

WHEN
DREAMS
Float

BOOK ONE

TRAVEL AND LOVE COLLECTION

Sensuous African American Romance

Sensual TLC Stories
An imprint of LED Literature and Publication

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Sensuous African American Romance

DOROTHY ELIZABETH LOVE

SCENE EXCERPT

His mouth opened over hers again and again as the kiss intensified. Tongues tangoed as lips sought and found more pleasure.

“I love the taste of you,” he said as his hand caressed her breast. “All of you.” His mouth moved to her neck as he licked a wetter path to the breast he held. As his fingers fondled its fullness, his mouth lovingly assaulted one taut nipple.

Melanie lifted slightly, moving her breast deeper into his hungry mouth... “Yes...” she moaned as the excitement roared through her body. He placed his hand between her parted legs and massaged back and forth, back and forth. “Oh, God!” She called, opening her legs wider.

Hi there, Reader. It’s time to cuddle and enjoy! This novel is part of a sensual book series. For details, check out my “Author’s Message to Reader” at the end of the book.

TLC “Travel and Love Collection” Series

- WHEN DREAMS FLOAT is set in Tahiti
- CROSSING PATHS, TEMPTING MEMORIES is set in the Caribbean Islands
- EVERLASTING MOMENTS is set in Rio de Janeiro



“When we steer with a heart of passion... our dreams, desires, and successes taste so much sweeter.”

—D. E. Love



WHEN DREAMS FLOAT

(a poem inspired and written for this novel)

In the aftermath of despair lingers a glimmer of hope
that the heart will mend, the spirit will forgive and
the mind will remain open to the advent of love.

Who could have known that one dark night could make
day forget the stormy dawn of past misery and pain,
allowing the fullness of her light to recast his shadow
and overcome any thoughts of unfulfilled desire.

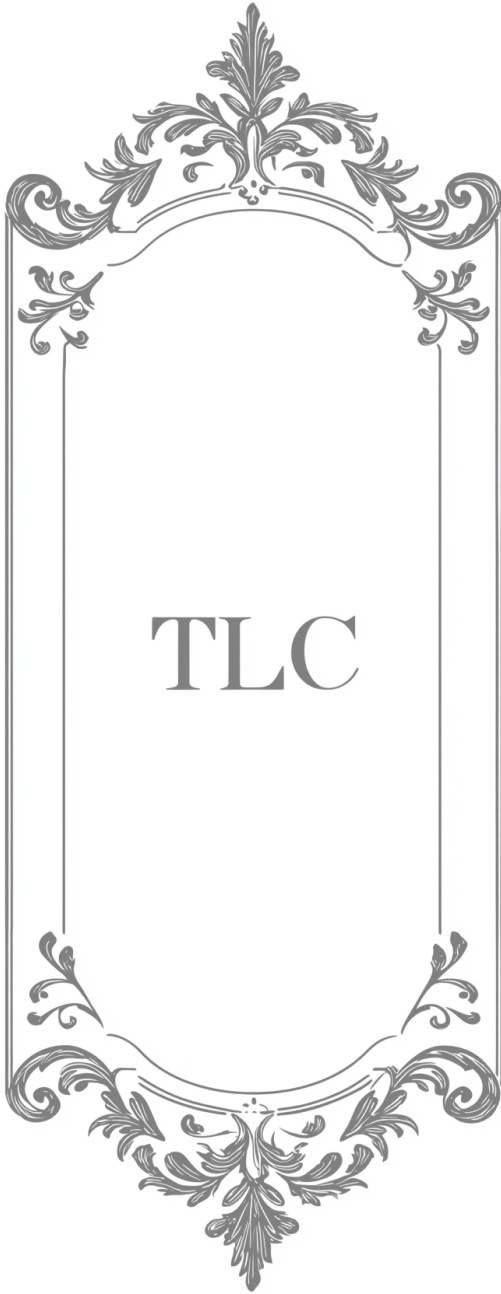
Who could have known that embracing her
in the sensual warmth of his evening breeze
would rejuvenate the joy of possibilities.

When dreams float,
a broken heart knows pain passes,
time heals and wisdom reaffirms self-love.

When dreams float,
two well-worn hearts find comfort
openly exposing their wounds to explore their healing
and bask in the first light of the happiness they deserve.

When dreams float...love thrives.

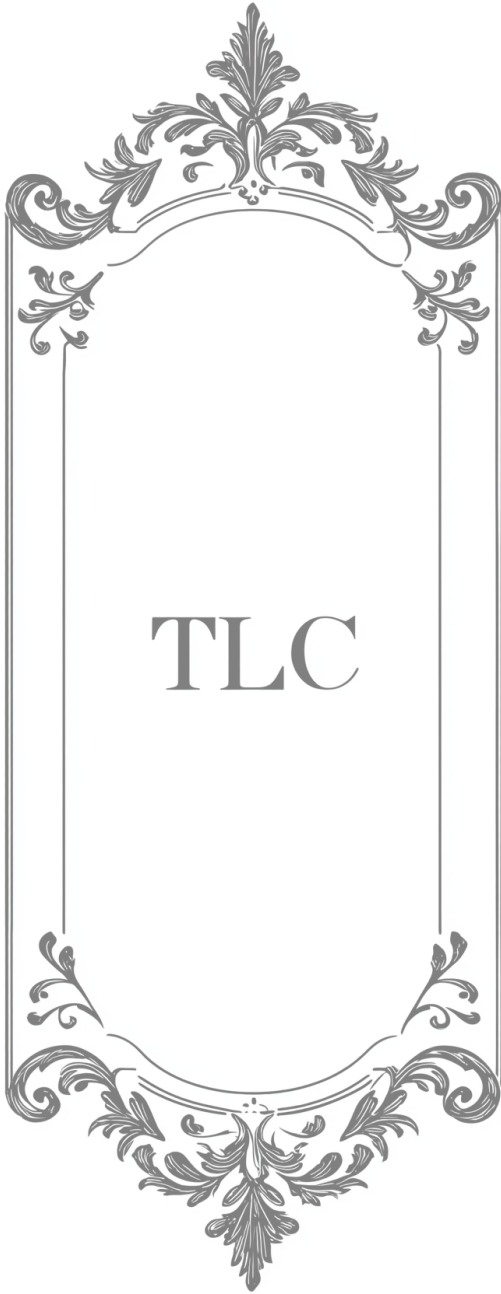
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TLC

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TLC



CHAPTER ONE



If there was ever a time to thank his lucky stars, this was it.

But Winston Knight was a man of science and put little stock in chance or luck. He dealt better with facts. And the fact of the matter was that something about her halted him, excited his insides, and numbed him to the world around him. He didn't understand why he felt so drawn to her, which intrigued him.

Another luscious thought ricocheted through Winston's mind as he watched her slip the long gold chain around her neck, its attached pendant dipping into the valley of her breasts covered in pale-yellow lace. The pendant lay softly against her cinnamon-brown skin. How he would love to run his fingers up, down, and around that chain.

The problem was he had never met her before. And from where he was standing on the other side of the jewelry store, he wouldn't get the chance. She was about to leave.

Somewhere in his aroused fog, a voice called to him. “Final call for Flight Number TN1 to Papeete, Tahiti.”

Winston quickly glanced down at his watch. He was booked on that flight, the start of his business trip, a medical retreat. It was the only plane leaving Los Angeles airport for Papeete this afternoon. His mind warred between rushing to catch his flight or missing it in order to go around the jewelry shop counter and talk to the attractive lady who had caused his current physical condition.

Making a quick decision, Winston took a step in her direction, stopping only long enough to put back the item he’d picked up to use as an excuse to stare at the woman as she tried the necklace around her delicate neck. He had never had an immediate reaction this strong and was dying to discover more. He would end this fantasy and go introduce himself.

