.

“Sing out if you need anything else. Towels and bedsheets are in the cupboard here, as you know, ummm, and I’m sure Kendra won’t mind if you use her shampoo and girlie stuff.”

“Great. Thanks, Nathan.”

We stand, facing each other for an extended minute before Rosa says, “I’ll get myself organized, then... And call Kendra.”

I go back into my room and unpack my things. When I come out again, Rosa is in Kendra’s room. I can hear her talking on

the phone. I make some herbal tea, pour out two cups and knock on the door that stands open.

“Ahhh, tea! You are an angel,” Rosa says, holding her phone to her ear. “I’m just talking to Kendra. Do you want a word?”

I take the phone and say hi to my sis. She thanks me for being so gallant and rescuing her friend. No problem. Then she asks me if I’ve heard from Ingrid. I tell her I hadn’t and didn’t expect to. There’s quiet on the line before I say goodbye and hand the phone back to Rosa.

The mention of Ingrid is unnerving. Why was she asking me, I wondered?

A little later, I’m sitting on the sofa, drinking my tea when Rosa comes out. She’s smiling as she comes over and perches at the other end of the corner couch. Her hair is damp from a shower and hangs in loose ringlets over her shoulders and down her back. She’s wearing some of Kendra’s track pants and a T-shirt, which are baggy and oversized on my sister, but are filled, seductively, with Rosa’s ample curves.

“Sounds like Kendra isn’t having a great time.” Rosa leans back into the soft cushions. “She says the lawyers in Washington aren’t as much fun as New York lawyers.”

“I can’t imagine lawyers being that much fun anywhere!” I laugh at this, and Rosa does too. “Kendra being the exception, of course.” After a few minutes I follow with, “I was wondering about tonight. Do you have plans?”

Rosa shakes her head and says, “No. I was going to just have a quiet night at home. Maybe share some food with my roommates. Watch a movie... Nothing really.”

“Sounds perfect... We can watch a movie here... if you want.” I’m trying to sound casual but I’m not sure if I’m pulling it off. “What kind of films are you into?”

“Now there’s a loaded question...” Rosa laughs. “I just loved ‘The Notebook’. There is something about that story...” She pauses, curls up, tucking her bare feet under, and leans towards me. “I went to see it at the movies years ago with Kendra. One of those small, independent movie theatres. We were, you know, not particular about what film to see. We were just out and happened to be at the cinema at the time the film started, so we bought tickets and went in... I remember...” She laughs again. “... we were in our seats, waiting for the movie to start, and telling each other about how we don’t cry at films. We could never feel that deeply for something so obviously not real.” Rosa stretches her arms out, sighs, smiles, and shakes her head. “I swear, five minutes in and I am bawling. And I turn to look at Kendra and tears are streaming down her face. I mean, she’s not crying just a little bit, but we’re talking floods. She sees me looking over at her mopping up her tears with her T-shirt, and she starts laughing, and that sets me off.” Rosa’s hand covers her mouth to stifle her giggles. “We are a big hot mess. And we just get worse throughout the film, so when it reaches to point where she dies and James Garner is holding her hands, and he dies... well, you can imagine!” Rosa pauses for a minute to sip her tea. “At

the end, we had to wait for the whole cinema to empty out, then we ran to the bathroom to clean up. I have this picture of us standing side by side looking at ourselves in the mirror, all blotchy, with makeup in streaks down our faces, and wet patches from tears on our T-shirts, and we're laughing so hard."

"Do want to see 'The Notebook' again?" I ask, joining Rosa's infectious laughter.

"I don't think that would be a good idea... I wouldn't want to inflict my blubbing on you. It's not pretty."

I was thinking the opposite, but I didn't say anything. We both sip our tea.

Then Rosa says, "What about you?"

"Oh no. I didn't cry when I saw 'The Notebook'. I don't think I could feel that deeply about something so unreal." We laugh again.

"That's not what I meant, Nathan." Rosa fixes me with a mock-stern gaze. "I meant, what films do you like?"

"I like good stories... ones based on real life, usually..." Then after a moment's thought, I say, "And 'Star Wars'. The first three. That's 'Episode Four: A New Hope', 'The Empire Strikes Back' and 'Return of the Jedi'. Not the one with the Sith. He was never a convincing baddie. Not like Darth Vader, until he took off his helmet."

"Ahhh, you're right. The storylines became a bit flabby after the third one." Rosa pauses for a moment. "We could see a

‘Star Wars’ tonight.” She beams at me. “Maybe two?”

I could have reached over, in that magical moment, and kissed Rosa fully and passionately. A woman who likes ‘Star Wars’. I couldn’t believe she existed. She is as rare and special as a unicorn. And yet, here she is, drinking herbal tea and sitting in my lounge on my sofa, and she wants to spend her Friday night with me, watching my favorite film. I know I live a charmed life, but things just cranked up a gear.

“Okay. Sounds perfect,” I say, reaching for the remote to turn on the TV.

Chapter 17

Rosa

I'm so excited, I'm fit to burst. I'm going to be watching 'Star Wars' with Nathan on his sofa in his apartment. I should be feeling sad and anxious about the potential explosive gas leak at my place, but that all seems a million miles away and not real at all.

My awkward nerves at being here have melted away and I'm enjoying our time. Maybe too much. He is, I need to keep reminding myself, my best friend's brother. But there's no harm in sharing a movie night, is there?

"I'll go get some popcorn," I say, wanting the evening to be perfect.

"Good idea. I think there's some in the cupboard if Kendra hasn't helped herself to it." Nathan stands up and goes to the kitchen. He opens one of the cupboards to check. "Ah, we're in luck," he says pulling out two packs. He takes out a large bowl, opens one of the packs, and empties half into the bowl, then looks over to me and says, "What else do we need?"

"You know what? I can't think of anything." I am in heaven. A movie with a hot man and caramel butter popcorn? Can things get any better?

Nathan settles on the sofa placing the bowl of morish sweet popcorn between us. The film starts, the familiar music plays, and we both read out loud, the immortal words about a far away galaxy, a long time ago. I had forgotten how good this

film is. Although it's dated and the special effects aren't as special as I remember them, the narrative is compelling, and the characters are all brilliant. I love how Han Solo, Princess Leia, and Luke Skywalker interact. The dialogue is great. But Han Solo claims all the best one-liners. He's so cool. Not unlike my movie-watching companion sitting close by.

I sneak a sideways look at Nathan's handsome profile, while he is engrossed by the flickering screen. I'm quietly studying the noble straight nose; the salt and pepper of not-yet-shaved stubble; the distinguished silvering hair at his temples that blends with the other shades of sun-bleached blond. Then, before I get snapped gawping, I turn my attention back to the TV screen where Luke has just cleaned up R2-D2 and activated Princess Leia's message. 'Help us Obi-Wan. You're our only hope,' says her hologram. Caught up in the scene, my hand reaches into the popcorn bowl but instead of feeling corn snack kernels, my fingers lightly graze the smooth skin of Nathan's hand. Our fingers touch briefly before we both retract, apologizing profusely. The moment sets me off giggling, which interrupts the film. Nathan hits the pause button.

"Please, Rosa. This is a very important and serious part of the story," Nathan says, suppressing his own laughter. "The rebels need Obi-Wan Kenobi to help them smash Darth Vader's Death Star. Do you mind?"

"Sorry." I cover my mouth to squash the giggles that turn into a cough. "I'll get some water." I get up and make my way to the kitchen. "Do you want some?"

“Sure,” says Nathan. Then, adopting the voice of Obi-Wan Kenobi, he says, “Don’t abuse the power of The Force.”

“No, I won’t... I never do,” I say, returning with two glasses of water. I hand one to Nathan. He presses play and we resume watching the action. I’m careful with popcorn extraction from now on, in case our fingers, once again, come into breathless contact within the ceramic confines of the popcorn bowl.

Han Solo is in a bar making a deal with some Aliens to get the Millennium Falcon back. It’s one of the best scenes. But I’m only half-watching the movie. I’m too conscious of my movements, my breathing. The outlandish sheer joy I have in being here, that I want to film to go on forever. So, when the end credits roll, I am overwhelmed by disappointment. The film is over. The popcorn bowl is empty. Legitimate time on the couch with Nathan has finished. No what?

Breaking the silence, Nathan says in the voice of Yoda, “Intermission time, it is, young Jedi.” He stands up and takes the empty bowl back to the kitchen. “The Force is massive with this one.” He lands the TV remote, his imaginary X-wing starfighter, on the kitchen counter and says, “What would you like now? Let me guess. A lightsaber fight?” Nathan grabs the remote, holding it like the hilt of a sword, and sweeps it around his head like a weapon, making raspy noises in his throat. Then, in the voice of Darth Vader, he says, “Princess Rosa. Are you hungry?” Lightsaber swooshes in a wide arc. More rasping. “I will look for sustenance.” More lightsaber swooshing. “In the far corners of the kitchen.”

Nathan's performance has me curled up on the sofa in hysterics at this point. I can't speak. It takes me a while to control myself. "I'm not super hungry, Mister Vader, Sir. But you know. I could eat something. How about I call you Darth? What do you have?"

"Nope. You may call me Lord Vader, Earthling. Or Your Mighty Eminence. Either one will do." Nathan opens and closes cupboard doors, reading out names from labels on cans in his own voice. "There's not much really. I'm not one for grocery shopping." He laughs, then opens the freezer. "Ben & Jerry's? Ahhh, Kendra must have bought these. I know I didn't." Nathan looks across to me, then lines up the ice cream tubs on the counter, labels all facing the same way, equal distance apart. "We have Phish Food, Choco-lotta Cheesecake, and Cookie Dough."

"Wow! Yes please!" I say, already on my way to the delectable frozen deliciousness: three of my favorite flavors. I settle myself on one of the stools at the counter. Nathan hands me a spoon from the drawer. "All we need now, to make things extra super perfect, is music."

"Of course," Nathan says as if he's had a spiritual epiphany. He darts for the remote and presses some buttons. "Let me know if this is okay?" The apartment is filled with 'Chan Chan', the opening track of one of my all-time top ten albums, 'The Buena Vista Social Club' movie soundtrack, from years ago. I watch as Nathan prizes the lids off the ice cream tubs. Each one is about halfway finished.

“Ah!” Nathan looks me in the eye. “I bet you are an ice-cream tub half-full kind of girl.” He grabs the Phish Food and scoops up a luscious brown wave. “As opposed to an ice-cream tub half-empty kind of girl.”

“Sure am.” I pick up the Choco-lotta Cheesecake and spoon a scoop, relishing the decadence. Nathan comes around and sits on the stool next to me.

“I remember my grandma playing this album when I used to go visit... when I was little.” I swap the Choco-lotta Cheesecake for Cookie Dough and dig my spoon in.

“It’s a classic. I love it.” Nathan curls a swirl of the Choco-lotta Cheesecake. “So, where’s your grandma? Not Cuba, I’m guessing.”

“No. She lives in Miami. My dad is from Havana and my mum is from Minnesota and I was born in Chicago.”

“So,” says Nathan swapping ice-cream flavors. “You grew up in Chicago. You went to law school, where you met Ken. You decide that it’s not for you, so you come here to New York.”

“Ummm, yes, but you missed out the bit where I stay with my grandma.”

“And how was that?... Coming from Chicago?” Nathan says before grabbing the Phish Food tub from my hand. I pretend to wrestle it away from him, before releasing it, theatrically.

“Well, Florida. It’s hot most of the time, so I had to adjust to the climate. But staying with my grandma was great. She is a

cool lady. She taught me all about my Cuban self.” I swap tubs and scoop out some Cookie Dough, careful not to lose any yummy chunks. The warm Caribbean island rhythms swirl around the apartment, instantly transporting me away as I savor mouthfuls of delicious ice cream. My body starts moving without permission.

“And is that where you learned to dance?” Nathan licks his spoon.

“Uh-huh. Yup.” I shovel a scoop of chocolatey heaven into my mouth, almost missing. “I can show you.” Wiping my hands on a tea towel, I hop down from the stool and stand in front of Nathan, hands on hips. “Nathan. Ven.”

Nathan shakes his head, smiling. “No. I can’t.”

“What? Have you even tried?”

“No. But I know I can’t because I don’t have a Cuban self.”

“That doesn’t matter...” I say, laughing. “C’mon. I’ll be gentle.” I hold out my hand to Nathan. He hesitates then stands and takes it in his.

“Alright, you hold my hands like this.” I place Nathan’s hands, palms up to receive mine. “Now, watch my feet. When we start, the man - that’s you - always steps forward with the right foot and the lady - that’s me - steps back with the left. Then, back. Yep. And I’m forward. Yeah. You got it.” Nathan’s body is stiff and mechanical as he follows my instruction. “Alright, you got to shake all that tension out of your body. Loosen up, yo.” I release Nathan take a step back

and wobble like a jelly, shaking my arms and legs, so that everything jiggles. “You can’t expect your body to respond to music if you’re holding on to any kind of... rigidity, you know, in your mind.” I don’t know how else to express it. “Go ahead, shake it all out.”

Reluctantly Nathan shakes an arm, then the other. He wobbles his head and rolls his shoulders, then says, “You better not be filming this, Rosa.”

I laugh and clap my hands. “Right, you’re good and loose now. Let’s have another go...”

Chapter 18

Nathan

We are salsa dancing in my kitchen. Or rather, Rosa is doing her best to teach me, and I have as much Caribbean rhythm as the wooden stool that I've pushed aside to make space for us. The ice cream is all gone apart from sticky puddles of brown and cream. The spoons, licked almost clean, are discarded in the sink.

I feel giddy with music and the sugar-fueled rush. And the sexy, luscious Latina who is patiently talking me through the steps as if I am a child. My coordination is all over the place and I have lost the ability to tell my left from right and I can't count to eight.

I hold up both hands and beg to be released from the torture. Rosa is laughing at me.

"You just need some practice. That's all," she says, although I know she is probably lying.

"You are being kind. I'm hopeless." We sit back down on the kitchen stools. The final track of 'The Buena Vista Social Club' has faded. We are both a little disheveled from the exertion of trying to dance. Rosa is looking up at the ceiling and I can tell she has something on her mind. "What?" I ask.

"Oh, nothing." She waves me away.

"What's 'oh nothing'?" I persist.

"You'll think I'm mean or judgy."

"Why?"

“Because, when we first met... do you remember?”

“Yes. When you were my minion... Go on.”

“Yes, that day on the boat... I thought you were grumpy as all hell.”

“I was what?”

“Grumpy, as in moody, bad-tempered, anti-social. And...”

“And what?”

“And I thought you didn’t like me.”

“No... You’re right... I still don’t.” Rosa throws her head back and laughs until her shoulders shake.

She is radiant. She is glorious. And all I want to do is kiss her. A long, deep sensuous, luxurious kiss that could go on until morning. I suddenly feel self-conscious. I don’t know if she knows what I’m feeling, but I excuse myself abruptly. I don’t want to spoil the moment by doing something as stupid as trying to kiss Rosa. That would be so dumb and regretful.

“Err-um. Right then. Rosa. It’s been fun.” I stand up and move towards my room. “But I’m going to bed now. So, good night.”

“Buenos noches, Nathan. Thanks, again, for letting me stay.” Rosa’s voice is as soft and warm as her eyes.

She is disarming. My defenses are laid low. But I make it to the safety of my room and, closing the door behind me, I lean back against it as if that would stop the feeling that overwhelms me.