Maybe this won’t start as another mundane business trip after all, he thought. “Damn it!” he mumbled, looking around the store. “Where did she go?”

Entering the corridor, he looked to the left, away from his plane’s gate, and saw a figure dressed in pale yellow moving with the crowd rounding the corner. He looked to the right and saw the airline attendant preparing to close the gate to his plane. He wasn’t sure why he hesitated. Perhaps it was the sheer absurdity of being so mesmerized by a stranger. He was Winston Knight—calm, rational, logical. But nothing was logical about the immediate and unexplainable attraction she ignited in him. Even if he sprinted like an NFL running back, he wouldn’t make it to his dream girl in time to still make the flight.

“Damn,” he said, reluctantly trotting toward his gate. That would teach him to hesitate before going after something he wanted.

As he boarded the plane, he spotted Chuck Rogers, a friend and fellow doctor. He waved, genuinely glad to see him. He and Chuck had been planning this trip for months. And he was glad to get it started. Besides, the past twenty-four hours had been more taxing than he had expected. His ex-girlfriend, Daphne, had called him last night to argue about his decision to go on this trip without her. It had ruined his evening. And the disappointment he had just experienced from missing a chance to meet someone new didn’t help much. So, Chuck’s friendly face was just what he needed.

“Glad you made it. I was getting worried that you wouldn’t,” Chuck said over the general chatter of travelers and movement in first class. “Where’re you sitting?”

Winston glanced at his boarding pass. “Seat 3C. Aisle.” He found his seat and placed his carry-on luggage in the overhead compartment.

“I think this one might be empty.” Chuck pointed to the seat next to him. “Ask to change seats and join me back here.”

As Winston removed his luggage from the overhead bin, someone, he assumed the flight attendant, asked, “Is there an extra blanket under your bag?”

“I’m about to remove my bag. I’ll check.” He took a step backward and bumped into her. Turning to apologize, he felt a jolt, partly from the contact but mainly from the shock.

An inviting smile greeted Winston first. *That smile could melt the coldest winter*, he thought. And he was no exception. Then he noticed the fullness of her ruby-colored lips, the soft

slant of her chocolate eyes, the shine of her black hair that lay on soft brown shoulders. She was lovely. There was a hint of Jasmine, her perfume, in the air, entertaining him.

He was definitely the lucky one.

“No.” Winston had to think hard to remember the reason she stood next to him. It wasn’t just an attraction—it was curiosity, intrigue, and a pull he couldn’t explain. “Yellow looks good on you.” His eyes traveled farther down. “Especially with that necklace you have on.”



CHAPTER TWO



“Thank you,” she said, fingering the pendant between her thumb and index finger. “I just got this. I thought it would be a nice going-away present to myself.”

“Very nice,” Winston said, enjoying watching the pendant drop.

He stared at her lovely features before deciding on a plan. Something about the way her lips curved when she smiled made him want to see it again. “Where’re you seated? Since there aren’t any extra blankets in here, I’ll have the flight attendant bring you one.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll probably see one of them around the same time you would since I’m seated next to you.”

“3B?” he asked, hopeful, not bothering to hide his excitement.

“No. My friend, Sandra, is seated there. I’m at the window in 3A.”

Winston turned to his friend. “Chuck, I’ll chat with you later,” he said, giving him a wink. Chuck smiled, winking back. There was an unspoken understanding between them—Winston had found a new focus for the flight.

“Melanie?” A female voice coming up behind them said, “The flight attendant will bring you another blanket. As much as you fly, I can’t believe you packed your jacket in your stowaway luggage.”

So, her name is Melanie, Winston thought, returning his carry-on to the overhead bin. He had an eight-hour plane ride, with only one seat separating him from getting to know a lot more about Melanie. The disappointment at having missed the opportunity to meet her in the jewelry store was swiftly replaced by the anticipation of how he was going to make the best of this plane trip. Somehow, he had been given another chance. Twice in one day. He wouldn’t strike out.

“Looks like you’re taken care of for now,” he said.

“I guess I am.” She flashed that alluring smile again, and Winston warmed.

Winston sat, wondering how he was going to remove Melanie’s friend from between them. It would happen before this plane landed, he decided. He wouldn’t let Melanie get away until he was sure that ring on her third finger wasn’t put there by a boyfriend. It wasn’t a wedding ring, so the coast was almost clear. Fate wouldn’t be cruel enough to throw the type of curveball that equaled a loving, gift-giving boyfriend in the mist. If so, that would be strike three. Winston frowned.

There was something in the way she looked up at him, how close she stood in the aisle, that made him think of all sorts of pleasant possibilities. He started having a teenage

physical reaction and blamed it on having gone too long without sex. Why else would he react to this woman like this?

Melanie's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Sandra, here's the tourist guide for Tahiti. Maybe we can map out a sight-seeing tour?"

"For Pap-pete?" Sandra asked.

"Girl, you're purposely saying that wrong," Melanie said grinning. "The Polynesians pronounce all their vowels. It's Pa-pe-et-a."

"Yeah. There, too." Sandra flipped through the book.

Winston's mind did another calculation. In Papeete, he and Chuck would attend a medical meeting and then take a transport bus to the cruise ship. The ship wasn't scheduled to leave until 10 p.m. tonight. That would give him approximately two additional hours in Papeete to turn a chance encounter into something more.

Lord, he thought, if anyone could read my thoughts, I'd probably be arrested. He hadn't even been introduced to the woman, and he was planning the next several encounters with her. With that thought, he decided to change things.

Winston turned to face them. "Papeete is Tahiti's version of New York," he said, directing his gaze at Melanie. His voice was smooth and confident, the kind of tone that invited curiosity. "Lots of fun things to see and do."

"I know it's the capital," Sandra said. As she turned to look at him, her long braids flowed about her dark chocolate shoulders. "I was hoping that meant plenty of big-city fun. So, you've been to Tahiti before?"

"I would love to travel there once a year." Winston decided vagueness might be more beneficial than admitting this

was his first trip. If they thought he had, he could use that to his advantage. “First time for you, Melanie?”

Melanie did a double take upon hearing her name, then smiled, her eyes lingering on his for a moment as if wondering how he knew her name. Winston noticed the subtle way her lips parted, as though she were debating whether to flirt or to play it cool.

“This is the first time for us both,” Melanie said, her voice soft, teasing. Then, with a curious tilt of her head, she added. “And you are?”

“Very pleased to see you again,” Winston replied with a grin. The statement was both true and a well-played move. “I’m Winston.”

Sandra looked back and forth between them, her eyes widening slightly. “You two know each other?” she asked of Melanie, raising a brow.

“We met just a few minutes ago on the plane,” Melanie explained, her gaze still fixed on Winston. “And I remember seeing you in the jewelry store today. But...”

“Jewelry store?” Sandra interrupted. “You mean the guy you were...” she stopped, clamping her mouth shut.

“Were what?” Winston wanted to know, intrigued by the unfinished statement.