The next morning, I'm up and about first. Memories of the previous evening linger in the herbal teacups that are left on the coffee table and the scrunched-up tea towel left on the kitchen counter. Did we really eat all that ice cream?

I boil some water and think about the day. I open the fridge and check but, of course, there's no food in there, as per normal. I'm not glum at all, however, because going out for breakfast is one of my guilty pleasures. Cafés abound in this part of Manhattan. I have my favorites, depending on my mood and whether I want a perfectly roasted aromatic coffee and fresh, out-of-the-oven flakey croissant or something a bit more substantial, such as a tasty shakshuka or good ol' bacon 'n' eggs.

I yawn and stretch and look down at the traffic and pedestrians in the street below. I feel strangely removed from everything this morning as if there's been a subtle shift; a rearrangement of elements. Or perhaps I have just had the best sleep that I can remember, and I feel fantastic.

“Good morning.” Rosa's voice interrupts my reverie. I turn towards her. She is framed in Kendra's bedroom doorway.

“Buenos dias, dancing queen.” She looks exquisite in a rumpled, morning, bleary way. Her untamed hair is a riot of curls. “We have absolutely no food now. Not even ice cream or popcorn. So, we're forced to go and forage, as best we can, out there on the mean streets of café-land, Manhattan. Are you

up for it? Or do you want me to bring something back for you?”

“Ah, Nathan. That’s so sweet. Give me ten minutes to get ready, if you can wait, and I’ll come too.” She disappears into Kendra’s room and shouts through the open door. “I’ll have to find something to wear of Kendra’s that fits me.”

I am overpleased when Rosa agrees to come out for breakfast with me. The wonderful magic of the previous night has spilled over into the morning, and I can’t believe how lucky I feel. Is it because this woman is out of bounds that I’m finding her so irresistible? Am I that schmuck that you hear about, who is so hung up on the unattainable, he lives his life longing for the thing he can’t have? Like one of those French novels. A tragedy. A hopeless, brokenhearted, life of emptiness. Is that me? I hope not.

I put on a shirt and Levis, my favorite orange Addidas Gazelles, and denim jacket. I check my wallet and bring my phone. No one has called, thankfully. I flick through my messages while I wait for Rosa. There are three from Ingrid. I don’t read them. We are not together anymore, but I still feel somehow connected to her, as if she still has a hold on me. And even though nothing happened with Rosa, there’s a twinge of guilt as if I’ve been unfaithful, which is ridiculous.

Rosa appears wearing black stretch pants and a colorful flower-print wrap-around dress over a tank top. It looks great with her green woolen coat. She twirls at the door, clearly pleased with herself.

“I might just keep this outfit,” she says, smiling impishly slinging her bag over her shoulder.

We take the elevator down and talk about what we want to eat for breakfast. Rosa tells me coffee is the most important element in the morning, so we head over to a French patisserie that I think she’ll like.

We are only a few yards from my building when I see a familiar tall blond figure striding toward me. It’s Ingrid. Her face is set into an expression as hard as granite. She doesn’t look happy at all.

“Nathan,” she says when we are almost within hearing distance. “I’ve been trying to reach you. Didn’t you get my messages?” Her voice is syrup, thinly disguising an underlying bitterness. “Oh, hi, Rosa.” She turns her attention to Rosa. It’s almost a snarl. “Did you know that Kendra is out of town for a few days?” Ingrid doesn’t wait for a response but continues. Her attention is back on me. “So, how have you been?”

Rosa shuffles her feet and, biting her lip, looks around, then she says, “Sorry. I, um... I’m going to go now.”

I’m torn. Ingrid doesn’t halt her flow of monologue that holds my attention as I’m trying to work out what it is she wants. And I notice Rosa turning away and making an exit. This all happens in slo-mo. I reach out to Rosa, but she has already moved away.

“Wait!” I finally manage to articulate the word I need to say. “Just a minute, Rosa!”

“No. No, you go ahead,” Rosa says, still walking away. “I... just remembered something... So...” She is already down the street. Each word she says is another step away from me. And I seem to be rooted to the spot. I want to follow her but the look in her eyes tells me, ‘No’.

“She’s such a sweetie, isn’t she?” Ingrid says, following my gaze. She is standing on the street in front of me, saying something but I’m not really tuned in. I watch Rosa walk briskly down the street until she disappears into the crowd and out of sight. “... the Big Apple Media Awards...” Ingrid smiles at me and I realize I haven’t heard a word she has said. “...I think Harry and Meghan will be there and they always bring a certain je ne sais quoi to an event, don’t you think? I mean, I know they are not technically royal anymore, but when you’re born into something it’s not like the blue blood turns a different color, just because you’re not actually wearing a crown, right?”

“What? Um, excuse me... media awards?”

“Yes. Nathan. They’ve sent the invitation to me, but they’ve printed both our names on the one invitation card.” Ingrid pulls out an envelope from her blood-red patent leather Prada bag. “So, I was wondering what you want to do about it. That’s why I came over. Well, I was in the neighborhood anyway, so I thought I’d just, you know, run it by you... I mean, we could call up the organizers, and get them to amend the invitation and send out separate ones to each of us, but it’s soon, next week, and things get lost in the mail all the time. So, what I thought is... we could arrive together. That would

save a big headache, wouldn't it? And..." Ingrid changes her tone from a-hundred-miles-an-hour breathy to a deeper, more sultry, "...we could, maybe, enjoy the evening... I mean, yes, it's work, and we'll be expected to schmooze. That goes without saying..."

Okay," I say, a bit bamboozled by the torrent of information. "Yes. That's fine, Ingrid." We had broken up. Yes. But we could still be friends. I was open to that. There were no hard feelings on my part. Ingrid is an amazing person. She's just not the amazing person I want to be with.

"Were you going to have coffee? I'll join you..." We begin to walk slowly down the street towards The Chelsea Coffee Company. Ingrid continues, over-animated. "I've been so busy lately with my new YouTube channel. Follower numbers are off the charts. I feel so blessed. It's all about quality content and regular blasts. Larry, my agent, tells me I'll probably be up for a Big Apple award next year."

"That's great, Ingrid. I'm happy for you." I hear my own voice as if it doesn't belong to me. I'm in the café but part of me is still salsa dancing with Rosa in my kitchen. I'm sad that the moment is gone. The spell is broken.

Chapter 19

Rosa

I'm almost running. Nathan called after me, but I couldn't stay. Suddenly, the beautiful fictional bubble burst and my romantic idiocy came crashing down around me like fallout from Godzilla on a Manhattan rampage.

I didn't want to be the third wheel on that vehicle. No way. Ingrid is trying to get back with Nathan and I don't want to be in the way of that. He laughed at me when I said that I would try not to be in his way. Well, this is exactly what I'm talking about.

They have history. They were in love and maybe they still are, and they just need to reconnect and find their happily-ever-after. I don't want to be the one to mess that up. What am I even saying? I'm not Ingrid's rival. As if. I can be fully confident that Nathan doesn't have the tiniest interest in me other than a casual, my-kid-sister's-friend kind of interest.

I just got carried away by his kindness. Anyone would have done the same thing in those circumstances: I couldn't go back to my apartment. He was on his way home in a cab. Kendra is away. There's a spare room. There's absolutely no hidden romantic agenda there, surely. It's human kindness and shouldn't be confused with anything deeper or more meaningful than that.

But then, there was the sharing a quiet night in: the movie we both like and the popcorn moment. And the ice cream in the kitchen. Spoons dipping into tubs. Sweetness and laughter.

And salsa dancing to my favorite tunes. He tried so hard to learn the steps. It was the best non-date I have ever had. And if that is all I am allowed then, I am happy. I shared a beautiful night with a hot older man who was respectful and fun and charming and didn't try anything sleazy with me. Although, was I disappointed about that? Maybe. No.

It was like we were in one of those old films where the guy and the girl don't kiss until the end and the sexiest thing they get to do is hold hands. Or like 'The Notebook': Allie and Noah don't make out until they have overcome a heap of obstacles. And it looks as if they are destined to be apart, and then... Oh my! That kiss.

There definitely won't be a kiss for us. That's for certain. But I will always have the caramel butter popcorn finger contact moment which was almost as good.

I cross the street and find a café that I don't know. Somewhere new and fresh without connotation or history. Somewhere far enough away from Nathan's Chelsea neighborhood, so there is little chance of him wandering in with Ingrid on his arm and the awkward, "Oh, Rosa... again. New York, huh? Not such a big city."

I look around the café tables inside which all seem to be occupied by happy couples enjoying a leisurely breakfast, probably after a lie-in and some hot morning sex. Sets of twos on every table, slumped together, fingers entwined, lazily disheveled with mops of unruly bed hair. I can almost hear their thoughts by reading their body language. Oh, babe. Let's

have a lazy day, why not? We'll have breakfast because I'm starving after that three-hour morning make-out session and go back to bed. What do say, hun? I just can't get enough of you, you wild temptress. Why did I have that thought? I'm annoyed with myself and order a large mochaccino with extra chocolate and marshmallows to go.

Irritation and disappointment make me restless, and I take my mochaccino and stomp to a bench outside where I lose two of my marshmallows that were stuck to the lid. When I took the lid off, they slid onto the floor but made sure they ricocheted off Kendra's pretty dress, leaving a trail of chocolatey foam, before hitting the dirt near a dog poop. Urgh.

I can't settle and wander aimlessly trying to decide how to fill my weekend. I'm avoiding my apartment. I don't want to go back there, even if it is safe. I walk down to the Hudson River Park. Families with young children play on the swings and slides. Their laughter and squeals of delight are abrasive and harsh. Watching the mothers hold the tiny hands of their small children creates an unpleasant ache somewhere deep inside. I turn away and follow the path to where brightly colored boats bob and chug on swirling brown currents.

I am reminded of the day of the photo shoot, out on Esmerelda with Nathan, when I thought I was going to die of exhaustion. I didn't like him at all and, I suppose, I was a bit in awe of Kendra's older brother, who had achieved legendary status in my imagination. I thought he was aloof and cold, but I realize now that this was because he was focused and professional. I believed he was grumpy and unfriendly and

that he didn't like me at all. But I was so useless and young, wide-eyed: straight off the plane.

It was only a year ago, but I feel so much older. My life is slipping away, and I'm suddenly lonely as grubby New York rain spits in my face. I tug my collar up and hunch my shoulders as if this futile action is going to help me not get wet. I wish I had remembered to bring an umbrella.

Chapter 20

Nathan

The Big Apple Media Awards is the most prestigious event in the industry calendar. It's up there with The Oscars, with as much hype and lead-up insanity as you would expect from one of the biggest nights of the year. Each year is grander and glitzier than the one before, attracting A-list celebrities, showbiz names, and the rising stars of the world of print and digital media. The Big Apple has catapulted careers overnight. I've been nominated for a couple of categories, so I had better turn up, in case I win one. Part of me is excited and proud about the praise and acknowledgment of my work, and part of me couldn't care less.

The New York Times Magazine ran the article about the Cuban Community Center, and it looked really good. The piece was spread across four pages and coincided with the Cuban Revolution Day. I called Alfie to congratulate him. The picture of Rosa dancing with Raul is central. They are wearing street clothes. The feel is quite mundane, although the light from the window is truly atmospheric which lifts the picture and adds glamor. I've caught them in a kind of semi-silhouette. It's all about contrast. There's hardly any color. Everything is low-key and everyday, and that is why this image is successful. It conveys the magic of dance and Cuban culture that is intrinsic to ordinary people. Everyone in Cuba dances. They dance before they can walk.

I'll see Alfie at the awards, probably. The magazine is in the running again this year and he deserves to pick up a trophy or two.

I haven't seen Rosa since last weekend. She called to say that her neighborhood was safe, and she had gone back to her apartment. When I asked her about the things that she left in Kendra's room, she said not to worry. That she was meeting up with my sister sometime later. So, that is that. Memories of 'Star Wars' and salsa dancing with ice cream have taken on a dream-like quality. I wonder if I just didn't make the whole thing up.

I didn't see Ken when she got back after her conference. She arrived when I was out and left a note for me on the kitchen counter.

Nate. Hi. This is your sister. I'll have my people contact your people to arrange a meeting. It's been ages, bro. Let's hang out. x o x

I added a, Yes please, underneath her scrawl, with a smiley face. We hadn't connected properly for weeks. I needed to make time for Kendra. Our work commitments had taken over, and although we shared the apartment, we hardly saw each other. I had a couple of jobs in New York, then a fashion shoot booked for L.A. next month. I message my sister, then make a reservation at Marcello's. Just the two of us.

"Nathan. Tell me everything," Kendra says when we're settled in the booth seat at the back of the restaurant. It's Tuesday evening and not particularly busy.

“Hawaii was spectacular. We should go some time. You would love the eco-lodge I shot. It’s so well thought out and kind of blends in with the landscape. And, oh gosh, the surf was incredible.”

Gino brings our pizza. We talk about Kendra’s conference in Washington. She laughs and says how happy she is to be back in NYC. It’s a different buzz there, she says in between bites.

“And how are things going with Ingrid?” Kendra puts down her cheesy slice, wipes her hands on a serviette, holding my gaze.

“What do you mean? We broke up, remember?”

“I know, but Nathan.” Kendra is suddenly serious and talking to me as if I’m a client. “She really does love you and is trying to make it up to you. Why not give her a second chance? Look at you both. Such amazing people. You’re a world-renowned photographer. She’s a model/actor, YouTube sensation, influencer. You were happy Nate. What happened? Couldn’t you patch things up?”

“Kendra. I’m happy now,” I say, exasperated, but I feel the need to explain. “It’s in the past. Ingrid is amazing. She is... But I can’t see us together anymore. I’ve moved on... and so has she.”

“Well, that’s a shame.” Kendra picks up her pizza slice and takes another bite. Then, after a few chews, she fixes me with one of her looks and says, “You’re not getting any younger, you know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, bro. I’m just concerned that you fill your life with work, and you don’t leave any room for... love. I’m your sister and we live in the same apartment, and you barely have enough time to see me. So...”

She had a point, of course. But I feel defensive.

“Kendra. I appreciate your concern. I know it comes from a good place, but I am fine. I’m more than fine. I’m living my best life. And maybe...,” I pause here as I think about what it is I want to say. I can’t really come out with, ‘Oh, by the way, I wanted to kiss your best friend when she stayed over at the weekend.’ That wouldn’t be appropriate. But I want to make it clear to Kendra that the file on Ingrid and I is firmly shut. Case closed. “I have met someone,” I say, warily. “...who is so special, I’m taking things slow because I don’t want to burst in there, guns a-blazing and wreck anything, just yet.”

“Oooh! Now you have my attention. Who is this lucky lady?”

“I can’t say... at the moment. I’ll let you know. In fact, you’ll be the first to know.”

I knew I had to tread carefully. The idea of me dating Kendra’s best friend may not be as warmly accepted as I hope it will be. I’ll cross my fingers and approach things cautiously to see how each step plays out. I have no idea how Rosa feels about me. If I made any kind of move romantically, she might be appalled and run in the opposite direction. But, like Kendra says, I’m not getting any younger, and, when I’m with Rosa...

I don't know. I just want to be with her. It doesn't matter where we are or what we're doing. She is so real. There's an honesty about her that is rare and wonderful. When we're together, I feel I can just be myself. Just Nathan Ellis.