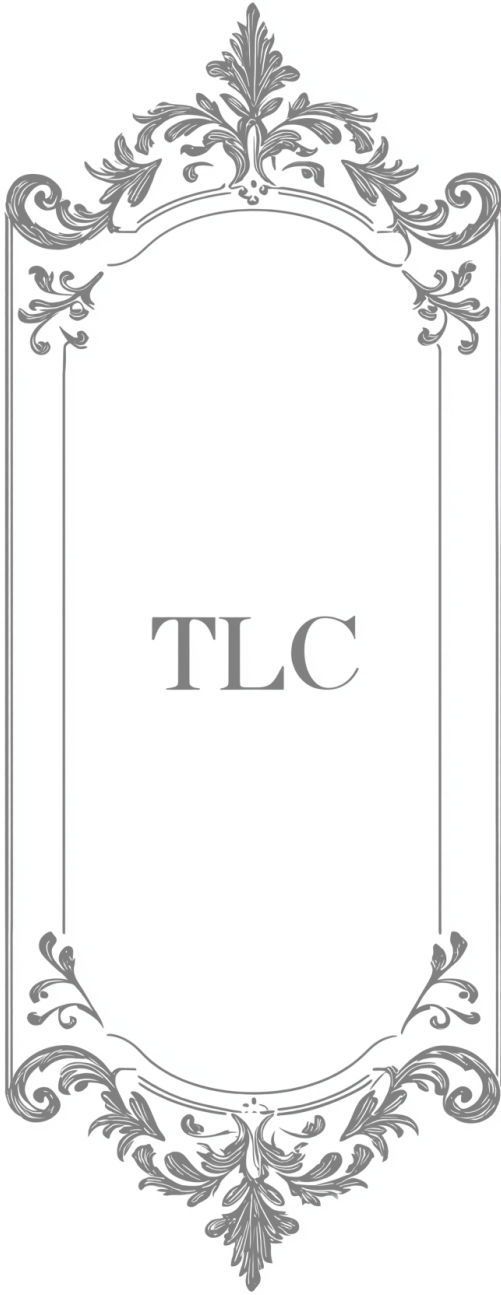
Just then, the captain inconveniently interrupted with a greeting to the passengers. He came across the intercom system promising a wonderful and eventless flight. A bell tone accompanied the seat belt illumination warning, and flight attendants began rushing down the aisles. One attendant stopped to stand in the aisle between them, effectively blocking Winston’s view of Melanie’s wide smile. Winston silently cursed the timing of the unwelcome interruption. He would

have to explore Sandra's comment and the thoughts behind Melanie's smile later.

He leaned back in his seat, unable to see Melanie's smile, but the memory of it was enough. Melanie had noticed him in the store. Since she had mentioned it to Sandra, she must have been thinking about him just as much as he had been thinking about her. And judging by the fact that no one had mentioned a significant other, there didn't seem to be anyone in her life who posed a real threat to his plans.

Perfect, Winston thought as the plane began its ascent, lifting his spirits along with it. The excitement building in him wasn't just about reaching Tahiti. Images of gold chains, soft lace, and cinnamon-brown skin being dazzled by his touch danced in his head.

Soon, he thought. *Real, soon*. He closed his eyes, letting pleasant thoughts take over. *And I'll have plenty of time to learn more about Melanie*.



TLC



CHAPTER THREE



Winston was running out of time.

At the rate he was going, he wouldn't have any *time* at all to talk to Melanie. They had been in the air for almost six hours, and he hadn't had an opportunity to talk to her since the plane took off. Melanie and Sandra had reclined their seats, turned toward the window, and covered up with blankets. Two hours after takeoff, lunch was served, but they slept through it. Frustrated, Winston had joined Chuck for lunch in the back row of first class on the other side of the aisle. After lunch, Winston read a few chapters of a book while Chuck worked on his laptop.

Later, Chuck had beaten him at a few hands of cards, because Winston was more interested in looking to see if Melanie was up. Now, he could see Sandra was still sleeping, and Melanie's seat was still pushed back in the resting position.

Enough sleep, Winston thought. Just as Winston was trying to figure out how to wake her, Melanie stood and stepped

over Sandra into the aisle. She glanced at his empty seat and then up at the occupied sign for the front restroom. Turning, she headed toward the back of the plane.

After she passed their row, "Excuse me, Chuck," Winston said, crawling across his friend.

"Catch her before she gets away," Chuck teased.

"Shut up," Winston said, losing sight of Melanie behind the curtains of the attendants' station. She was headed to the rear restroom. "Chuck, I'm headed back to my seat. See you on the ground."

Winston made his way to his seat, wishing the one next to him was empty so he could invite Melanie to join him. Maybe he could bribe the man next to him to go sit with Chuck. Of course, the guy was asleep, gently snoring and wearing a sleep mask. Waking him would be rude. But what the hell? Desperate times; desperate measures.

Fueled with a newfound determination, Winston rose and went to the mini kitchen stationed between premiere class and coach class. The area was large enough to comfortably fit several people with a partially closed curtain. None of the flight attendants were around.

Perfect.

The counters were cleaned, coffee was brewing, and snacks and drinks were sitting on shelves for later serving. Winston opened a can of Sprite and sipped. His eyes were fixed on the corridor.

A few moments later, Melanie emerged from behind the curtain. Winston reached out and gently touched her arm, stopping her in her tracks. Slightly startled, she dropped her toothbrush and toothpaste.

“Getting to talk to you requires a direct approach,” Winston said as he stooped and retrieved her belongings. “All freshened up?”

“Direct would have been following me into the restroom,” Melanie said, taking her things from him. “Thanks.”

“Then I’m glad you don’t mind my subtleness.” Her smile was something Winston realized he had missed the past few hours. He was glad to see it now. “I had planned to entertain you with my jokes, but you fell asleep the minute we took off.”

“Sandra and I flew into LA last night. There’s a lot to do on a Friday evening in LA. We didn’t get to bed until very late, figuring to sleep on the trip over.”

“Thereby ruining all my plans,” Winston added jokingly.

“And just what were these unknown plans?” Melanie asked, widening her smile. She crossed her arms under her bust, unknowingly causing her blouse to pull taut across her full chest. Winston had to fight not to stare.

“To prove what a great guy I am by offering to show you around Papeete,” he said softly, after returning his gaze to hers.

She laughed, a sound that was light and melodic. “Have you ever been around Papeete?”

“No,” Winston admitted, flashing a sheepish grin. “But the ‘great guy’ part would’ve been true, and you would’ve forgiven me for being a lousy tour guide.”

Her laughter filled the small space again, and Winston found himself thoroughly entertained by it. It was the kind of laugh that could make you forget everything else—except for the desire to hear it again.

Suddenly, the plane hit turbulence and pitched from side to side. Melanie stumbled, and Winston reacted without thinking, pulling her toward him. Melanie's empty hand reached for his supporting arm as his hands went around her waist to steady her. He could not only feel the cotton of the full skirt and delicate switching in the lace blouse, but the warmer, more scintillating skin between them as the blouse lifted. His fingers marveled at the discovery.

Winston concluded that prayers were probably heard more clearly the closer to heaven you were. He had just wished to touch her, right before she fell into his arms.

"I'm sorry," Melanie said. "I didn't mean to stumble into you like that."

"Don't," he said, his voice softer than usual. He didn't want her to move away.

She was referring to her clumsiness. "Manners. An old habit that makes me apologize when I'm in the wrong."

"Well, don't move just yet. We might hit another air pocket, and you wouldn't want to stumble away from me and break something important... like my heart," he teased, "and ruin my entire trip."

"You're funny," she said, laughing again. "And cute up close, but you can let go now. The plane's not bouncing anymore, and I think your heart will be okay."

Winston wasn't sure if he would be okay, but reluctantly, he released her. As she stepped back, his eyes lingered on her mouth as she looked seductively, searchingly up at him. She wasn't smiling outright, but her mouth tipped up naturally at the corners, making her look serenely happy. Two things he hadn't felt in a long time—serenity or happiness.

What had caught his attention back at the jewelry store was the regal tilt of her head, the way she carried herself, her full chest, small waist, and the hypnotizing sway of her hips. But now, as she stood this close, it was her eyes that held him captive. There was something there, something unspoken but powerful. He didn't want to let go of the feeling she stirred in him.