I have made a decision. I can't sit back and do nothing. Rosa lights me up in a way no one has before. Being with her is like winning a prize, bigger than any Big Apple award. As I go about my day, I find myself inventing all sorts of scenarios where we run into each other. Then I feel nervous about that happening because I don't know what to say. I could easily wreck something beautiful before it has even started. And what if she doesn't like me? Or only likes me as her best friend's brother? I wonder when I will see her again.

Chapter 21

Rosa

I call Kendra from my apartment. The emergency had passed, and everything is back to normal as usual. My roommates were in the lounge when I got back. It was good to see everyone. I didn't want to put myself in the position of seeing Nathan with Ingrid, so I arranged to meet up with Kendra who kindly agreed to bring me my laptop and other things that I had left in her room. We meet in a café on my side of the river. She was in good form and chats enthusiastically about her trip.

“Thanks for bringing my stuff over,” I say, smiling gratefully. “And I'm sorry about your dress. It was a marshmallow malfunction, but it should be alright after a wash.”

“Ah, don't worry about it. You're most welcome to anything of mine. You know that.” I almost interject with, ‘Even your brother?’ but I hold it in. Kendra smiles. “And you were a refugee, Rosa. How awful,” she says with concern, lightly touching my arm.

“Yes. It was strange and weird. But Nathan rescued me... He was so kind.” My head is filled with popcorn, ice cream, and salsa dancing in the kitchen. Remembering our movie night together I wilt like a flower without rain but try not to let it show.

“He is...” Kendra sips her spirulina smoothie. “So, tell me... You have been invited to some awards by the journo from The

New York Times magazine? That's pretty cool. Is he, you know... boyfriend material?"

"No! Kendra!" She makes me laugh. "Alfie is a nice guy. He asked me to go as his plus one as a kind of thank you for the piece he did about the center. There's nothing... It's... We're just friends..." I catch the sneaky look in her eye. "Really," I say firmly.

"Oh, how boring." There's a pause in conversation. I gaze around the café at the other customers. Then Kendra asks, "What are you going to wear?"

"Ah, gosh. I hadn't given it any thought."

"Well, it's going to be swanky. Where is it?"

I think for a moment and try to recall the details. "The Hilton, I think... Midtown."

"Woah! That's going to be great and a chance to properly dress up." Kendra's enthusiasm is infectious. It's one of the things I love about her, but I play it down.

"Ah no. I'll iron a shirt." I mentally go through the meager contents of my wardrobe. I haven't bought anything new for a while. And I haven't bought anything that isn't practical or work-related in forever. "I have my interview outfit. I'll wear that."

"Oh no, you won't. Rosa. You are going to an evening at the Midtown Hilton with a soon-to-be-award-winning journalist. You are going to look the part, my friend..." Kendra slurps the rest of her smoothie and slaps me, heartily, on the back. "We

are going shopping... for a dress.” Kendra whips out her phone and starts scrolling through fashion sites. “I know, we’ll check out what Ingrid is promoting on her channel. That’s a good place to start.”

The tiny screen is filled with an image of Ingrid, smiling brightly and talking to the camera. “The award season has started people, and if you’re lucky enough to get invited, well you will want to dress to impress and feel like a winner even if you miss out on an actual accolade. Here are some of my top tips for looking Hollywood glam...” Ingrid dazzles. “Tip number one. Black is back. Slink in and wow that crowd with long, to-the-floor elegance, twinned with a burst of sparkle with earrings and elongated lengths of chain. Don’t be shy to accessorize. See links below for outlets for my personal recommendations. See you next time for ‘What’s hot and not on the red carpet!’”

Kendra clicks on a link that opens a webpage of a designer boutique off Lexington Avenue.

“Looks expensive,” I say, calculating what’s left of my paycheck after paying bills. Not much.

“Your birthday’s coming up, isn’t it? I’ll go halves with you...”

“Oh, I don’t know. Seems excessive for one night.”

“Look. Rosa. You live in New York now. You need a beautiful dress to wear to occasions such as this... It’s not an expense: it’s an investment. Yes? And, it’ll be fun... Did you consider that?”

You can see why Kendra is a lawyer. Her arguments are so compelling. She's right, of course. What better way to shake off the doldrums than looking fabulous at a posh do, where nothing more is expected of you than to enjoy yourself? Get there, look gorgeous, have a great time, and that is all.

Since the movie night with Nathan and the Ingrid incident the following day, I had been feeling so off balance and agitated. I needed to reset my inner world, to erase any romantic notions of my best friend's brother, once and for all. I needed to be proactive and approach this uptown event as therapy: a little pick-me-up treat with Alfie, who is a nice man, but definitely not boyfriend material. But there could be other nice men who are, possibly, boyfriend material, that I might meet at the Hilton, who will take my mind off Nathan. That would be a very good thing.

Before we leave the café, Kendra and I arrange to meet at the bijou boutique later in the week. I am excited now and looking forward to the awards night. It was sure to be a glamorous showbiz glitzy entertaining affair and certainly not something I would be doing every week. It was going to be a very special night.



The fashion store off Lexington Avenue is small and extremely trendy. There are only a few racks of 'pieces' on show. A sumptuous fuchsia-pink brocade curtain, hung on brass hooks on a rail, indicates a fitting room. A massive chandelier dominates the space, but the high ceiling, which is

painted black, accommodates its dazzling bulk. Plain white walls are behind the suspended racks. The floor is exposed naked wood. Oval mirrors mounted on wheels are placed in the corners. A Billy Holliday remix sound bed is playing in the background. Kendra and I are greeted by a diminutive sales assistant with spikey black hair, wearing fitted black jeans and a floaty, see-through, oversized black shirt, sleeves rolled up revealing arms covered with tattoos and bangles. He's wearing thick, black-rimmed glasses.

I almost lose my nerve and back out. "I'm sure I can find what I need at Walmart," I hiss into Kendra's ear as I turn toward the exit. She grabs my arm.

"Hello ladies," says the sales assistant with a warm smile. "Welcome to Chloe's. How can I help you today?"

"Hi," I say looking around at the expensive clothes. My fingers instinctively turn over the satin-feel white card price tags and try not to react to the hand-written digits and dollar signs. "We're just looking, thanks."

"Actually, my friend here needs an outfit for a posh event. Something glamorous. Gorgeous. Sexy." Kendra winks.

"Oh, well you have come to the right place. Let's see..." The sales assistant, whose name is Gerald, prances around the store, pulling out garments, reminiscent of a Spanish toreador in a bullring. He pushes aside some hangers on one side of a rail, hangs up the items that he has draped over his arm, then pulls aside the curtain to the fitting room at the back of the shop. Then he retrieves a stool from behind the counter. "Let's

get comfortable,” he says, patting the stool for Kendra. Then, with a sweeping gesture, he invites me into the fitting room.

The first item that is thrust into my hand is iridescent blue satin, shimmering like a mermaid’s tail. It’s on over my head, but I need a hand when doing up the zip. I step out from behind the curtain. The skirt is a little long.

By the look on Kendra’s face, I didn’t need to do up the zip. This one was a no-go. Next. I step out of the mermaid dress and carefully hand it back to Gerald.

“It’s maybe too Hollywood and not enough NYC,” he says to Kendra as if I can’t hear. “This one... I have a good feeling about. We only make a limited number of each design, in three sizes, so you can be confident that no one else in the room will have on your dress.” He hands me a chocolate velvet corseted construction over a tulle, floor-length skirt. “We can make alterations on site, if it’s not quite right...” I climb into the dress and gently pull up the bodice. Once again, I need help with the zipping.

“Oh, yes!” say Gerald and Kendra together.

“This one is very nice,” says Gerald scrutinizing my reflection as he yanks the sides of the bodice around my ribcage, pulling it in tight at the waist. “Breathe in and lift your chest...” He zips me up. “Now relax.”

My body is encased in structured fabric, restricting movement. I don’t think I could pick up anything from the floor, but, strangely, it’s not uncomfortable. I turn from the mirror to face Kendra.

“It’s definitely a statement piece,” she says. “How do you feel in it?”

“Like a trussed-up chicken.”

“Well, you look fabulous!” Gerald chimes in. “And with the right shoes and an up-do...”

“I’m not sure,” I say, turning back to my reflection. “It’s beautiful, but, umm, maybe a bit... dramatic, isn’t it?”

We study the lines of stitching and Gerald smooths out the skirt in downward sweeps of his hand. Then he takes a step back, looks at me one more time, and says, “Alright, Missy. Next.”

The next one that is passed through to me doesn’t even go on. It’s silver and has sequin details and I just know I will look like a walking disco ball. I hand it back.

“Okay. This one will wow. Guaranteed,” says Gerald almost purring as he presents me with a drape of black jersey, so fine, it feels like water. “Isn’t this fabric amazing? It’s called Slippery Nipple.”

“Did you just make that up?” says Kendra guffawing, almost falling off her stool.

“No. I swear. That’s its name. I can show you the roll if you don’t believe me.”

The dress is unbelievably slinky. It hugs my ample curves in gathers and folds, at once concealing and revealing, like a Greek sculpture of Venus. Tiny glittering black beads catch the light in a scattered pattern at the shoulders and down either

side of the deep 'v' neckline to a starburst of beads and gathered pleats beneath the bustline. Its sleeveless sultry elegance makes my light cocoa skin look radiant.

“Are you alright in there?” asks Gerald. “Don’t keep us waiting.”

I push the curtain aside and walk forward into the middle of the store, then turn to face my friends. Kendra and Gerald are speechless.

“I love it,” I say in hushed tones.

“Done,” says Gerald who drops to his knees to tuck up the hem. “You know, it just needs a couple of inches taken up, so you don’t trip. Let me pin it while you’re there, hun.” Gerald nimbly dives towards a drawer at the back of the counter where he grabs a pin cushion which he slips onto his wrist. “You’re going to be wearing heels, so I won’t go crazy...” Gerald is on his knees again, turning up the hem. “I think, for this dress, diamanté sandals, or black... but I feel you need some kind of sparkle.”

Kendra is smiling behind both her hands. “You look like a star,” she says. “People will think you’re from TV or a movie or something.”

Gerald has finished pinning and guides me back to the full-length mirror. He gathers my hair and twists it up, holding it in place as he says, “A simple do, like this, looks really pretty... You can get little pearl or diamanté hair slides to hold it.... And match some drop earrings or hoops with a long chain pendant... What do you think?”

“I think... if I am going to wear a dress to the Big Apple Media Awards, it’s going to be this one,” I say throwing my arms up, not caring about the eye-watering price tag.

“Oh. Did you say the Big Apple Media Awards?” asks Gerald, suddenly somber.

“Yeah, why?” Kendra and I both articulate together.

“Oh, you know, it’s probably nothing and... there’ll be so many guests, who knows? But...”

“But what?”

“That thing I said about limited numbers, so you won’t see your dress on anyone else.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re probably going to see your dress on somebody else.”

“Ah no,” says Kendra. “This exact same one? What were the chances of that?” There’s a pause and we all look at each other in turn.

Then I say, “How much does it matter? I don’t care. Whoever is wearing this design, will probably be wearing it in a completely different way to me, won’t she?” I’m saying the words but deep inside I’m rattled by this information.

“You are absolutely right,” Kendra says. “You look incredible. This dress is made for you. The other woman... we don’t know who she is... She won’t even look half as fabulous as you, Rosa.”

“No, you do look wonderful and, you probably won’t even see the other woman wearing this dress. I can tell you now, she has a completely different body shape. It could be a completely different dress.”

Gerald says that he could complete the alterations that afternoon in the time it would take us to go and purchase accessories. He points us in the direction of a shoe store close by and hands us a card, which would give us a ten percent reduction on any pair we choose.

“So, I’ll go ahead with the purchase, should I? Because I can’t begin the adjustments until the full price has been put through.”

I feel a bit giddy. The retail high was hitting me like a sugar rush. I take one last look at myself in the mirror before changing back into my worn-out jeans and scruffy T-shirt.

Kendra is at the counter with her credit card in her hand. “Charge it to mine... Rosa, you can pay me back... half, anytime, okay? Happy birthday.” She smiles at me, and blows me a kiss, as I join her at the counter. “Ooh! I almost forgot... We have a discount code from Ingrid’s blog. Is that still valid?”

“Yes, of course!” says Gerald “I just know she will be so pleased... She has the other dress, so you have to look out for her and say hi. She would love that! Ingrid is so great, isn’t she? I love her channel.”

There’s the briefest of moments when I had second thoughts about wearing the dress. I couldn’t quite picture myself

standing beside Ingrid, arm in arm, comparing our matching evening wear, as if we had coordinated our outfits. But as Gerald said, The Big Apple will be a huge event. I probably wouldn't see her, and she most definitely wouldn't notice me.

Chapter 22

Nathan

I've arranged to pick Ingrid up at her place, which is on the way to the Midtown Hilton. She calls me to say she's ready and waiting outside. I see her wave as the cab pulls over to the curb.

"Perfect timing," she says as she climbs into the back seat next to me. She leans across and kisses my cheek, then laughs and attempts to erase the lipstick mark she has left there. "Oh, Nathan, I'm sorry. Here, let me try again." She looks around in her bag for a packet of tissues, pulls one from the pack, and begins dabbing my face until I take the tissue from her.

"Hi Ingrid," I say, tucking the lipsticked tissue into my pocket. I ask her how she is, which, true to form, unleashes a torrent of information and statistics about her life. Her voice flows over and around me like static electricity; like white noise, hardly anything enters my head. I nod and say encouraging words in the few pauses left open in her monologue.

"... and the dress. Nathan. What do you think? Isn't it beautiful? Feel the fabric. It's called, get this... Slippery Nipple." Ingrid squeals with delight like a child.

The taxi arrives and we disembark where a red carpet lies across the sidewalk, sectioned off from pedestrians with thick deep-red velvet rope strung between shiny brass bollards. Heavy-set security personnel monitor the entrance as Hilton uniformed staff take the printed invitation and check our

names against an iPad list. Once inside the foyer, bright lights and cameras abound. Ingrid and I are ushered to a wall of logos in front of TV cameras on tripods, where we are required to stand while photographers snap away. People with microphones fire questions left and right. Ingrid answers while I hold my breath, willing it all to be over. Eventually, we are released from the logo wall, and just when I think we've made it through, a well-presented young woman approaches with a microphone.

“Ingrid,” she says as she waves to us, blinking slightly with the flashes and wattage.

I should be used to this environment, but usually it's me on the other side of the camera. I can't help but feel self-conscious and awkward. Ingrid, however, is in her element. She air-kisses the woman with the microphone who introduces herself as Mimi from Animal Print Magazine. I haven't heard of it. It's relatively new. Cutting edge. Focusing on up-and-coming New York designers.

“We're all about connecting the stylish women of NYC to designers who know who their customers are,” she says, enthusiastically. I'm distracted by more lights and guests arriving. “So... tell me, who are you wearing tonight, Ingrid... I love your channel, by the way.”

“Mimi, so lovely to see you,” Ingrid beams. “Yes. Let me talk you through my outfit. The designer is Chloe, on Lex. She is so innovative and really knows how to craft a garment. I'm a big fan, obviously.” She laughs.

“And you’re here with the very talented and legendary, Nathan Ellis... Nathan. If I can have a quick word with you? You’ve been nominated for several award categories this year.” Mimi reads from her list, “Fashion Photographer of the Year; Artistic Expression; Documentary; Storyteller. Which prize are you most excited about? Are you excited?” She holds her microphone out to me.