"Can I ask you something?" Winston said, his voice huskier than he intended.

"I think you're going to ask me regardless," Melanie replied, her tone playful. Out of the corner of her eye, Melanie saw someone coming down the aisle toward them. "Can I ask you to..."

She stepped forward, closer to Winston, to make room for the person approaching. Her hand landed instinctively on his arm, and at that moment, her face was inches from his. Her scent, her warmth—it was all too intoxicating.

That caused Winston to misread her movement entirely. "I like your idea better," he murmured, pulling her into his arms. Melanie's eyes widened in surprise, but she didn't pull away. His mouth found hers in a gentle kiss, his lips savoring the softness of hers. He chanced a taste of her, and she tasted of toothpaste and joy and something he couldn't put his finger on, but it made him think of lemons and honey. The latter were parts of a remedy he recommended to patients. Except now, he felt it healing something in him. For that reason, he concluded that kissing her made him feel better. Hotter. Hardening. And it thrilled him.

When she wrapped her arms around him, Winston moaned softly, pulling her closer. Was this a sign of acceptance? Was she feeling the same way he was?

He hadn't realized how much he wanted her acceptance until that very moment. But he forced himself to pull back, not wanting to lose control completely. If he didn't stop, he might drag her into a nearby restroom to explore the kiss further.

Lifting his head, he whispered, "Thank you for that. Unexpected but very nice."

Melanie didn't mean to kiss him but didn't want to stop either. Her own behavior surprised her, but something about him made her feel safe... and excited. "I ... We..." She moved back, collecting her thoughts. "I was about to ask you to step back. Someone was coming this way." She gestured down the aisle.

Winston didn't even bother to look. "Based on your actions, I thought you wanted my opinion on what you tasted like," he teased.

"No," she said, regaining her composure. "But under the circumstances, you can probably describe that better than I can."

"I think I can," he replied, his voice dropping into a seductive whisper.

"And that is?" her tone matching his.

"Like a place I've been eagerly waiting to get to."



CHAPTER FOUR



Melanie was about to laugh, ready to tell him the appropriate response was “toothpaste, minty fresh.” Or maybe even like the honey-flavored candy she had munched on just before deciding to brush her teeth to remove the aftertaste of sleep. But the look on his face, the sound of his voice, the way his hand pressed gently against the small of her back—all of this suggested he wanted her to believe him. And that touched something deep inside her, a place she had carefully guarded, a place she didn’t want to open up to a man.

She shouldn’t have let him kiss her. It was a mistake—Melanie knew that now, but it was too late. All she had thought about since she’d seen him enter the jewelry store was: What it would be like to experience him firsthand? Now she knew.

Melanie hadn’t noticed him when he first got on the plane because she had been bent over, shoving her oversized

straw bag under the seat in front of her. She immediately recognized the outfit he'd been wearing, then somehow, found herself standing next to him, looking for any reason to get his attention. His jeans hugged all the right places, all the right ways. His khaki short-sleeve shirt clung to the wonderfully defined muscles of his arms. Arms that she now knew held so well, so warmly. And his face—handsome and rich chocolate, with that full, wonderful mouth. He was even more overwhelming up close.

Suddenly, the plane pitched again, dipping as turbulence rocked the aircraft. The “fasten seatbelts” sign flickered with an accompanying tone.

Something about that happening at the end of the kiss added a bit of disbelief to it all. The plane shook again, jarring Melanie back to her senses. *What am I doing?* she thought.

Melanie's blatant response to Winston's kiss should never have happened. It wouldn't have happened if not for the whimsical thoughts she'd had since she first laid eyes on him. What had begun as a playful flirtation when he grabbed her arm had ended with her losing control. She wasn't good at games like these. She never had been, and she always ended up with her feelings hurt when she tried.

Surely, Winston thought she was an easy physical conquest.

Melanie's mind raced for an excuse to slip away, to hide in her seat and let the distance calm her. Just then, the flight attendant's voice came over the intercom, warning passengers to return to their seats and buckle up.

Any excuse will do, Melanie thought, eager to escape.

“You both need to return to your seats,” a male attendant said, walking up to them with one of those overly po-

lite, all-too-fake smiles that must have been taught in flight attendant school.

“Melanie, is the rough movement making you feel sick?” Winston asked, his brow creasing with concern.

“I’m okay,” Melanie replied, grateful for another excuse to leave. Her stomach wasn’t in knots from the turbulence—it was from the shame.

“You don’t look okay,” Winston said, eyeing her carefully. He turned to the attendant. “Bring extra barf bags to row 3. Let’s go, Melanie.”

Back at their seats, Melanie was relieved to find Sandra awake. Another reason not to face the man who had just shaken her world a little too much.

“Oh my God!” Sandra exclaimed dramatically when she saw them. “I think we’re being shot down!”

“It’s only turbulence,” Melanie reassured her.

“More like turbo,” Sandra quipped, gripping her armrests. “Turbo missiles hitting one of the engines. I wanted to see the Pacific, but not from 20,000 feet below it!”

“This won’t last, Sandra,” Winston said, buckling his seatbelt with ease. He was calm, collected—a man who seemed to thrive under pressure. “Melanie, there should be a bag in your seat pocket if you feel queasy again.”

“Since when you get sick on planes?” Sandra asked, genuinely puzzled. “You’re practically invincible when it comes to motion. Fortitude runs in your family.”

Melanie didn’t respond. She turned toward the window, avoiding Winston’s eyes as though the vast sky outside could distract her from the heat of his gaze.

After what felt like an eternity, but was actually less than ten minutes, the aircraft found calmer skies. Melanie con-

tinued to stare out the window, watching as the pale blue horizon turned into shades of burnt orange as evening approached.

Tahiti time was five hours behind Mountain Time back home in Denver. It would be six o'clock when they arrived—eleven o'clock her body's time. But despite the long day, Melanie was wide awake. Her mind buzzed with thoughts of how she was going to handle the Winston incident.

The Winston incident? She smiled wryly at the phrase. She was already making it sound like a major ordeal. It was only a kiss—a kiss that got out of hand with a man she had just met.

Lord, Melanie thought, *maybe I'll wake up in an hour and realize I've been dreaming this whole time*. She prayed it would resolve itself that easily, but she knew better.

"Melanie?" Winston's deep voice interrupted her thoughts.

Melanie could pretend to be sleeping, because that wouldn't fly—literally or figuratively—since she had just taken a five-hour nap. Reluctantly, she turned to face him.

"No regrets today," Winston said, his tone gentle yet firm, and she nodded, though she wasn't entirely sure if she meant it.

"Regrets about what?" Sandra interjected, looking between them.

"Doctor-patient privilege," Winston said with a wink.