I’m good with answers to these sorts of questions. I get asked a lot, so I have my responses ready to go. “Yeah, thanks Mimi. Of course, it’s an unbelievable honor to be nominated. I’ve been doing this job for many years, and it possibly shows,” I say indicating my grey hair and wrinkles. “But each job is like my first one because I approach fresh every time. That’s just how I work. I have to not bring previous images with me. That would be really boring for everyone.”

“Ah, that’s very cool. Thanks Nathan. And one more question, if I may. There are rumors that you guys are back together and, certainly, judging by your arrival tonight, could we perhaps see New York’s most talented power couple stepping out again?”

Ingrid is doing her best to be coy. She sweetly looks up at me, then says, “We can neither confirm nor deny that possibility. Can we Nathan?”

“Well, Ingrid,” I begin, “I think we can definitely deny those rumors.” But Mimi doesn’t hear me. Her attention is caught by a group of people who are on their way in, causing an eruption of camera flashes.

“Thank you so much for your time,” Mimi calls over her shoulder. “Good luck and have a great evening,” she says darting to greet the newcomers ahead of her competition, who race to get their microphones in first.

Ingrid and I make our way together towards the main function room.

“We’re not back together, Ingrid,” I say firmly but gently. “You left me, which was a bit of a shock. But I’m fine with it. And I think you were right to leave.”

Ingrid reaches for my arm and pulls me in front of her. “Nathan. Stop torturing yourself and me... We are meant to be together.” Her face is twisted with emotion. “I had a reading with my guru, Mahindra Rama, and he said that our souls are entwined at our heart chakra.” Ingrid thumps my chest then repeats a thump to hers. “Do you know what that means, Nathan? It means that you can think that we are not together, but we are bound, spiritually, as in the spiritual realm and not in the physical, earth realm. This is powerful shit, Nathan. I hope you know how deep this goes.”

As I’m listening to Ingrid, it strikes me for the first time that this woman may well be mentally unhinged. I breathe in to begin to say something but realize that no matter what I say, she won’t be listening or accepting of the cold hard truth staring her in the face. I’m not angry, I’m tired. I walk away in the direction of the bar to find a drink: a stiff one. Ingrid stays, open-mouthed, where I left her, before making her way to the ladies’ room.

From the bar I can see people coming in, getting interviewed and photographed. I see Mimi and other members of the press encircle a couple who are in front of the logo banner fielding questions and laughing. After a few minutes, the next wave of guests enables their freedom and, to my surprise and delight, I see that it's Alfie. He is arm-in-arm with an absolute goddess who slinks in like a movie star. There's something familiar about her, but my attention is on my friend until the couple is almost within hearing distance away from me.

"Rosa? Is that you?" is all I say. Then, suddenly, I regain my composure and step forward to hug Alfie. "Buddie, so good to see you. I was beginning to think this was going to be a boring night." Alfie shakes my hand and says something about me being a boring person, but my attention is on Rosa.

"You look fabulous," I say and move to her, gently kissing her cheek and inhaling her intoxicating fragrance.

"Thanks," she says. "You don't look too bad yourself." She is smiling from her immaculately styled hair, all the way down to her sparkly high heels. We look at each other for a minute, having both forgotten Alfie. "Are you photographing me, Nathan?" asks Rosa, after a beat, which makes me laugh.

"What?" says Alfie, who is confused by Rosa's comment.

"Rosa is just reminding me, of when we first met," I say not taking my eyes from Rosa. "I was watching Rosa eat pizza and I was, rudely, staring, and Kendra said, 'Don't worry. He's photographing you. He can't help it'... Or something like that."

“Yes. That’s exactly what happened,” says Rosa.

“That’s right! Yes. Haha. She’s right, Nathan.” Alfie pats my shoulder. “You can’t help it, can you? Especially when the subject is as captivating as Rosa.”

Rosa looks down at the floor, clearly made self-conscious by Alfie’s comment. There’s an awkward pause until Alfie asks about the categories and the other nominees. He’s clearly excited.

“This is my year, Nate! I can just feel it.” He clenches his fists in front of his chest like a prizefighter in the ring. “Right, then. Let’s get a drink... Rosa. Champagne?”

“Lovely. Yes please,” Rosa says before excusing herself. She walks off to the ladies’ room.

As soon as Rosa is out of earshot, Alfie turns to me with the biggest, saddest eyes. “Nathan,” he says. “I think I am in love with that woman. She is so hot; I can hardly contain myself.” He fans his face with his hand. “I took a chance on asking her to come with me tonight. I didn’t think she would, you know. But...” He clenches his hands into fists again. “... she doesn’t even have a boyfriend. Can you believe it? Which means that woman is single! Honestly, I can’t believe my luck.” Alfie lowers his hands and pulls his shoulders back. “Nathan. You are my oldest friend, and you can tell me honestly. Do you think I have a chance with Rosa? Go on... The truth.” Alfie closes his eyes. “I can handle it.”

I’m not sure how to answer Alfie about The Truth. Should I tell my friend what he wants to hear or say, ‘Get in line,

buddy. Behind me.’ I sip some Champagne to buy some time, but thankfully, I am rescued by a gaggle of journos from The New York Times Magazine. They work with Alfie and are fizzing as much as the bubbly wine about their nominations. The Truth question is swept aside and replaced with, ‘Who do you think is going to get Journalist of the Year?’

Chapter 23

Rosa

Alfie is a sweetheart. He came to pick me up from my apartment even though he lives on the other side of town. He held open the back door of the taxi as I waved goodbye to Donna, Marlene, and Dolores who gave me the kind of sendoff you would expect from the crowd of Beyoncé fans when she performed at the Super Bowl.

I feel fantastic. I never believed in the magic of The Dress, but now I do. And heels. I think it has something to do with being elevated from your normal height. It's a mind trick. I actually feel taller, more regal. Just more. That is the magic of dressing up: it's the presentation to the world of the best version of you.

I walk down the steps to Alfie and the waiting taxi, the way Cinderella must have felt getting into the pumpkin carriage. If she was a real person, that is. Alfie is nervous, but he needn't be. I'm still the same Rosa who showed him around the center only a few weeks before.

"You look fantastic, Rosa," Alfie says, greeting me with a kiss on the cheek and a guiding arm around my waist.

My roommates cheer and whistle from the doorway attracting interest from passersby. I wave and grin and settle into the back seat of the cab. Alfie climbs in after me and we are away down the street to my roommates' fading cheers.

I tell Alfie that I like his article. He really captured the essence of the place and the people.

“I hope I did. It was Nathan’s photos that made the piece, though, wasn’t it? I don’t know how he does it, but every time it’s pure gold. The man’s a genius. And I’m not just saying that because he’s my friend.”

The mention of Nathan’s name causes me to smile involuntarily. Popcorn, ice cream, salsa dancing in the kitchen.

“We’ll see him tonight, probably. He’s up for a few categories.” This is news to me. I suddenly sit upright. My eyes are wide open. “Rosa, are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine... I just remembered something.”

The rest of the journey to the Midtown Hilton is spent in semi-relaxed chat, although my senses are heightened by the possibility of seeing Nathan. Alfie asks me about my family and whether I would consider dating an older man. When I say that I prefer older men, he replies with, ‘Oh well, that’s wonderful,’ and appears to fall into a happy trance with a big smile and eyes wide.

I’m a bit overwhelmed when we arrive at the red carpet, but I hope I’m not showing it. Broad-backed, dark-suited security guards dominate the cheering crowds lined up either side, behind velvet-rope barriers, as Alfie holds the taxi door open for me. Flashes of light make it hard to see. Alfie offers me his hand as I climb out with, what I hope is, dignity and grace. Someone in the crowd yells, ‘Is that Rihanna? Riri! Over here!’ I have to concentrate on walking in my new diamanté

sandals without wobbling. It's a technique I had been practicing up and down my bedroom. I channel the spirit of my inner Lizzo and do my best to strut.

Inside the lobby, we are descended upon by cameras and people with microphones who ask questions from all directions. They talk to Alfie about his nominations, then they ask about me. Am I in the new Mission Impossible? Was it true I signed with Sony? Who was I wearing? How was working with Pharrell Williams? Could I be considered 'A Date' or 'The Significant Other'? Alfie turns to me and smiles, telling the microphones that it's probably too early to say. Then we are directed to stand in front of a banner covered in logos for more photos, before being swept along on a tide of media interest.

"That was the worst of it. We can relax now and enjoy our evening," says Alfie, patting my hand, which is tucked around his upper arm. We make our way to the bar.

I'm still bewildered by the flashing lights and interview questions, it takes me a while for my eyes to adjust to the dim, intimate glow of the bar. Groups of people, chatting in twos and threes, are silhouetted with glasses in their hands. A tall, solitary figure stands alone. As we approach, his smiling eyes meet mine.

"Rosa? Is that you?"

My heart has leapt into my throat, and I have to swallow hard to suppress an eruption of joy from bubbling over, but it spills out as a giggle when I say, 'hi'. It hadn't crossed my

mind that Nathan would be here tonight. Not until Alfie mentioned it in the taxi. Of course, now that I'm here, it seems obvious that he would be one of the guests and nominees. I suppose I had been trying to put him out of my mind and focusing on an evening out, in a beautiful dress, with Alfie. I excuse myself and go to find the ladies' room in an attempt to calm down and re-apply some lipstick.

Two elegant women exit passed me when I go in. There's no one there so I take advantage of the full-length mirror. I want to remember myself, looking this good and being at a fancy event in Manhattan. I'm so pleased I bought this dress. And so grateful to Kendra for paying with her card. She is such a special friend.

As I have this thought, one of the stall doors opens, and a familiar blond steps out in front of me.

"Rosa? Is that you?" says Ingrid, her brow furrows as she looks me up and down.

"Ingrid. Hi. Gosh. What a surprise."

"You're telling me!... Surprise." Ingrid has lost her signature ice-cool demeanor and just looks shocked. We stare at each other in the full-length mirror. "Are you wearing my dress?" she snaps at me. "Is this some sort of a joke?" Ingrid looks around the ceiling. "Ah, yeah. I get it... Nice one." She waves at imaginary cameras. "Oh, you guys! This is a setup, right?... And this is when I'm supposed to freak out... Is that what's happening here? Have I just been punk'd, Ashton Kutcher? I didn't think you did that anymore. Is that still a thing?" Ingrid

turns to face me, looking directly into my eyes, her nostrils flaring like a bull about to charge. “Who put you up to this? Was it Larry? Haha. Well, Larry. The jokes on you, buddy,” she bellows at the ceiling.

Two women come into the ladies’ room, talking loudly, but when they see Ingrid and me, they instantly fall silent.

“Well, Ingrid, have a wonderful evening. I’ll see you later,” I say, seizing my chance to escape.

Once outside the door, I pause for a second to digest the surreal moment with Ingrid. The dress, although the same design in a different size, looks completely unrelated to the one I’m wearing, on the tall, thin blond model/ YouTube personality. Her body carried the folds and pleats of the fabric without showing her shape, unlike me, where my body was the main event. She wore her long straight hair down and had accessorized with cowboy-inspired snake-skin ankle boots and black gothic-themed necklaces. She looked amazing, but her styling made the dress look totally different. And I was pleased with the way it looked on me when we were standing side by side in front of the mirror.

Shoulders back and beaming confidence, I walk back to where Alfie is chatting to Nathan in the bar area, which has filled with stylish media people.

“Everything alright?” asks Alfie, handing me a tall glass fizzing with bubbles. Nathan smiles at me as if we share a secret.

“Couldn’t be better,” I reply, lifting my glass. “Here’s to winning... Cheers.”

An efficient-looking man tells us to please move into the auditorium as the award ceremony is about to begin.

Chapter 24

Nathan

The awards were, as expected, a mix of predictably obvious and off-the-wall curve balls. I was more than happy with my award for Artistic Expression, which focused on the art installation of black and whites at the One Two One Gallery. The judges said the standard of entries for this category made their job almost impossible. But there was an outright winner who showed that photography can be more than a two-dimensional experience and that this photographer continues to push the boundaries of the medium. When my name was called, I was genuinely surprised and delighted.

It takes me a few moments to gather myself and walk to the podium amid thunderous applause. As I blink in the cone of the spotlight, obscuring the sea of faces, I accept the Big Apple trophy from the chief judge and spokesperson of this category, who shakes my hand and says something to me that I don't hear. Eventually, the noise dies down. I take a moment to center myself. Clicks and camera flashes fill the expectant hush in the auditorium. I unfold a piece of paper: a short speech, just in case.

"I'm a bit overwhelmed," I begin, which causes a ripple of laughter. I mention the people who have supported me over the years. It's been a slow and steady journey to this point. "I'm definitely a tortoise and not a hare." I wait for the crowd to settle before continuing. "... And thank you, fellow members of the media industry for continuing to place New York front

and center on the world stage.” I look at the etched plastic hexagon bearing my name. A surge of emotion threatens to hijack my speech, so I wrap up quickly. “I have a great job and I’m so proud to be a part of this community. Thank you.”

People stop me to shake my hand and pat me on the back, as I make my way back to the table and my seat in between Alfie and Rosa. Alfie stands to hug me and Rosa’s eyes glint with gleeful happiness.

“Phew, that was intense,” I manage to say after a minute or two, although I’m still overwhelmed.

Alfie missed out on the categories for individual journalism, but the New York Times Magazine scooped up three. He excuses himself and leaves our table to congratulate his colleagues on their collective success. You can see he is as proud as Punch. Rosa and I are alone together: a quiet island in a sea of jubilation, as whooping and yelling media people mingle and celebrate noisily around us.

“What a wonderful night,” Rosa says, barely audible above the din. She looks around at the prize winners and their friends. “I had no idea that tonight would be this big... I feel as if I’m an imposter, a gatecrasher... With no business being here at all.”

“What do you mean? It was your article that inspired Alfie to write his piece, so you absolutely should be here...” I sit close to Rosa, in a bid to be heard. “And I’m so pleased that you are.” A fresh wave of noise and cheers washes over us as the final award is handed out. Excitement fills the air. After a few

minutes, I say, “Would you like a change of scene? ...Go somewhere else, perhaps?”

“Yes. That would be... nice. I’d like that. But...” Rosa’s gaze seeks out Alfie, who is in a knot of journalist mates all talking at once. “... we should go get Alfie.”

We stand to leave, and I catch Alfie’s eye. He comes over still laughing and sweaty. He mops his brow with a handkerchief.

“Not leaving already, are you?” Alfie says waving over to the mob he’s been talking with. He steadies himself on the back of a chair. “There are free drinks at the bar. Come on. Let’s go party!”

“Alfie, I think I’d like to go now,” says Rosa, gently. Her voice is almost lost.

“What?... Why?... The night’s just getting started.” Alfie says. His face plummets to the floor with disappointment. “Okay, then. Give me a minute. I’ll just say good night to the team.”

“No. You stay,” says Rosa. “You’re having a great time and you have something to celebrate, so...”

“Nah! Nah,” Alfie protests, reaching a hand out to Rosa. “I’ll make sure you get home safe.”

“Alfie,” I interject quietly. “I’ll make sure Rosa gets a cab. Don’t worry... Go and enjoy yourself. You deserve it.”

Alfie stops still. Something has dawned on him and he’s looking from me to Rosa and back again. He puts his arm

around me and pulls me to one side.

“Give me one minute, Rosa,” Alfie says over his shoulder. “Do you mind? I’ll be one minute.” Then he turns his face to me and leans in close. “Nathan,” he says directly to my ear. “I have a question for you.”

“Sure. Okay. Fire away.”

“How long have you been in love with Rosa?”

“Ahhh, is it that obvious?”

“Yes. It’s glaring like an arc lamp, Nate.” Alfie hiccups and repositions himself in front of me. He holds my shoulders and looks at me with bleary serious intent. “I’m not going to stand in your way, hic, in case you were wondering... hic, I know she’s out of my league, hic.” He looks back at Rosa and jovially waves at her. She waves back. “And, hic, she is totally into you.” I open my mouth to refute his observation, but he stops my words with an authoritative forefinger. “So, my friend, if you don’t make your move tonight, hic, you are probably going to risk losing that wonderful woman, hic.” Alfie’s face crumples into a cry. He slaps my chest so hard it almost hurts. “Nate. Ol’ buddy, hic, ol’ pal,” he says, as he buries his face into my shirt, releasing a sob and a whine. Regaining his dignity, somewhat, he pats my chest again, steps back, and takes a full deep breath, swaying slightly from side to side. His hand darts up in a military-style salute. Alfie nods to me then walks over to Rosa where he grabs her in a bear hug, before disappearing into the crowd of revelers.

“Shall we?” I say, offering Rosa my arm.

“Yes, let’s,” she says taking it. And we make our way to the exit.

Chapter 25

Rosa

Outside the Hilton, Saturday night is in full swing. It's only when I'm out on the street that I notice how claustrophobic I feel. It's a funny thing to think of New York air being fresh, but here I am breathing in a lung full. The banner with the logos has been put away. The red carpet rolled up for the next event and the lobby shows no sign of the earlier media excitement. Nathan and I face each other on the sidewalk, close together, as pedestrians flow around us.

"Okay, now what?" Nathan says, smiling at me.

"Well, it's your night. You choose."

"Alright, then. Are you hungry?"

"Starving."

Nathan steps into the street of honking restless traffic and flags down a taxi. We get in and he tells the driver the address.

"I hope you like French food," Nathan says, settling back in the seat. "This place is kind of special. I think it will suit your dress."

We ride a few blocks south, leave the cab, and enter an older building through a decorative wooden double door with etched glass windows, which allow welcoming rectangles of yellow light to spill onto the ground outside. The wood-paneled interior of the lobby suggests an elegant Art Deco era with a tall cuboid, glass pendant central light. Small square black and white marble tiles cover the floor. Nathan steers me to the

elevator at the far end and presses the call button on the brass panel at the side where an engraved sign reads, La Belle Nuit. Apart from the street sounds outside, it's quiet. There's no one else around.

The elevator doors slide open with a resounding ting. I step inside and Nathan follows.

“The story goes that this place was a speakeasy, way back when,” Nathan says as he presses the button for the top floor. “In a time of prohibition when having a good time was deemed detrimental to the nation...” The door closes. “... when certain pleasurable pastimes were banned... illegal...” We stand side by side facing the door. “You could be put in jail for having a beer with your buddies... Or a glass of Champagne with a beautiful woman.”

“Imagine that,” I say, my voice barely a whisper, although I'm imagining something else pleasurable that is out of bounds, but tantalizingly within reach. Nathan and I watch, above the door, as the needle slowly tracks our progress up through each level. We are so close my upper arm lightly brushes the fabric of Nathan's jacket sending a shiver through me. I concentrate on the circles of lights illuminating one by one on the arc of the indicator panel. I inhale Nathan's scent and breathe deeply, swept away by his manly presence, so, so close. In the next moment, unexpectedly, I turn towards him, my hand slowly reaching up, barely touching the black satin lapel of his jacket.

“Nathan, I...” I don’t know how to ask, or what his reaction will be. For a moment, time stands still until, looking deep into his eyes, which are soft and searching, I say, “Kiss me.”

“Oh, Rosa,” he murmurs, as he wraps his arms around me, pulling me gently to him, slowly bending to where his lips meet mine.

My arms extend around his neck, pulling him closer, and I press my body against his. We are lost in the kiss that I have imagined for the longest time. But the reality is so much better. I am transported to another place. We’re flying to the moon on a magic carpet. Shooting stars whizz overhead. Then, ting, the elevator stops with a bump, and the doors slide open to the sounds of loungey jazz music and chatter of La Belle Nuit. Our kiss is interrupted. We both look out of the open door. I prepare myself to leave the elevator. But instead of releasing me, Nathan reaches over to hit the button for the ground floor, and the doors slide shut again. I don’t think anyone noticed. And I don’t care because I am kissing the most beautiful man I have ever met, in my slinky black dress, in an elevator. This is the best night of my life.

When the elevator tings open at the ground floor, Nathan pauses our kiss, pulling me closer as if he will never let me go.

“How about we go up and get that glass of Champagne, beautiful woman?”

“Yes please... and maybe some French fries?”

We share one more lavish, luxurious kiss on the way back up and I can’t stop smiling. I’m tingly all over and have an

overwhelming urge to shout out, ‘Yipeeee’. Soulful piano music meets us when the elevator door opens again at the top-floor restaurant. We saunter, hand in hand, towards the soft amber light surrounding the bar. Glass bottles on the back wall glow like jewels.

A smartly dressed young man approaches and says, “Welcome to La Belle Nuit, monsieur, madam. Are you here to eat?” Nathan nods. “Table for two?” He looks down at his iPad screen. “Do you have a reservation?” When Nathan tells him no, the man sucks in his cheeks, shakes his head, and furrows his brow. “One minute, please. Take a seat at the bar and I’ll get your table ready.” He moves off and says something to a waiter.

I perch on one of the bar stools and Nathan sits beside me, entwining his fingers in mine.

“That was quite a kiss,” he says, looking at me, smiling shyly. “I could have happily kept hitting that elevator button a few more times.”

I laugh, and squeeze Nathan’s hand. “Oh my! Such a nice kiss.” It was up there with the one from ‘The Notebook’, for sure. The barman comes over to take our order. “Champagne? Of course. We’re celebrating.”

“Congratulations,” says the barman. “And what’s the happy occasion, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“The best kiss ever,” says Nathan without missing a beat. “It’s official.”

“Well then, that is truly something to celebrate,” the barman says as he prepares the ice bucket for our Champagne. He moves away to get the glasses.

“I have to admit that I have wanted to kiss you for a while now,” Nathan says, suddenly serious, still holding my hand.

“Well, Nathan Ellis, I have been patiently waiting for you to do so.”

The barman pours out two flutes of deliciously bubbly wine, then leaves the bottle in the ice bucket. We each lift our glasses.

“To the best kiss... and our first kiss,” Nathan says, looking deep into my eyes.

“Which implies there will be more,” I say, taking a sip.

“I hope so.” Nathan drinks his Champagne, holding my gaze.

The waiter comes over to say that our table is ready. He picks up the ice bucket and we follow him through the arrangement of tables to one by the window with a view of the terrace, which is enclosed by an elaborate wrought iron balcony, entwined with ivy and strings of white fairy lights. The waiter lights a candle in the middle of the table and says that he’ll be back to take our order. The menu is on the table in front of me, although the butterflies in my stomach have chased away any thought of food.

“So, I guess, we have crossed a line,” Nathan says, perusing his menu.

A tinkling piano plays in the farthest corner. The dinner rush has been and gone and has been replaced by the late-night theater crowd who occupy some of the tables in twos and small intimate groups. We are far enough away from the other diners, so their conversation is a distant blur punctuated by occasional laughter.

“I guess we have.” I smile at Nathan.

Yes. A line has been crossed with That Kiss. It poses the question, ‘What next?’ But I am indulging in the wonderful moment, basking in the glow of what the kiss means. Blissful feelings bubble up and fill me, sparkling, like celebration Champagne fizz in a glass.

Chapter 26

Nathan

We have crossed the line. I know we have, but as Alfie said, if I didn't act soon, I would risk losing Rosa forever and I couldn't take that chance.

The kiss in the elevator. Wow. It was Rosa who made the first move. I simply followed. I was standing there beside her, trying to figure out when, how, and what I was going to do to get my point across; to let her know what I was feeling for her. Then, she turned to me and said, 'Kiss me', which was exactly what I wanted to do. So, I did.

It was as if we were in a movie: one of those glamorous Noir films where the hero finally gets the gal. Except our kiss was better than anything Hollywood could conjure. It truly was a magic moment that I wanted to go on and on. I had imagined Rosa's soft lips and wrapping my arms around the sumptuous curves of her body, but the reality was so much more.

I felt, with that kiss, we had altered our course. We had stepped through a portal where our futures were parallel. Whatever we were and whatever we did, from that moment, we did together. My life had changed, profoundly, with one kiss, in an elevator going up to a speakeasy bar. Rosa was now a part of my world, and I didn't want to live in a world without her.

So, we would need to come clean with Kendra, which was sure to alter the dynamic of our relationship, as well as that of

Kendra's friendship with Rosa. I hope she'll be supportive, but I really don't know.

Rosa scans the menu and orders French fries when the waiter comes over.

"I'm not supposed to fall for my best friend's brother," Rosa says, smiling at me, looking mock coy. "It's not allowed... Off-limits..." She looks around La Belle Nuit. "A bit like this bar in prohibition." She laughs and I lean over to kiss her.

"Yes, extreme pleasure is detrimental to the nation and should be banned." I lick my lips which taste of Rosa. "Does the off-limits factor make the pleasure more desirable?" I ask, reaching for the Champagne bottle in the ice bucket. Wiping off the condensation with a serviette, I top up our glasses, then replace the bottle. "Would you still be attracted to me if you met me in... well, this place?" I sip from my glass, trying not to think about our age difference. I absentmindedly touch the grey hair, I know is there, at my temples. I dispel an image of Rosa here with a younger, more attractive man. "Or would you even notice me?" I surprise myself with this sudden lack of confidence.

Rosa laughs. Her eyes shine in the candlelight. She leans back in her chair appraising me, which is unnerving and exciting in equal measure. Her earrings glint playfully.

"Nathan." She leans towards me and strokes my hair, then traces a finger across my cheek and down my neck. "You are the most handsome man I have ever seen: a total silver fox. And so much more interesting than any man my age... if that's

what you are concerned about.” She laughs again. “If I saw you here tonight, I would...” Rosa laughs again. “... I would want to make some excuse to come over and talk to you, but I would be too shy... Then I’d be staring...” She thinks for a minute. “... and it would be weird and awkward. And I would probably feel so self-conscious I would need to leave.” She sips her wine. “But, you know, being handsome isn’t top of my attractive man requirements list.”

“Oh, there’s a list, is there?”

“Certainly is.”

“So, what’s at the top of your attractive man requirements list, if handsome, isn’t up there?”

Rosa leans against me, licks her lips, and whispers, “Great taste in movies... and ice cream.”

We kiss. And there’s a pause in conversation as we drink our Champagne. The French fries arrive with a small dish of aioli and another of plum sauce.

“I’m starving,” Rosa says, using her fingers, and not a fork, to take a piece of fried potato, dipping it, before offering it to me. I bite it in two, with relish. The French fries are perfectly golden and piping hot. We eat in silence, and I’m distracted by couples making use of the secluded terrace. I’m thinking about, perhaps, making use of the terrace myself, until Rosa says, “That kiss... the one in the elevator.”

“Yes. Very nice. What about it?”

“It was just a kiss, right?” Rosa is looking at me. Her face is open and questioning.

“And what if I told you, that it was just a kiss, and didn’t mean anything... And we should forget all about it and leave it at that...” I pick up my Champagne glass and look at Rosa over the rim. “I’m a big-time, award-winning photographer.” I put the glass down and reach into my pocket, retrieving the Perspex hexagon with my name etched on it, placing it, dramatically, on the table. “... and I do this sort of thing all the time.”

“Then, I would tell you, you’re a big fat liar.” Rosa chomps another chip and winks at me. We continue eating in contented quiet before Rosa asks, “Are you going to talk to Kendra?”

“About...?” I gaze around as if I’ve lost something. Rosa thumps my arm. “Oh, you mean, we should let her know about us?” I lean back in my chair, rubbing the place where Rosa hit me as if it actually hurt.

“I think you should tell her,” Rosa says. “It would be better coming from you.”

The award on the table is small and irrelevant. The evening at the Midtown Hilton, with all the media hype and important people, pales in comparison to this moment and the realization that everything I have always dreamed of is here with me now. I pick up the last French fry, dip it in what’s left of the aioli and plum sauce, then hold it up for Rosa to bite. Then, we kiss again.

Chapter 27

Rosa

I call Kendra the next day. She wants to know all about my night in The Dress. And she wants to tell me all about her night and a guy she met. We arrange to meet for lunch on her side of the river this time, at Happy Cat in Chinatown.

I'm excited about seeing my best friend, but I know that Nathan probably hasn't told her about us yet, so I have to keep reminding myself not to say anything. If she brings it up, then that's a different matter. I need to keep a lid on my emotions and tread carefully. Kendra is my best friend, but I have no idea how she will react to news that I kissed her brother. And that it was so much more than just a kiss.

I've never felt like this before about anyone. I am shiny new. Being with Nathan brings out the best in me. I feel that the elevator kiss was the start of something that has our future bound up in it; as if we are somehow different people than we were before. I want things to be perfect with him. It seems right that Kendra hears about us from her brother and not me. I will let him tell her, in his own good time. I hope she'll be pleased for us.

Walking from the subway, I am still buzzing from our beautiful evening. I was too excited, thinking about Nathan, to get much sleep. After dinner at La Belle Nuit, we walked around a bit, holding hands, kissing some more, and talking about Nothing and Everything. It was so blissful; I didn't want to say goodnight. There was a moment in the taxi, when

Nathan dropped me off, where I felt like asking him to stay, so we didn't have to say good night. But, we agreed that now we had crossed the line to something more than just friends, anything more could wait. We had the rest of our lives to get to know each other. Nathan said he wanted to savor every step and not rush things. So, I'll have to be patient.

Kendra has already claimed a table at Happy Cat and I can tell she is about to burst with excitement when I walk in. She stands to hug me and then we sit down. She pours green tea into two tiny porcelain cups.

“Rosa. I can't tell you how I feel. Everything has changed overnight.”

“Wow, Kendra. Drink some tea to calm yourself, then try... Start at the beginning.”

“No. I want to hear about your night first. Was it amazing? Did you meet Harry and Meghan? Were they ever so royal?” Kendra beams at me, then says, “I saw Nathan's trophy. He left it on the kitchen counter with a note saying it was the best night of his life.”

I almost choke mid-sip, and I'm desperate to say, ‘I kissed Nathan and we're in love and everything is incredible’, but I don't. I say, “You first.”

“Well, Rob, that's his name, we met last month at that awful conference in Washington. He was the only good thing about it, although we didn't really connect then. We said hi, and that's about it.”

A smiling waiter in a pink apron comes over and carefully lays out on our table, serviettes, stainless steel chopsticks, and white porcelain spoons with pictures of sinuous blue dragons. She tells us the set menu will arrive dish by dish in order, from soup and noodles, to barbeque ribs and rice, with lychees to finish. She nods and smiles and returns to the kitchen through a decorative curtain printed with a large pink smiling cat, waving a paw.

“The food here is legendary,” says Kendra. “You have to turn up early to get a table or risk the disappointment of being turned away.”

“So, back to your night... Rob. What happened?”

“Okay. Then last night,” Kendra continues, rapidly. “He turns up at this bar I’m at with the girls from work, and he comes over. So, at this point, I’m thinking, ‘Oh yeah, he’s a nice guy. Super friendly, but not hitting on me, or the other girls. He’s just... normal. Can you believe it?’” We laugh.