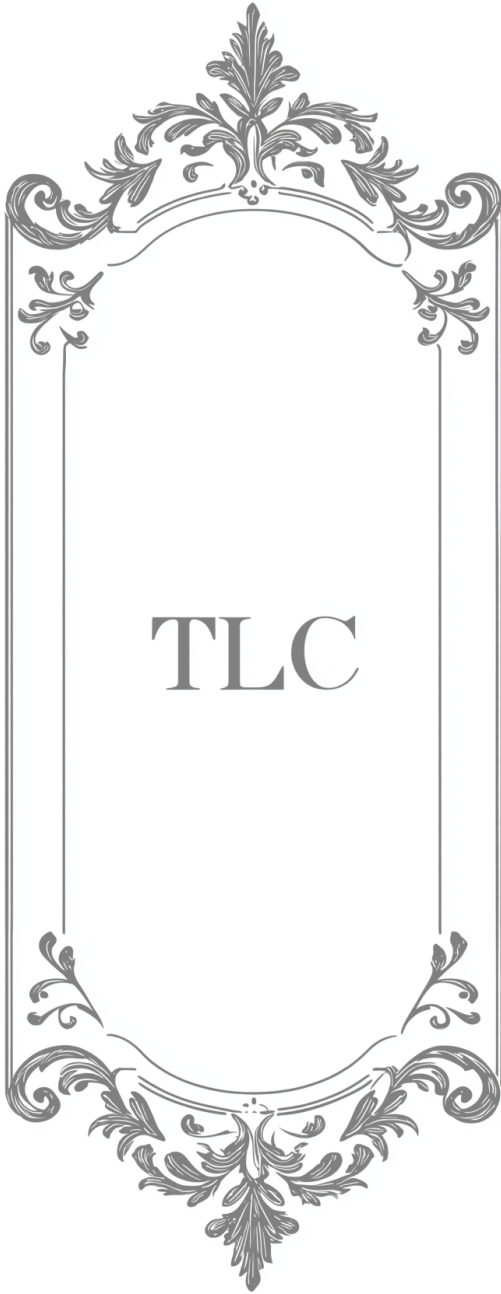
"What doctor?" Sandra blinked, bewildered. "What did I sleep through?"

"The ride over," Winston replied casually. "And I'm the doctor."

Melanie and Sandra both stared at him in surprise.

Just then, the flight attendant returned with extra barf bags. “For you, madam?” he said, handing them to Melanie with an overly formal nod.

“You sick for real?” Sandra asked, her disbelief evident. “I hate not being in the know!” She sighed dramatically. “I’m not sleeping another minute on this trip!”



TLC



CHAPTER FIVE



A Tahitian evening breeze greeted all one hundred and seventy passengers of Flight TN1 as they climbed down the stairs onto the runway. Tahiti, the largest of the 118 islands and atolls comprising French Polynesia, is in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, just four thousand miles from Los Angeles. Travelers—some tired from jet lag, some not, all showed enthusiasm to finally have made it there. Now they stood wondering, talking, and laughing in the customs lines that started in a covered atrium at a rear entrance to the airport.

The atrium's ceiling fans circulated warm air around the terra cotta entrance that had several large, strangely shaped trees with roots that grew above ground. A band of Tahitian men next to the entrance of the atrium sang rhythmic melodies and played instruments made from wood and bamboo. A welcoming committee of women in brightly colored dresses placed small white flowers, called *Tiare*—the Tahitian

gardenia—on the ears of those who passed them, their wonderful fragrance filling the air.

“Is that a crab?” Sandra asked stopping her frantic search in her oversized purse. In the middle of the atrium, a small land crab navigated its way through the six caterpillar-slow-moving lines of passengers going through customs. “Where the hell is my passport?” Sandra was back to digging in the bag.

“You don’t think you left it on the plane, do you?” An elderly lady in line behind them asked.

“No,” Sandra said in annoyance. “A case of bad packing.”

“Thank goodness! Bill and I had the same panic just before leaving home,” the woman added, fanning her tinted reddish-blond hair that did not go far in covering up the gray. “We’re from Dallas. And you?”

“I’m from Denver,” Melanie said, “Sandra’s from Cedar Hills, Texas.”

“That’s just south of us! I’m Ethel Hightower and this is my husband, Bill.” The woman enthused. “It’s our fiftieth anniversary and...” she gave a synopsis of the past ten anniversary vacations leading to this trip. They were cruising to countries and islands one ocean at a time. Next year, Fuji, another Pacific Ocean Island. “Luckily, no poisonous snakes and bugs here. But the mosquitoes...”

If not for the too-long flight, too-warm atrium, and too-disconcerting incident with Winston, Melanie might have enjoyed listening to Mrs. Hightower prattle, non-stop, about their vacation hot spots. Inbred manners forced her to acknowledge the conversation, but she silently prayed for the line to move faster. She hadn’t seen Winston since deplan-

ing and hoped it would stay that way. He had gotten off the plane before she and Sandra did, because Sandra had forgotten to complete her customs documents during the flight, and they stayed on the plane to do so. Winston had probably cleared customs, picked up his luggage, and was well on his way to enjoying Papeete.

“Are you married, dear?” Mrs. Hightower asked Melanie. Sandra wasn’t listening.

“No. I’m divorced,” Melanie said.

“Too bad,” Mrs. Hightower patted her husband on the arm. He stood silently nodding occasionally, more to prove that he was breathing rather than listening. “He couldn’t lose me if he tried. With the right man, fifty years is nothing.”

“Are you staying in Tahiti or island hopping?” Melanie asked.

“Cruising the islands. They should have these lines by the final destination. Some of us are going to the cruise ships versus headed directly to an island in French Polynesia.”

“Nationality is the only way these lines work,” Melanie said, just to be talking. It was a standard procedure for all custom checkpoints.

“I just don’t want to miss my ship. We’re traveling on the Paul Gauguin. It’s one of the smaller cruise ships in the line, and extremely exclusive.”

“That’s the only way we be travelin’. Exclusive.” Sandra purposely added a touch of Ebonics. She never stopped digging for her passport. “We’re on the Paul Gauguin, too.”

“Oh!” Mrs. Hightower looked somewhat deflated but not deterred. “It’s a bit warm today,” she changed the subject. “The average temperature is about 80 degrees. I had hoped traveling here in March wouldn’t be so warm. Mr.

Hightower burns so easily. The nice man on the plane next to us gave us so many great safety tips.” She turned in search of something. “Oh, look, Bill.” Mrs. Hightower pointed to the movement at the rear of the line. “It’s Dr. Knight. There were a few doctors on our flight. Convention, you know.” She began waving him forward. “Bill, he needs to be with us, not way back there at the end. The dear man sat near us in first class.” Mrs. Hightower lowered her complaint to a secretive tone. “One would think they would have premiere and executive travelers’ lines for customs.”

Melanie and Sandra had no idea who this Dr. Knight was, but they hoped he would join them quickly to chat with Mrs. Hightower. Melanie was about to suggest she go fetch Dr. Knight herself.

“You’ll love meeting him, dear,” Mrs. Hightower said to Melanie. “Has an excellent practice near Highland Park. Treats a lot of the Dallas football players.”

The words ‘football players’ registered in Sandra’s brain. “Oh, really!” she quickly chimed, fully alert to any conversation involving football players.

“It would be nice to chat with him,” Melanie said, thinking he would be a great diversion from Mrs. Hightower. But as she stepped around to get a better view, she saw Winston. She quickly moved to stand behind Mr. Hightower, glad for his height. Hopefully, Winston wouldn’t see her.

“Dr. Knight!” Mrs. Hightower exclaimed. “Join us!”

“Winston?” Melanie looked puzzled.

“Melanie.” Winston was smiling.

“Dear, you already know Dr. Knight?”

“I thought you said he was a football player?” Sandra asked.

“Treat football players,” Winston corrected.

“Sports medicine?” Melanie asked.

“General practitioner as well,” Winston added.

“Ohhh... how nice!” Mrs. Hightower enthused. “All together again.”

Melanie prayed that the folks in front of them would hurry up. She couldn’t take both Mrs. Hightower and Winston on an empty stomach and achy back.

Chuck walked up and Sandra beamed because he looked like a football player.

“Everyone, this is my friend, Chuck Rogers.” Winston introduced Melanie, Sandra, and the Hightowers.

“Running back or wide receiver?” Sandra asked Chuck excitedly, while attempting to rub wrinkles out of her blue sundress.

“Sorry. I practice medicine, not ball,” Chuck corrected.

“What’s with all this damn skipping!” The person in line behind the Hightowers shouted at them all. “You can’t skip!”