“Wow, Ken. You met a guy who’s normal... in New York.” I roll my eyes and laugh some more. “Is he gay?”

“No! No, he’s not gay... He’s just nice with a capital N. So...”

“So?”

“He says his friend is in a band and they’re playing a gig just down the road. And he’s in the bar with a couple of friends and did we want to join them?”

“Cool, so I’m guessing you did?”

“Yes! That’s exactly what happened. Then the other girls weren’t up for a big night, and they went home. So, it was me and Rob and his friends. We went to this really cool club somewhere in SoHo, downstairs in a basement. I’ve probably walked past it a thousand times not knowing it was there. That sort of a place.”

“And how was the band?”

“Just terrible. So out of tune and the singer was kind of wailing... Or that could be just me. They might be, what do you call it? Avant Garde. Is that still a thing? Anyway... We stayed there for a few songs, then Rob asked me if I wanted to go to a party. So, we went!”

Kendra takes a break from her story to eat some soup and noodles that have arrived on a tray. We make appreciative comments about the bowls of tasty noodley heaven, then Kendra resumes where she left off.

“And the party is close by, so we walk. He is so nice. Did I say that?”

“Yes. A number of times. But please continue.”

“Right, thanks. The party is up on the top floor of one of those old-style buildings with the fire escape ladder on the side, like in ‘West Side Story’. And it’s really cool. It’s an architect’s place and everything has been handmade. And there’s art everywhere. You know, the place is designed with a capital D. And there’s a DJ playing some funky tunes and before I know it, I’m dancing. And yes, with Rob. And we’re dancing. Phew. So much fun.”

“That’s so great! So did you... you know?”

“No! No. No no no. Not a kiss or anything. But he was the perfect gentleman, and he has my number... so... Fingers crossed.”

The ribs and rice come steaming to our table. Kendra takes another break, and we get messy in the glutenous, rich red rib sauce. Afterward, we clean our hands in the finger bowls and dry them on the serviettes.

Kendra drinks more green tea and gazes across the tiny restaurant at the other diners. Then, out of the blue, she says, “I think Nathan is seeing someone.”

“Oh yeah?” I try to sound surprised and not that interested. “How do you know? Has he mentioned any names?”

“No. Not yet. And I don’t think he brought her home last night. Not that I was looking for clues or anything. But he said something at dinner last week. We were talking about Ingrid, and he was saying how he has totally moved on. Then he said that actually there was a ‘special someone’.” She acts out the quotation for effect. “I’m curious... I wanted him to tell me who she is, but he said that I would be the first to know when he was sure.”

“Ah, mmm, good.”

“Rosa. I know you think he’s a bit, you know, stuck-up and everything, but he is a very sensitive soul. And I’ve been worried about him.” Kendra pours out more green tea and thinks for a moment. “When he broke up with Ingrid, he just

threw himself into work. Like a maniac.” She fills my cup and then hers. “Even more so than when he and Ingrid were together. And I mean he worked a lot then. They both did...” Kendra sips her tea. “Anyway, so I guess I was wrong about him getting back together with her.” She laughs. “Typical Nathan. He wants to be friends, but she still thinks she’s in with a chance. Poor Ingrid. He’s had to put distance between them, so hopefully, she gets the message.”

“He didn’t give you any clues about who this special someone is?”

“No. Probably a model or maybe a journalist? He knows a lot of people. But it’s rare he allows anyone to get close. He’s quite a private person really.”

“I’m sure he’ll let you know when he’s ready.”

“Yes. I know he will.” Kendra looks wistfully out of the steamed-up restaurant window to the street where people are walking up and down. “I love my brother. And I want him to be happy... I just have the feeling that whoever he meets is going to be second best to photography. If she wants to be with Nathan, whoever she is... she’ll probably have to accept him how he is and change her life to fit, because I don’t see him ever, adapting his life for anyone.”

Are you sure about that? I mean if he’s met The One. The person who he wants to spend the rest of his life with, then surely, he’ll meet her halfway?”

“I would love to say yes, but I just don’t see it happening. He is so focused and driven. He has spent years striving to be the

best, he doesn't know any other way to be. I mean, we're flatting together, but I swear, if we didn't make appointments to see each other, it might be days or even weeks until we connect."

"So, what would you say to her? This woman that Nathan is seeing, ...if she was sitting in front of you right now."

"I think I just want to warn her. I would say something like, be prepared to live in his shadow. Something like that, so she's under no illusion about what to expect. My brother, well, he's not normal." She laughs.

"Like Rob?"

"Yes, well, we'll see how that pans out... He might not even call me. I might have invented the whole thing because I want it to be real and I've filled in the blanks with my own imagination of how I want things to be."

I relax back against the restaurant wall and think maybe I have filled in the blanks with Nathan. My first-kiss glow dims as Kendra's words begin to sink in. I wanted to be with Nathan, but at what cost? I saw my future self, alone in his apartment, waiting for him to call from a far-off place; counting down the days and hours when he would return; counting the days and hours until his next job would take him away again. Is that really my future? I shake it off.

"So, I've been blathering on." Kendra interrupts my thoughts. "And you haven't told me anything about your night."

I smile. “It was wonderful,” I say, dreamily. “The best night of my life.”

Chapter 28

Nathan

I'm so happy. I'm finding it hard not to smile, even when it's raining. I get funny looks in the street and at the grocery store from unsmiling people. I wake up with memories of kissing Rosa in the elevator. What a wonderful way to start the day! But, also, suddenly I'm nervous because now I have something to lose. I wonder how she feels about me. And if I have been so caught up with The Kiss, I have completely misread what's going on between us. It's as if there's a picture of Rosa and me, together, softly appearing like a silver tint photograph in the dark room. The outline and tonal contrasts, not yet solid, are taking shape. But at this early stage, the image is delicate and easily ruined if due care is not taken. The responsibility is mine. I don't want to mess things up. And I don't want to risk getting hurt. Proceed with caution, I tell myself in the bathroom mirror.

Alfie called me the day after the media awards to find out if his prediction had come true. But I'm not one to kiss and tell. I told him that, yes, we had shared a lovely evening, and left it at that. Being a true journo, he tried to get more detail by asking the same question in a variety of ways. I made some excuse and hung up. He'll forgive me. Alfie's a good sort.

I want to call Rosa, but I don't want to scare her off with being too... much. I don't want to rush things. But then... I want to surprise her after work. What if I turned up unannounced at the center? What would she say? Would she

be pleased to see me? It might be awkward. I remind myself to proceed with caution. I'll call to make sure she doesn't have plans or anything. Or message. I'm leaving for Los Angeles in a couple of days, and I can't leave without seeing her, even if it's just for coffee or a casual meet-up. I start typing a message on my phone, then delete what I have written straight away because it sounds too business-like. I try again, hoping it's the right tone. 'Hey. Thinking about you. Are you free sometime this week?'

The reply arrives when I'm sorting out my gear for the L.A. shoot. 'Sure. Dinner? 8?' My heart flips a double somersault triple twist. I punch the air. Then feel self-conscious. Thankfully, I'm on my own in my bedroom and no one saw my display of sheer, unbounded joy.

As I'm sorting out my camera kit and following up on job leads, an email pops up. 'Urgent: date change.' It's from the production company in Beverly Hills. Is there any chance I could come earlier? There's a meeting with the designers, art director, and finance. I should be there. Sorry for the late request. Blah blah blah. This was typical of L.A. I should have predicted the date change. I would need to rebook my ticket and leave tonight. I check availability of flights. There's one direct at ten. I could make that. I email Beverly Hills back to say I'm on my way. Then I message Rosa to ask if we can do dinner earlier.

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I'm packed and ready. I have all my bags with me when I meet Rosa at The Turkish Kitchen. She waves to me from a table in the far corner. Her face lights up when she sees me, but then the light goes out when her eyes drop to my bags. We greet each other with a warm hug. I dump my baggage and hold her. She feels so good, I don't want to let her go. It's the first time I've seen her since the awards night. She's dressed down tonight, in jeans and sweatshirt, which suits me fine. She's so beautiful, she would look great wearing a sack.

"Hi," I finally say as I release my hold and sit down on the bench seat beside Rosa. "How have you been?"

Rosa reaches for my hand and kisses it, then tells me about her week: the funny things that have happened in her apartment block and the updates at the center.

"The mural is looking great," she says. "And the plans for the official unveiling party are coming together." Rosa smiles up at me. "I have a brilliant team of volunteers, but there's still a million things to do."

"Ah great! I'm sure you have everything under control. It'll be amazing, because you are amazing," I say, kissing her again. "Am I invited?"

"Of course, you are my plus one." Rosa scoots closer to me. I put my arms around her and kiss her. And keep kissing her until she breaks away and says, nodding towards my heaped-up bags, "Are you going to photograph our falafel wraps?"

"No. No, I have a job in Los Angeles." I check the time on my phone. "It was supposed to be in a couple of days, but the

date got brought forward, so...”

“Ah, okay. That’s why the early dinner, huh?”

“Yeah, I need to get going soon.”

Rosa doesn’t say anything but stares straight ahead. I tell her I’ll be back in a few days. We’ll pick up where we left off, right? It’s the nature of this line of work. Rosa nods, slowly, but the warmth has gone from The Turkish Kitchen. I’m desperate to get it back and start talking about random things.

The precious minutes whoosh passed. We don’t really have time to eat. I check the time again and get my falafel wrap to go. Suddenly, we are on the sidewalk and I’m waving down a cab to take me to the airport. A taxi pulls over and I load my stuff. We kiss before I slide into the backseat. Rosa passes me my camera bag.

“I’ll call you, okay?” I say through the open window. “It’s just a couple of weeks.”

Rosa doesn’t say anything, but waves to me as the cab merges with the traffic on the way to JFK. I watch her until she is out of sight.

There’s a strange ache in my chest as I move further away from Rosa toward the airport. She looks small and vulnerable on the sidewalk. It’s as if I’ve abandoned her. A wave of panic sweeps through me. I suddenly feel compelled to yell, Stop! at the driver and tell him to turn around because I can’t possibly leave the city, or the woman I love.

Well, there it is. The ‘L’ word. Out in the open.

Chapter 29

Rosa

Kendra's words ring in my ears as I watch Nathan's cab disappear into the night-time stream of cars, trucks, buses, bikes, and taxis. I'm not sure how long I stood there on the sidewalk outside The Turkish Kitchen, but eventually, I shook off the trance that was rooting me to the spot, and I walked to the bus stop feeling sad and alone.

Is this the life I want? I knew all about Nathan, and how he is, when I kissed him. I should just accept that as fact. Or I should be clear with him, sooner rather than later, that perhaps I had made a mistake. I laugh at myself as I wait for the bus to Bergenline Avenue. What the hell, Rosa! Should have thought of that before you accepted Nathan's invitation to drinks after the awards, girl. What did you think was going to happen? You, all dressed up, sexy as all hell, and him so, so attractive in his suave tuxedo and bow tie, just like James Bond, only better looking. Now look what you've done. Did you think that you could kiss Nathan Ellis, your best friend's brother, award-winning photographer, and things would be just tickety-boo? Ha!

The bus pulls in. Doors open. People get out. People get on. I almost forget to get on, I'm so lost in my thoughts. I sit down and allow the rocking motion to soothe my turbulent mind. I want to talk to Kendra about what's going on, but that's probably not a good idea, considering Nathan hasn't said if he has talked to her yet.

I pull my phone from my bag and dial Tia's number. A talk with Grandma usually does the trick. Her phone clicks straight to voicemail. Disappointed, I look out of the window at the passing parade of street life. I begin typing a message to Nathan. Then instantly delete it. What did I want to say? I don't actually know.

I decide to talk with Nathan when he gets back from Los Angeles. It's not the sort of conversation I want to have on the phone. But then, I think, why am I being so uptight about a kiss? Why am I attaching so much importance and meaning to it? It was just a kiss and not a contract. I am a grown woman and not a silly schoolgirl, so why am I riding an emotional rollercoaster? My happiness does not depend on male attention. I should be more mature. More in charge of my destiny. More cool.

I retrieve my phone again and scroll through magazine articles to get some clues on how to be in this situation.

There's one that discusses dating versus relationship. Know where you are on the scale of 'exclusivity'. Well, what the hell does that even mean?

When you meet someone you're attracted to, don't think you need to stop looking for Mr Right. Cast your net wide. Be open to date a different guy depending on the day of the week and your outfit choice. A few dates down the line you can decide if you want to turn the dating into a relationship. Then you can have the conversation about the 'mutual exclusive clause' and move along to your happily-ever-after or not.

I am plunged into depression after reading this. Where was the romance? Where was the love? The ‘mutually exclusive clause’? What about the feeling of an inner knowing? That in a magical moment, the man I kissed already had my heart. There was no negotiation. I was already signed, sealed, and delivered. Was I just being foolish wanting more than Nathan could give?

I’m still weighing up my options when the bus drives through my neighborhood. After the Big Apple awards night and the elevator kiss, I had wild imaginings of me being all loved up and feeling on top of the world, wafting around in a pretty pink love bubble. But the opposite is true. I don’t feel good at all.

I close out of the magazine app as the bus pulls in and stops. It’s still early. I’m restless and I don’t want to go back to my apartment just yet. I point my feet to the dance studio. There’s an advanced salsa class about to start. I’ll dance my troubles away. Salsa is my happy place, after all.

I can hear music as I climb the stairs. Raul is presiding. He turns down the volume and welcomes everyone to class with three loud hand claps. His bossy, heavily accented voice resounds. “Places, por favor. Boys here, girls over there. Bueno.”

I take off my jacket and dump it, with my bag, on one of the chairs around the sides of the dance floor. I find a space with a group of women of varying ages. We stand opposite the

mirror. I recognize some of the faces and smile, nod, and mouth, 'hola'.

Raul demonstrates the step. First for the men, on their side. Then for the women as he says, "Es muy muy importante... It's very very important, do not move on the fourth or the eight beat. Got it? It's like these numbers no exist. Lemme show you." He walks everyone through the step, slowly, three times: the basic step, then a turn for the ladies, then back to basic. "Okay, now it's your turn. Slowly. And then with the music. Listos chicos? Vamos."

Fortunately for me, it's a step I already know, so I don't waste too much brain power on it. The movement and mental focus are recalibrating my mind away from Nathan. After a while, I'm not even thinking about him at all. Well, maybe a little bit.

Raul plays the track, and the class repeats the new step in time with the music up loud. I'm at the back, furthest away from the mirror and I'm dancing, so caught up with the rhythm, I keep dancing when the music stops.

"Thank you, boys and girls," says Raul. "Now we put it all together with a partner." Raul holds out his hand at shoulder height. "Lemme show you... Rosa. Ven."

I thought that I had sneaked in unnoticed, but this clearly isn't the case. I don't want to hold up the class, so I do as I am told by my teacher. Raul places one hand on my back and the other lightly supports my hand. He counts out loud, as we move, with emphasis on the one, two, three, five, six, and

seven. After our demo, he claps his hands and arranges the guys in a circle in the middle facing outwards, and tells the ladies to each stand in front of one of the men.

“Is like this. When I say change, ladies, you step left to the next guy. Men you stay where you are and, this way, we get to dance with everyone. Bueno. Vamos.”