“Medical reunion,” Mrs. Hightower explained quickly in a low tone. “We’re Dr. Knight’s patients.” She turned to her husband, “Aren’t we, dear?”

“Doctor, my ass!” The person behind them wasn’t buying it.

Chuck flashed his medical ID stored inside his passport wallet.

“Heyyyyy,” Sandra said, looking for a reason to get closer to Chuck. “Cute passport case. I’m sure you never lose it that way.”

“Have you found yours yet?” Mrs. Hightower wanted to know as the line in front of them cleared.

Melanie took advantage and rushed forward. She flashed her passport, impatiently waited for it to be stamped by the inspector, and hurried forward to baggage claim to get her luggage. Luck was on her side; she found her bags immediately. Sandra showed up complaining about the sudden rush as Melanie hurried her along.

“We don’t want to miss our bus, Sandra!” Melanie said.

“Fine!” she whined. “But we’re stopping for snacks. I can’t find my pretzels either.”

Just as Melanie was about to wheel her luggage away, Winston smoothly stepped in front of her. “Sandra, there’s a duty-free shop over there if you want to grab something. We’ll wait here for you.”

“Sure thing, Winston.” Sandra caught sight of another fine-looking man heading into the shop. “I just might pick up a few extra things while I’m there,” she said with a wink, before disappearing into the store.

“Hey again, Melanie,” Winston’s voice was low and warm now that they were alone. “I thought we agreed on no regrets.”

“Winston, I...” Melanie paused, taking a deep breath. There was no point in pretending anymore. She would never see this man again. This was their last encounter, so what was she really running from? Besides, she had enjoyed the kiss. In fact, she’d fantasized about him since the moment she first laid eyes on him. She owed herself the truth. “I... think you’re an incredible kisser,” she admitted, her voice more confident now. “And I think you taste like... like ‘a good time I wanted to have.’” She watched as his sensual mouth curved into that irresistible grin. “The flight over was a lot more enjoyable because of you.”

Melanie's eyes trace over every inch of him. Tall, muscular, ruggedly handsome. The shadow of his beard made his dark chocolate skin even more tempting. He had a way about him—charming when he wanted to be, arrogant when it suited him. And it suited him a lot.

“This is the last time we'll ever see each other,” she continued, her tone softer now. “So, let's just say goodbye.”

Winston raised an eyebrow, amusement in his eyes. “Isn't that the name of a great oldies song?”

“Probably,” Melanie replied, a smile playing on her lips. “But it's also a great way for us to part. You're here in Paapeete for your meeting, and I'm off to a ship that won't be back here for a week when we fly out. So...” she exhaled softly, “have a great time here.”

Melanie started to leave, but his words stopped her.

“I would love to help you enjoy your stay,” he said playfully.

“I will enjoy it,” Melanie assured him, her voice steady.

“You sure you don't have any regrets?” Winston asked, his gaze holding hers.

“About you?” Melanie's eyes flickered to his mouth. “Just one.”

“And that is?” he asked, clearly intrigued.

“That the turbulence stopped me from kissing you again.”

Winston's grin widened. “I think you're flirting with me.”

“Why not be honest?” she smiled back, her confidence blooming. “We won't see each other again.”

He paused, thinking. “Maybe we could still spend time together on your last day, waiting for the return flight.”

“It’s a thought,” Melanie teased, her lips curving, “but I’m not the kind of girl you think I am.”

“And what kind is that?” Winston asked.

“The kind that’s an easy lay,” she said, her tone direct.

“I never thought you were,” Winston replied seriously. “I was just suggesting a way we can finish the kiss we started. I like the way you taste.”

Like a place I’ve been eagerly waiting to get to, Melanie remembered him having said that about the way she tasted. The memory warmed her, and she couldn’t help the smile that spread across her face. She stepped forward, coming up on her toes, and pressed her lips to his in a soft, lingering kiss. A goodbye kiss.

“Bye, Winston,” she whispered, watching him watch her.

“You’re sure you need to leave now?” Winston asked. “Maybe we can have a drink before you go.”

“The Paul Gauguin has already started its boarding. Sandra and I need to find the ship, shower, and change for the *Bon Voyage* party onboard.” Melanie saw something that looked like surprise and disappointment in his stare. She guessed he had hoped she would change all her plans to be with him. Her trip was already planned, and he wasn’t a part of it.

“Enjoy your cruise,” Winston said.

“I will,” Melanie said.

“Even without me?” he joked.

“I’m sure it would be better with you,” she kidded.

“Is that a promise?” he asked.

What the hell, she could flirt too. Walking backward, she flashed him a mischievous smile. “You seem like a nice guy; someone who could be quite entertaining. It would be abso-

lutely fantastic if you could be there!” Then she turned to hide her laughter. “But I’ll try to manage without you.”

Winston laughed as she waved farewell, not looking back.

Melanie intercepted Sandra and they followed the signs to the Paul Gauguin bus transfer station. Winston watched and waved a final goodbye as Chuck came to stand next to him.

“That Sandra is something else,” Chuck grinned.

“I was just thinking the same thing about Melanie,” Winston said.

“Yeah, but I don’t get the impression that Melanie is the freak that Sandra is. She hit on me and some other guy in the duty-free shop.”

“Let’s go,” Winston said, his mind already elsewhere. “We’ve got to get to that medical check-in meeting.”

Chuck raised an eyebrow. “So, did you make plans to hook up with Melanie on the island?”

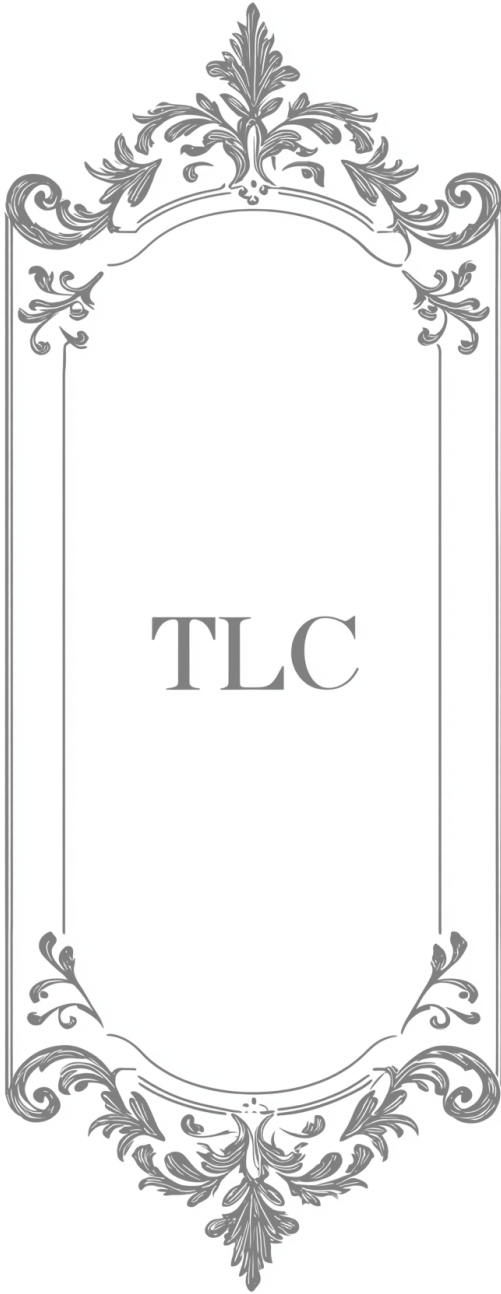
“No,” Winston said, his voice quiet. “She wanted to say goodbye here.”

“But?” Chuck asked, sensing there was more.

“But,” Winston added, a slow smile returning to his face, “I found out something else.”

“What’s that?” Chuck asked.