The music starts and the class practices the steps. My first partner is Mellors. He is here with his lovely wife, Sofia. They are regulars at the dance studio. You can tell that he was a very handsome younger man because he is still very handsome with close-cropped white hair and deep chocolate leathery skin. Even in his senior years, he carries himself with a generous dignity and smiles all the time.

Raul shouts, ‘Change’, and I move to the left and on to my next partner. When the track ends, Raul announces that it’s time for free dance.

“We have music for an hour, maybe more, depending... So, find a partner, introduce yourselves and... dance! I’ll be here for if you need me... Okay... Vamos. Let’s go!”

This is my favorite part of the class. I get to practice the salsa steps with different partners. It’s always fun to dance with someone, but not all partners suit my rhythm. The man is supposed to lead, but some men take this too literally and the dance becomes a sort of battle. The best partners move with consideration of the woman. He guides but doesn’t dominate. He always dances in a way to make his partner look good.

After a while, I take a break to watch the couples moving around together. I learn a lot from watching. Not just about dance steps but how people interact. I'm drawn to Mellors and Sofia. They dance like two people in love. He holds her as if she is the most beautiful woman in the world. It's obvious they adore each other. They laugh. Perhaps they have made a mistake. Then Mellors walks Sofia over, holding her hand. She sits down on the chair next to mine.

"Oooh, I need a rest," says Sofia, fanning herself with her hand. She straightens her skirt. Mellors has gone to get a drink for us from the water cooler. I say something about how beautifully they dance together.

"I can't imagine our life without dancing," Sofia says with a chuckle. "Even when we have the most horrible disagreements, I'm grumpy and I can't even look at him... I'll go to the kitchen and start chopping vegetables." She mimes the action as if she's using a machete and not a kitchen knife. "And then, after a while, I hear salsa music. My husband comes and stands in the doorway with that annoying smile and his handsome ways. He doesn't say anything. He holds out his hand like this." Sofia raises her hand, palm up. "And that's it. I melt every time. And we dance. And he says sorry for whatever it is. Usually, it's his fault." Sofia shrugs. "But, you know, mostly we hardly have those grumpy moments. It's better to be happy, yes?"

Mellors comes back with cups of water for us. He's still smiling as he sits down and reaches for his wife's hand. We watch the other dancers and sip our water. As I watch, I realize

what is missing. I realize what I want. I want a partner who will dance with me, and adore me, for the whole of my life. And yes, I wanted exclusive. One hundred percent. Passion. Romance. Love. I didn't want to share. I'm rubbish at sharing anyway, but the idea of dating other men and casting my net wide seemed to be the opposite of Sofia and Mellors. In a flash, I fast forward fifty years and see myself as Sofia. But who is my Mellors? Could it be Nathan?

When Nathan's taxi drove away, I thought my heart would break. I felt that I would always be watching him leave or waiting for him to come back. I don't want to feel that. I want to feel as if I am the most important thing in his life. Exclusively. Always and forever. I don't want to be second best to anything.

Chapter 30

Nathan

I like the West Coast. There's a relaxed confidence that you don't get in New York. It seems as if winning the award in the Artistic Expression category has impressed the right people over here in L.A. I should think about increasing my fee. But, nah. Maybe later.

The meeting with the art director and designer went well. I've worked with them both before, so there should be no surprises. The fashion label is doing a line in shabby chic and is doing a joint promotion for the winery which is the location for the shoot. The models are going to be styled with lots of loose hair; silk scarves and ribbons in autumn shades. They want dreamy; soft lighting; in the vineyard with vines and grapes, and glinting sunshine through the leaves. Then interior shots in the rustic tasting room, with bottles and glassware with subtle product placement. We have a couple of days to prep, then it's all on.

After the shoot, I've scheduled a meeting for a potential job at Universal, that looks promising. So, I'll hang out at Venice Beach. Get some surf action in while I'm here.

I call Rosa from my hotel room, overlooking the beach. I'm excited to talk to her and hear her voice. I listen to the rings as I watch the pageant of beach life stroll, skate, bike, and run past beneath my balcony. The waves are rolling onto the sand in even sets. No wind. No chop. It's serene. It's a perfect afternoon.

“Nathan! Hi,” Rosa says after a few rings. “How are you? How’s L.A.?”

I can tell she’s pleased to hear from me. She has a smile in her voice, and I’m relieved about that. I tell her about the meeting and the possibility of another job.

“That’s great news!”

It’s so good to hear her. Part of me wishes I was back in New York. Then out of the blue, I say, “Rosa. I have an idea. Take some time off and come over here. I have a wonderful hotel room, overlooking the beach. You could hang out and relax while I’m in the meeting, then we could hang out and relax together. What do you think?”

I’m listening to quiet on the line for some moments before Rosa says, “That’s a lovely idea, Nathan, but I’m pretty busy getting things ready for the unveiling party. I need to be here. It’s all hands on deck at the moment.”

“Alright. Just come for the weekend. I’ll buy your ticket.”

Rosa breathes into the handset. “Ahh, I don’t know. That’s such a nice thought, but I’m a bit flat out.” She sounds distant. Further than just New York. She sounds as far away as if she is on another planet. “Okay. Sorry, just a minute...” I can hear other voices on the line. “Nathan, I’ve got to go now... Good luck with Universal. I’ll call you soon, okay?” She hangs up.

I feel uneasy and deflated. I so wanted her to say, ‘Yes, I’ll be on the next plane out of here. I can’t wait to see you. It’s been too long already.’ But she didn’t.

I get myself ready and go out to hire a board.



The clarity I was hoping for out on the waves, unfortunately, isn't there. The niggle that I felt when I hung up the call to Rosa is still buzzing around like a mosquito. After a shower I settle on the balcony with an ice-cold Sol as the sun descends to the horizon, lighting up the scene in pinks and oranges. Memories of the elevator kiss play out against the beauty surrounding me. Rosa should be here to share this with me. I picture her sitting on the other chair on my balcony. I imagine how pretty she would be in this soft pinkish lighting: the breeze gently lifting the curls of her hair. The smile in her eyes when she turns to me to say something about how happy she is. Then, I am left feeling as empty as the chair. She isn't here and it's almost painful.

I call Kendra. I feel it's time to tell my sister that I'm in love with her best friend. I'm crossing my fingers that she'll be okay with it. The last thing I want is to change anything between us. And anything that is going to change things with them.

I attempt to organize my thoughts as I wait for Kendra to answer her phone. I almost bottle out and hang up when she says, "Hey Nate. What's up?"

We talk about this and that. She seems pleased but surprised to hear from me. It is a little unusual for us to talk on the phone outside of important information, and then it's in message form and not a call.

“So, Nathan. Why are you calling me?”

“I just wanted to know how you are.”

“Well, thanks. I’m just fine.”

“That’s good...” There’s empty air on the line as I think about what to say next.

“And?”

“And the surf here is perfect. The best it’s been at Venice for a long time.”

“That’s great, Nathan... But you didn’t call me up to give me a surf report. So, are you going to tell me the real reason for your call or am I going to have to guess?”

“Kendra.” I take a deep breath. “I have something I need to tell you.”

I can hear my sister laughing. “What Nathan? For crissake spit it out.” Before I can get a sentence together Kendra bursts out with, “Oh my! Who is she? Who are you seeing? What’s her name? Oh-oh-oh! You haven’t got back with Ingrid, have you?”

“No! Listen... I’m trying to tell you. I hope you’re alright with it.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because...” She cuts me off.

“Because it’s Rosa?”

Chapter 31

Rosa

I was so close to getting on that plane and zooming out to California to be with Nathan, but something didn't feel right. Was it pride? I don't know. I didn't lie. I am super busy here. But after I hung up the phone, a nagging voice started haranguing me for my decision. Why the hell didn't you go, idiot? He's the best thing that has happened to you and you're going to let him walk away? He wanted you there with him at Venice Beach. What is wrong with you?

Fortunately, I am at the center, flat out working on the final details for the mural unveiling which coincides with a significant day in Cuba's calendar, and is the ultimate event of the fiftieth anniversary celebrations.

The mural is fantastic. It depicts the story of generations of Cubans who have made New York their home and is so bright and colorful, that people stop by to say how much they like it: a huge improvement on the bare brick wall, that was a magnet for graffiti. Part of the project involved including the graffiti artists in the design and painting process. We received a grant from the neighborhood and ran fund-raising activities through the center to pay the artists. A home décor store donated the paints and brushes.

So, we have arranged for the parking lot next door to the center, with the mural on the wall, to be fenced off for our fiesta. It's a ticketed event, with a bar, a stage for entertainment, and food, of course. The performance area is

covered but we're all hoping it's not going to rain. The mayor is coming to cut the ribbon and say a few words and Liza will introduce Manuela, the brilliant artist who finalized the design and headed the team of mural painters.

There are a million things on my to-do list, and I find I'm adding to it faster than I'm ticking things off. The pace is getting more frantic the closer the date. I'm in the office before anyone else and leave late just to stay on top of things. But then there are always the wild cards that you don't see coming, such as the sound system supplier who double-booked our event with another, and I had to race around to find speaker stacks, a mixing board and technician at the last minute. Thankfully a friend of a friend stepped in to help out.

I'm in my office looking at the run sheet, checking it one more time when my phone rings. It's Kendra.

"Hey, BFF," I say, holding my phone against my shoulder as I type. "How's it going? I was going to call you." It's been a few days since lunch at Happy Cat. "Listen. I've saved you a ticket for the fiesta, and I was going to ask if you want a plus one."

"Rosa! Hi." It's evident she hasn't heard a word I just said. "I talked with Nathan last night. And it was late, so I didn't call you. But I'm calling now."

I sit bolt-upright in my chair. "Uh-uh."

"It's you! I had a feeling, but I didn't want to say anything... And now I feel bad because I said that he was a useless boyfriend, and he's a workaholic and he's never going to

change, but...” Kendra pauses long enough to take a breath then charges on. “Oh, Rosa! You’re perfect for him. And he knows. And he called me to say how much he loves you.”

“Kendra. Are you drunk? It’s eight fifteen.”

“No! I’m just really happy! I’m crying.” She sniffs loudly. “So, what I’m saying is... I know we had that conversation about how awkward it would be if you dated my brother, but it’s fine. It. Is. Fine. In fact, it’s more than fine! It’s wonderful!”

Listening to Kendra blather on, I’m speechless. Nathan called her from L.A. to tell her that he’s in love with me. I am about to burst through the ceiling with happiness. I gulp down a sob and squeeze my eyes shut to stem a flow of tears, but they leak out and I wipe them from my cheeks with my sleeve. Thank goodness I’m alone in the office.

“I know you have a whole lot to do and I’m so looking forward to partying with you. I just needed you to know, okay? This is the best news! My two favorite people in the world! Rosa, you rock.”

When I hang up, it takes me a while to calm my thoughts and keep it together. I can’t wait to see Nathan. Hearing Kendra so elated fixes a smile on my face and I buzz around for the rest of the day. I want to call him now, but I decide to wait until I’m at home and in a quiet place.

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“Tres. Dos. Uno.” The fiesta crowd shouts in a raucous collective countdown and then the mayor cuts the ribbon, declaring the mural well and truly unveiled. A huge cheer goes up, so loud that, if there was a roof, it would have been blown away by the noise. Thankfully, it’s not raining. Kendra, who was standing beside me, throws her arms around my neck and squeezes me so tight I can hardly breathe. Then she holds my hands, and we jump up and down, howling with the exhilaration of the moment. Rob is standing a safe distance away, smiling at our unleashed emotions. He seems like a nice person: normal. And it’s obvious he likes Kendra. A lot.

I’ve been watching them, slyly, throughout the speeches and the unveiling ceremony. He was never far from her side and even put his arms around her and kissed her cheek. I think I’m going to see more of Rob with Kendra.

Nathan called me earlier to say his flight had been delayed from LAX, but he would be here as soon as he could. He had better get here soon, otherwise, he’ll miss the party altogether. And then he will face a very grumpy girlfriend. Did I just say girlfriend? Well, that is what I am now. We had the conversation, and he said a few things that made me cry. But most of all he said a few things that made me feel like the most important person in the world.

He asked me to give him a chance to prove himself. He asked me to be patient, but that he needed to make some changes. He didn’t want to go anywhere far away without me, so I had better have my passport ready and up to date.

“I can’t wait to see you,” he says from the LAX departure gate. “I hope you’re ready for a kissing marathon. Maybe after the fiesta we could go to the Empire State Building just to kiss in the elevator all night.”

“Yes, please,” I say, grinning away in my pretty pink love bubble where everything is beautiful.

“Alright, Rosa,” says Nathan a little out of breath. He’s walking and talking. “I’ve got to go. The plane’s boarding now... I love you.”

“What? I didn’t hear that last bit.” Happy tears are streaming down my cheeks.

“Rosa Martinez, you are the most beautiful woman in the world and... I. Love. You... Did you get it that time? People are staring now. I’ve got to go. I love you, okay?”

“Yes. Get here soon.”

Chapter 32

Nathan

Airports are maddening. Especially when you desperately want to be with your hot girlfriend. Did I say girlfriend? Well, yes, I did, and I feel so good about it. And I didn't care when I said the three little words out loud in the departure lounge, and fellow passengers turned to stare. Let them. I'm in love with the most beautiful woman in the world and I want the world to know. It's liberating. It really is. I feel wonderful. If I was only in New York now and not on the delayed flight from LAX. Never mind.

When the plane lands I charge like a lunatic to the exit. I only have carry-on bags, no need to wait at the carousel. I jump in the front cab at the taxi stand. My head is so full of Rosa, I don't even strike up a conversation about sport to get the driver going on a rant. I sit back in the seat, willing the traffic to evaporate like mist. But it doesn't. Red taillights of vehicles, murky with exhaust fumes, stretch out like a procession in front. We inch forward at a snail's pace. The driver is playing reggae music. Bob Marley is telling me everything's gonna be alright, which helps to soften my anxiety. But the realization that I'm going to miss Rosa's event is causing my stomach to twist in knots. If I can't even make it to something as important to her as the fiftieth-anniversary celebration of her community, then what does that say about me? I'm a chump. That's what it says. She has put her heart and soul into planning this party, and I should be there to support her, and not in a cab.

I shake my head and look out of the window. Then we're in the Queens- Midtown tunnel. I check the time again. If there are no more hold-ups, I can still make it for the speeches.

“Almost at there, sir. Which end of West Eighteenth?” The taxi driver interrupts my internal monologue.

“The far-end corner of Ninth Ave, thanks.” The cab slows to a stop outside my building. “Please, wait?” I say, grabbing my gear and darting out of the taxi door. “I'll be two minutes.”

“You the boss. I'll leave the meter running, but I may have to drive around the block if the cops move me on. Cool?”

“Cool. Okay,” I shout over my shoulder, as I race from the taxi and sprint to the building door with my swipe card already in my hand. Backpack, camera bag, and laptop swing wildly as I run. Up the in the elevator, down the corridor. I punch numbers in the keypad and I'm in my apartment. Dump everything just inside the door and I'm gone. No time for a shower. No time for a change into fresh clothes. Shut the door behind me and I'm out of the apartment and back down in the elevator. Thankfully the taxi is still waiting.

“Thanks man. Let's go.” I collapse on the back seat.

“No problem, boss. Where to?”

The jubilant noise of music and laughter greets me when the cab drops me at the Cuban community center. I tip the driver who winds down his window to argue with me about it, telling me it's way too much, but I'm already across the street. I show the bouncer at the gate the ticket on my phone and I'm in.

Inside, the party is cranked right up. I crane my neck and look for Rosa over a multitude of dancing revelers. A salsa band on stage plays with exuberance: a big horn section, guitars, bass, congas, and keyboard. Three women in sparkly red dresses and a man in a white suit sing into microphones in front of the band. The temporary scaffolding performance area is barely big enough to accommodate the number of musicians.

I sidle through the crowd of dancing couples trying not to get in their way, judging the trajectory of spin, and newly vacated space, every few paces. I step through to a vantage point near the bar away from the twirling dancers, and there's Rosa, talking with Kendra and another guy. She sees me, smiles, and shouts out, but I can't hear. Kendra turns to wave, and I make my way through the crowd towards them.

A few more paces and Rosa is in front of me. We stand looking at each other, breathing heavily, for a moment. Then I grab her and pull her into my embrace. She wraps her arms around me, and I hold her tight. The music flows around, and for a few minutes, the party continues without us, before Rosa raises her head and says, "You made it!"

We smile at each other, then I kiss her madly, deeply, passionately with all my heart, until we're interrupted by Kendra who shouts, laughing, "Guys! Please. Enough already! This is a public place."

I hug my sister and she introduces me to Rob. He seems nice: normal.

“Right,” I say with authority, holding out my hand. “Rosa. Ven.”

Rosa looks at me, quizzically. Then she takes my hand. We begin to move. I step forward into the basic salsa and count, hoping I have the timing right, and careful not to tread on Rosa’s toes. Then, I reposition my hand to indicate the next step, out to the side. Rosa follows. Then back to basic a couple of times, before the turn to the left. I don’t mess it up and I’m laughing.

“You can salsa,” Rosa yells above the noise.

“Not yet, but I’m learning.” It’s clear that I can’t talk and dance at the same time. I lose the rhythm, and everything falls apart. “Let’s get a drink.”

I smile across to Kendra who is dancing with Rob and hold Rosa’s hand as I lead her to the bar. Rosa leans into me as I wrap my arm around her shoulders and wait for my turn to order drinks.

“Very impressive, Mr Ellis,” Rosa says, smiling up at me. “That was a vast improvement on your last attempt. Tell me about it?”

The barman places four bottles of Cristal on the bar. I pass one to Rosa.

“I wanted to find my Cuban self,” I say before drinking from my bottle. “So, in my downtime in California, I found a teacher who gave me a crash course... I almost died.” I laugh. “But it was worth it, just to dance with you tonight.”

Rosa reaches a hand up around my neck and pulls me gently to her for a kiss.

“Nathan Ellis. You are the nicest, most handsome, sexiest man... And the world’s best kisser... I love you.”

“What was that? I didn’t get the last part.”

“I. LOVE. YOU!”

“That’s what I thought.” And we kiss again.

Epilogue

Rosa

Nathan and I are in Havana, discovering our Cuban selves. We stopped off to see Tia in Miami on the way, which was frantic but fun. I had no doubt that my grandma would love Nathan, but I had underestimated how much she was likely to demonstrate her affection, i.e., all the time.

“Rosa. Nathan, he is cariño. Oh yes. I think you should keep ahold on this one, girl.” Tia says this as though Nathan isn’t standing right there. She has her arm around him. He’s looking at me, laughing, but hugs her right back.

“You hear that, Rosa? I get the thumbs up from Tia. The official stamp of approval. I’m truly honored.”

Our few days with my grandma weren’t long enough and before I knew it, we were leaving for the airport.

“Make sure you come back and visit me soon. I miss you,” Tia says, hugging me with her best biggest hug. I choke back tears at the door. “I’m so proud of you, Rosa. You are my granddaughter through and through.”

Nathan holds my hand and lets me cry in the taxi.

After the Cuban center’s fiftieth-anniversary fiesta celebrations were finished and wrapped up, I was in need of a vacation. Everyone was happy with the way things had gone, especially me because nothing, majorly, went wrong. I was owed some leave, so I took it, all. Nathan doesn’t have a job

for a while, so we booked our flights and now, here we are in Cuba, having the time of our lives.

We're staying for a whole month and plan to travel around. We want to hire one of those big old cars and drive from one side of the island to the other, stopping off to dance salsa along the way.

So far, we haven't left Havana because it's just too much fun. We're renting a room in a beautiful historic apartment building downtown and it seems there's a party every night. During the day, Nathan and I stroll around the streets, getting lost, then being surprised when we find where we are again. Sometimes, we have a lazy breakfast and go back to bed.

"You're staring," I say to Nathan from the tangle of sheets on the enormous carved dark wooden bed. He's leaning on the window frame. The soft morning light illuminates his tousled hair, the contours of his handsome face, and the musculature of his taut tanned torso. Voices rise up from the street below, blowing in on a breeze that stirs the lace curtains.

"Yes. And you know why," he holds his hands up and looks at me through the square shape he has made with his thumbs and fingers.

"You're photographing me?"

"Yup. And I wish I had my camera." Nathan sighs, hangs his head, then meanders over to the bed and slides in beside me.

Nathan had agreed not to bring his camera on vacation, this time. I gently, but firmly, told him that if he had his camera, it

wouldn't be our trip: it would be his trip with me tagging along. He laughed, then looked kind of guilty, and I said that I was right. There would be plenty of other trips where his camera would be permitted, but not this one, our first. This vacation, we agreed, was about us: not making art, taking photographs, or recording ideas to be used in a portfolio or promotion website.

We get up, eventually, and wander along the malecón. The Caribbean crashes against the sea wall and sprays a fine mist into the air and onto our faces. "This place is just too photogenic," Nathan says, as we turn a corner onto another scene bursting with life and color, light and shade.

"But, sometimes, don't you think it's better to live the moment, rather than observe it through a lens?" I say squeezing Nathan's hand as we walk.

Nathan stops me in the street and kisses me fully and passionately, causing toots and cheers from passersby. "Yes, Rosa, and I am loving living every moment with you."

With or without a camera, I am fully aware that, as we explore the crumbling grandeur of Havana, Nathan is filming everything, everywhere we go. He can't help it. He's a photographer. It's not just a job, it's how he sees the world. And that's a big part of what I love about him.

Author's Note

Thank you!

Thanks for reading *Mr Best Friend's Brother Grump*.

And a huge thank you to my fabulous ARC team for your generous support.

Thanks to my family, and everyone who has given me kind encouragement and helpful feedback.

And finally, thank you, Chloe and Mika, my loyal furry writing team.

I hope you enjoyed reading *Mr Best Friend's Brother Grump* as much as I enjoyed writing it.

I have more *Mr Grumps* coming soon, so check my website for updates.

<https://www.francescaspencerauthor.com/>

Here's a taster of *Mr Off-limits Grump*.

Download the ebook FREE and let's stay in touch.

ee

Mr Off-limits Grump

Chapter 1

Jake

I'm driving but don't really know where I'm headed. I just had to drive. Leave L.A. *Lah Lah Lah L.A. El Ay*. I'm laughing like a crazy person. Los Angeles, the city of angels, huh? I had to put as much distance between me and that place. I don't even know why. If I was being interviewed right now and someone asked, *So, what made you run off the stage and keep running, and get into your car, (at least I think it's my car) and drive and keep driving?* I wouldn't be able to answer. All I know is I'm driving and I'm getting away. Far away from all that stuff. That music biz stuff. That L.A. stuff. The record company people. The publicity people. The paparazzi with the cameras; the lights; the questions. The fans.

But, no, not the fans. These are the people that gave me everything. Not them. It's the rest of it I can't deal with. I'm exhausted.

I'm a mess. My head is scrambled. I can't think. Am I having a breakdown? Do I need a shrink? Whatdoyacallit? Therapist? Everyone seems to have one these days, huh? But I don't need one because I'm a regular guy, right?

"I'm just a regular guy." That's what I say, isn't it? That is what I said, but am I?

Jeez, I think I'm having some sort of breakdown. I shouldn't have just taken off like that, without even telling Frankie. I know she'll worry. Then she'll hate me. She hates me already.

I can hear her now, she's going to say something like, "Dad. This is wacko, even for you!"

The white line on the freeway is hypnotic. Each flash ticks off more distance down the road, but it's making my eyes heavy. Up ahead is a turnoff. I don't even read the name of the town, but it's ten miles away. I hope there's a gas station because the fuel light just came on.

The road winds up a hill, and even though it's dark, I see trees lining either side as I drive past. In the blackness, with my headlights showing up only a few feet of road ahead, I really have to concentrate.

After what seems like forever, streetlights appear around a corner, and, lucky for me, it's a town with a gas station. As I fill up the tank, I take a look around. Across the street, there's an old-style neon sign announcing a hotel that might just be open. I see if they have a room for tonight. It's too late to drive back home now. I need to lie down and close my eyes. This place is so quiet. All I can hear is the buzz of insects and night critters. The lack of sound is soothing like it's massaging my brain.

I'll figure things out, but tomorrow. I'm so tired. I feel like I could sleep for a thousand years.

Chapter 2

Carly

“Good morning, Sheriff Sullivan. It’s a beautiful day.” He’s in early today and he’s pretty pleased with himself too, by the way he swaggered in and stands at the counter with his chest all puffed out like a pigeon.

“Good morning, Carly. Yes, it most certainly is.”

I turn to the espresso machine and begin making his coffee. Like most of my regulars, I know what kind of coffee he likes - double shot large cappuccino, extra foam with chocolate.

The bright morning sun bounces off the wooden floor and tables by the window overlooking the yard. I can hear birdsong and the background rush of the river gushing through the gorge below.

I enjoy opening up. The mornings are nearly always quiet mid-week. Just the regulars stop by for their morning caffeine fixes. It’s a different story at the weekend. That’s when city folk come here for some R and R. It’s the quiet that draws them here. And the river, of course.

I place the sheriff’s cup on the counter.

“Sully. Call me Sully.”

I don’t say anything. I smile and nod politely. This is not the first time Sheriff Sullivan has asked me to call him by his nickname, but I would rather keep a professional distance at my place of work.

The Flow Café is not only my place of work, it is my business. It may not be generating the wealth associated with early retirement to a Caribbean Island, but it's a lifestyle choice to be here in sleepy ol' Fairwood. Yep. It's a homey little place that you probably wouldn't come to unless you were into white water rafting, or you wanted to truly get away from it all.

“There's been a report of burglaries in the area.” Sheriff Sullivan pauses to sip his coffee. He then licks the foam from his top lip before continuing. Then he places his coffee cup down on the counter and hunts around in his jacket pocket. “Probably a gang, the report says. Targeting holiday places. You know, empty houses like the ones up on the ridge.” The sheriff pulls out a folded printout, holding it up for me to see. It shows a blurry image of two guys walking through a glass sliding door, probably taken from CCTV footage. “If you see anyone resembling these hoodlums, just call me. I'll come right over. No problem.” Sheriff Sullivan puffs out his chest again and tugs up his pants as he tucks in his shirt. “Just gotta be vigilant. Look out for each other. Be good neighbors.” He says this last bit as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out some dollars, which he counts out and slides under his empty cup.

I smile like I always do with Sheriff Sullivan. It's good to stay on the right side of the local lawman, even if he thinks he's in with a chance of any kind of romance with me. Honestly, it gets a little exhausting sometimes. Sheriff Sullivan is not the only guy in town who comes into The Flow,

dropping hints and flirting like a teenager at a high school prom. I have become proficient at deflecting unwanted romantic attention without losing my professionalism. But sometimes I feel like screaming, ‘Go away! I have absolutely no interest in you, you strange little man in uniform, with your duck-like feet and your gut spilling over your belt and that really annoying sniff that punctuates everything you say!’ No. I would never say that. I smile. I maintain politeness. I have mastered self-possession and courteous control.

“Well, thank you for letting me know, Sheriff Sullivan. I will surely keep my eyes open and let you know if I see anything suspicious.”

“I know you will Carly. You are a good citizen, and I can speak for the whole town when I tell you we are glad you decided to stay, even after, you know, everything that happened.” He nods at me knowingly, as if we share a secret, which we don’t.

Ah yes. Sheriff Sullivan likes to remind me of the one thing I would rather forget. The fact that my fiancé, the person who brought me to Fairwood to open The Flow Café and live out our dream life in this little river community, decided to trade me in for a younger model. Literally.

Brooke, the name of the younger model, was quite simply dazzling, petite, and gorgeous with a highly effective toothpaste commercial smile. She came to Fairwood for a weekend with some gal pals and Conner, my ex-fiancé) took

them on a rafting trip, then took her up on her offer of a good time.

It took me a while to recover from the initial shock of finding out the person who was supposed to be my forever mate was actually a man I didn't recognize. How could this person, Conner, who had built a business and a life and made promises to me and convinced me that he was - oh let me see if I can remember the exact words - *the happiest man on the planet*, just leave with someone in the blink of an eye? At the time, it didn't seem possible. It was a nightmare. He calmly told me that it was a good thing we hadn't gone through with the wedding. Imagine my family all coming over from Ireland to celebrate a sham of a relationship that was doomed to fail.

No. Conner did me a favor. I know that now. He let me keep Rusty, our dog. He was always mine anyway and liked to be in the café, while Conner was guiding on the river. He also let me have the café and all its debt. All he wanted was a quick, clean break. He wasn't going to make things messy for me. He still loved me, he said, and wanted me to be okay. And then he packed a bag, left his key on the kitchen table of our house, and left town. Just like that.

Yes. I was in shock for a long time. But then, slowly, I pulled the broken pieces of my life together. I immersed myself in running a successful business in a beautiful place. I appreciate the good things I have here. I have real friends who care for me. Jodi and Ray were angels after the breakup. They cooked for me and ran the café when I was having a gloomy day and couldn't face the world.

I don't have gloomy days anymore. I don't think about Conner anymore. Not unless someone brings him up in conversation like Sheriff Sullivan did just now. I don't know where Conner is, nor do I care. I have a great life. I really do. Now it's just Rusty and me, I am so happy. Content. Comfortable. Complete. What more could I want?

“Good morning, Carly.” Jodi walks in. “And good morning, Sheriff Sullivan,” she says with a broad beaming smile. She knows his romantic intentions towards me and thinks it's hilarious that he believes he stands a chance. I tell her I don't know what she's talking about and then she points out that he has never once asked her to call him Sully. “I rest my case,” she says, holding up her hands like a courtroom lawyer.

Sheriff Sullivan tips his hat and leaves. More customers come in. A family with three children. A couple dressed in hiking clothes. Jodi and I are busy serving and clearing up. Then we prep for the lunchtime crowd. It's hard to predict just how many customers will come through the door. It's weather dependent, usually. When the sun's out, people feel good and will treat themselves to lunch out at a café or arrange to meet friends for a coffee and a piece of homemade cake. In summer it's pleasant to sit in the shade of the trees on the paved patio out back, where I've planted some raised beds of herbs, salads, and vegetables that I use in the café. Rusty's kennel is tucked around the corner where he likes to snooze most of the day.

The café empties out. Jodi and I chat about her husband Ray, and her kids, Lois and Jim, who are doing well at school. Café work is mostly mundane and repetitive so working with good

people keeps things moving along and makes work fun. We have the stereo turned up. Jodi is making sandwiches and I'm unloading the dishwasher. We're singing away to Van Morrison when Jodi stops singing and says, "Oh my. Be still my beating heart."



Get your eBook copy of *Mr Off-limits Grump* here.

More soon,

Love, *Francesca*

x

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