“She’s on the Paul Gauguin.”



TLC



CHAPTER SIX



“So, are you going to meet Winston on Bora Bora for some wild and kinky sex?” Sandra asked Melanie as the air-conditioned bus pulled away from Tahiti-Faaa International Airport.

“No.”

“Moorea Island then? I think we’ll be docked there for two days.” Sandra opened her cruise itinerary. “And it’s only a thirty-minute motorboat ride from Tahiti.”

“Not there, either.”

Sandra put down her itinerary and gawked, dropped jaw, in disbelief at her friend. “Whhaaattttt!!????” Sandra placed her hand on Melanie’s forehead. “Are you feverish? No,” Sandra said, removing her hand, “just plain crazy. The man’s fine, intelligent, surely financially secure, and just plain fine!”

“You said the ‘fine’ part already,” Melanie added.

“So, where’s he staying in Papeete?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You’re a damn fool,” Sandra slapped her itinerary and guidebook in her lap and crossed her arms under her chest. “Why not go after him? That’s what you had suggested back in the LA Giftshop. Besides, it’s been too long since you dated someone.”

Melanie liked Sandra’s directness. It was a refreshing quality she brought to the friendship. Even though she could be a little abrasive at times, Melanie wasn’t offended. “I’m not a fan of casual sex. Besides, the divorce isn’t that old. Last thing I need in my life is another good-looking guy, especially one who knows it.”

“Ronald, the asshole,” Sandra stated flatly. “That was a bad decision and it’s in your past.”

“My ex was definitely a good-looking cheater and liar, though,” Melanie added. “But let’s not dwell on his good characteristics.” She looked back out the window at the island’s beauty. It was extremely clean. Winston was right; Tahiti definitely had a big city feel to it. Traffic, streetlights, beautiful homes, shopping malls, City Hall, post office, churches situated throughout the mountains, and all the other comforts, and discomforts, of urban life. And Sandra was probably right as well. Experiencing Winston might have been a good idea.

“Let me give you a little advice.” Sandra pulled Melanie back into the conversation. “We’re here to have fun. Don’t be running off guys I might be interested in. True, I came for a relaxing exotic getaway, and it did help that you got this trip for half the going rate. I say, why go to the over-visited Bahamas—or Hawaii, for that matter—when we paid the

same price to come here? Hell, I'm all for an exotic change, but don't start preaching to me about being virtuous."

"You're a nurse," Melanie said. "I'm sure you know how to be safe, sexually and otherwise. I'm not going to preach to you."

"Good, 'cause I'm not going to pass up on an opportunity for fun! Enough said." Sandra pointed excitedly out of the window. "McDonald's! Feels like home already."

Then so be it, Melanie decided. She would have fun, too! She couldn't wait to get to the ship and start their cruise. And it would give her something else to think about other than Winston. Maybe she did misjudge him and let an opportunity for fun with him on her last day in Tahiti slip away. But he was from Dallas and her friend, Sandra, did live near there. *Who knows*, Melanie thought, *our paths might cross again someday*. "What's the order of the islands we're going to?" Melanie asked Sandra, putting thoughts of Winston and opportunities lost out of her mind.

Opening the itinerary, Sandra read them off: Papeete/Tahiti, Raiatea, Tahaa, the Motu Mahana, Bora Bora, Moorea, then back to Papeete/Tahiti.

"You've gotta get better at pronouncing all of the vowels. It's Ra-I-a-te-a and Ta-ha-a," Melanie said, laughing.

"Whatever," Sandra joked. "As long as I can stare at fine island men, I'm happy. The language of love needs no extra vowels."

They both laughed at that.

"I just can't believe you're gonna spend time researching these places to write magazine articles and posts."

"It's what I do, Sandra."

"This trip is a good tax write-off for you, is how I see it."

“That, too!” Melanie agreed.

As the bus pulled up to the docks, the Paul Gauguin luxury liner looked welcoming. White lights, the Christmas tree variety, lined palm trees that were spread across a large park area next to the docks. Vacationers sat, stood, and lounged as they sipped on cool drinks, munched snacks, and chatted merrily.

The Paul Gauguin was much smaller than the cruise ships Melanie and Sandra had been on before. It accommodated only 318 passengers, unlike the ship docked next to it—the type they both were familiar with—which accommodated thousands. Their ship would leave in a few hours to start the seven-day cruise. Melanie and Sandra skipped the picnic on the docks and headed straight for the ship to shower and change. As they boarded, the cruise director and his staff welcomed them aboard.

A personal server took their carry-on bags. “Right this way,” the woman said in a thick French accent. “I’ll have everything, including your other luggage carried to your room. I’ve put fresh fruit, soft drinks, and wine in your room. If you want a light snack before the Sail Away Party, the piano bar is on Deck 8.”

“Personal server? Ooooooohhhhhay! Never happened on any ship I’ve been on,” Sandra whispered a bit too loudly. “I’m beginning to feel rich!”

Exotic paintings lined the halls and rooms. The ship was a luxurious tribute to Paul Gauguin, the Paris-born impressionist painter of the late 1800s. Beautiful reproductions of his art covered the walls.

In 1891, ruined and in debt, Gauguin sailed to the South Seas to escape civilization. Under the influence of the trop-

ical setting and Polynesian culture, his paintings became more powerful, more distinctive, and more simplified, and in doing so, changed the status of his life. Tahiti and Paul Gauguin became one in the eyes of France and that made him famous.

Melanie entered their majestic stateroom, which featured reprints of several of Gauguin's works, teakwood walls, native stone carvings on shelves, and one exotic floral arrangement on a small dining table on the other side of the sleeping area that had two full-size beds. The dining area held a stocked refrigerator and bar on one wall, a loveseat on the other. On the back wall, a large window with a wonderful view of mountainous terrain.

Melanie looked around with appreciation and an expectation that views like this would inspire her writing as well. "Get a load of this room! I like this smaller ship better. It's more like being on a private yacht than a cruise ship." She moved to the window and looked out over the festivities on the docks. "And those people want to hang around on land? Unbelievable!"

"They gotta be from the other ship. Well, the party starts in an hour," Sandra shouted heading to the bathroom. "Let's hurry and get topside! I don't want to get back off the boat."

"You don't have to tell me twice! Our luggage should be here soon. Then it's sail-away time!"

"Did you see that cute guy in the greeting room!" Sandra recalled.

"They were all cute," Melanie said. "Are any of these Polynesian people bad-looking?"

"Or short for that matter. Even the women are all tall."

About two hours later, showered, changed, and happy to have previously found the restaurant for dinner, Sandra and Melanie sipped Island Delight cocktails, enjoying the live band playing a mixture of jazz, rock, R&B, and island music.

“My Smartphone!” Sandra whined loudly. “Tell them to hold the boat. I need my phone to take pictures of us here!” She jumped up, rushed around the pool, heading back to the room.

Laughing, Melanie exhaled what little worries she had and inhaled the expectation of joy that awaited her over the next seven days. It was going to be a quiet, relaxing good time. Nothing would cause this trip to be anything other than what she had planned. She was sure of it.

“Hey again, Melanie.” The deep voice rolled over her like a familiar warmth.

Melanie spun around, nearly choking on the sip of her drink. She stood quickly, coughing once to clear her throat, blinking several times to make sure the alcohol wasn’t playing tricks on her eyes.

“Winston?” she managed, her voice hoarse with surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Enjoying the sight of you,” he said softly, his eyes roaming over her with an intensity that caused her to warm.

“No, I mean, on the ship. I thought you said you were staying in Papeete for a conference or something.”

He shook his head ‘no’ slowly, his lips curling into that teasing grin. “I said I’d give you a tour of Papeete if you wanted. We checked in for the medical conference, then Chuck and I boarded this ship. The rest of our meetings are here.”

Her mind reeled. “On this ship?” She frowned, trying to make sense of it. “Vacationers are on this ship.”

Winston shrugged, his broad shoulders moving with an ease that was maddeningly attractive. “Doctors too. We’re required to meet every morning for a couple of hours—classes, workshops, and all that.” He moved closer, his voice dropping. “The rest of the time is ours to enjoy.”

“To enjoy?” she repeated, her irritation beginning to bubble up. She had planned this cruise for peace and relaxation, not to run into the very man who had already turned her world upside down.

“Yeah.” It took Winston three steps to stand directly in front of her. She had to tilt her head back to look up at him. With a tenderness that contrasted with the intensity in his eyes, Winston reached up, brushing a few loose strands of hair away from her face with the back of his hand. His hand lingered at her chin, lifting it ever so slightly, preventing her from looking away.

“And I plan to enjoy every minute of my spare time getting to know you,” he murmured, his voice low and promising.

The promise in his statement coupled with the look in his eyes made her go weak in the knees. She began to rock and blamed that on the ship moving away from shore. His nearness, the smell of his cologne, the warmth radiating from his body—it was all too much, too overwhelming.

“Winston,” she whispered, her eyes locked on his descending mouth, “what are you doing?”

“Helping you keep the promise you made to me at the airport,” he replied, his breath a whisper against her lips then he kissed her softly.

His mouth was warm, insistent, and as soon as their lips touched, a rush of desire flooded through her. His kiss now was slow, deliberate. A preview of possibilities.

Melanie's hands moved almost instinctively, reaching up to grasp his arms as if holding on to him could keep her grounded. His lips moved against hers, softly, then with more intensity, and she felt herself being pulled into a storm of emotions she hadn't anticipated.

Oh God, what was happening? Melanie's mind whirled.



CHAPTER SEVEN



Maybe it was the alcohol. Or maybe it was the romantic atmosphere that floated around the deck like some kind of love mist. Melanie wasn't sure what had made her delay in pulling back. But here she was, standing far too close to a man who could unravel her with a kiss.

Finally, she came to her senses and stepped back.

“Don't do that!” Her hand shot up to her mouth, as if to shield her lips from another one of Winston's sensual assaults.

A dozen questions erupted in her mind, all struggling to push themselves to the forefront of her brain. She didn't appreciate the surprise appearance or the weak explanation he just shared. But because Melanie was so befuddled by how quickly she had reacted to his touch, she asked the one question that she probably shouldn't have. It just popped out before she could stop it.

“Why do you kiss me the way you do?”

Winston’s brow arched, amusement flickering in his eyes as he took a step closer. “How is that?”

“Like you get so much joy out of it,” she said, her voice quieter now as if admitting that much had given him too much power. And the way he smiled—that slow, devastating smile—made her regret asking the question in the first place.

It dawned on Melanie then. This wasn’t like the airport, where she could flirt and walk away, assuming they would never cross paths again. Now she was trapped on this ship, floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, with nowhere to hide. And Winston clearly wasn’t planning on letting her off the hook easily.

He still hadn’t answered her, at least not with words. His eyes, though—they were saying everything, many things... sensual things.

“I believe,” Winston finally said, his voice as smooth as velvet, “that you can tell a lot about how someone makes love to your body... by the way their tongue and lips make love to your mouth.”

Oh, no. Melanie glanced around, hoping no one had overheard that little revelation. She moved her hand away from her mouth, but when she noticed him staring at her lips, she quickly put it back.

Winston was having none of that. He reached up and moved her fingers out of his way. His finger traced gently across her top lip. It stopped at her mouth’s corner. Instinctively, she moved her lips across his finger. She caught herself doing that and stopped. Again, she stepped back.

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Winston said. “I think making love to your body would be like dreaming when you’re wide awake. If the way you kiss is any indication.”

Melanie’s heart stuttered at his words. “Don’t say such things to me,” she managed, barely audible.

“I answered your question,” Winston explained.

“Just like you answered my other questions,” she said, slightly peeved. “In a way that suits your needs.”

“What do you mean?” Winston, although sharp, was baffled.

“How could we be on the same ship, and I not know about it?”

“I thought you would be glad to see me,” Winston said, his tone softening, genuinely surprised.

“You misled me, Winston. Why would I be glad about that?”

“I never said I wasn’t going to be on this cruise.”

“You never said you would be, either,” Melanie responded defensively. She felt manipulated. “You could have told me when I mentioned it to you.”

“You never gave me a chance, Melanie. You were too busy trying to get away.”

“I did no such thing! You had ample opportunity.”

“What difference does it make? I’m here now. And you want me to be.”

“No, I do not!” She decided that she was angry after all. One hand went to her hip while the other pointed at him. “Don’t you go manipulating the situation again.”

“Didn’t you say it would be a fantastic idea if I were on this cruise with you?”

“I didn’t mean it that way!” Melanie protested; her resolve was wavering.

“So, you lied to me?” he asked, tinged with surprise.

“No!”

“Then you misled me?” he pressed.

“Of course not!” She had been joking and now he was confusing the issue. “I didn’t know you’d be here. I was kidding around.”

Winston’s brows furrowed in confusion. “If *I* do it, it’s manipulation. If *you* do it, it’s kidding.” He was flabbergasted.

“Yes... I mean, no!”

He just stared at her.

“Look,” Melanie said, placing both hands on her hips. “It seems we’re going to be trapped together for another seven days. I would appreciate it if you do not approach me like you just did. Or the way you approached me on the plane for that matter.”

“You told me you wanted more,” he said. “I just gave you what you wanted.”

She threw frustrated hands up in the air before rubbing them across her hair. “I shouldn’t be upset on my vacation. But I don’t handle complications well,” she said softly.

“I didn’t think I was being complicated.” He took a step toward her. “I’m not less than what you are expecting.”

“Who said I was expecting anything?”

“Why else would you be upset?” he asked.

“Because I didn’t expect you! It would be one thing if you walked up and just said hello. It’s another to walk up and kiss me like you want more than that.”

“What if I do?”

“I told you.” Melanie forced herself not to shout at the man. “I’m not looking for a quick lay!”

“What about a good, slow lay?” he joked.

Melanie laughed in spite of herself. Shaking her head, she said, “That’s what I’m talking about. You can be so damn misleading. You knew what I meant, yet you twisted it to your own advantage.”

“Winston!” Sandra’s cheerful voice came out of the distance. She ran over to greet him. “Mel said you were in Papeete! A meeting or something.”

“I was. The rest of the medical meetings will be aboard the ship.”

“Really?” Sandra said excitedly. “That means there’s a boatload of doctors walking around loose.” She looked around, hopeful. “Being able to do business and still mix in a lot of pleasure is great.”

“That was the idea.” He looked back at Melanie.

“You two keep talking,” Sandra said. “Let me go find a drink. Hopefully, with a single doctor attached to it! Be back.” Off she went toward the crowd on the opposite side of the ship.

“She’s glad to see me,” Winston said, watching Sandra leave.

“You didn’t kiss *her*,” Melanie said defensively.

“I think Sandra would be even happier to see me if I did.”

Well, you are right about that, Melanie thought to herself. Sandra wouldn’t stand here questioning a man about why he found her attractive enough to want to kiss her and dream about making love to her. She would be leading him to some place where they could make it happen.

Instead, Melanie was being a stick in the mud. Why couldn't she be as free-spirited and accepting of pleasure as Sandra was? Well, because she didn't have casual affairs, and she was damaged from her last relationship. And she wasn't ready to admit, even to herself, that Winston's directness bothered her much like Ronald's had. *Darn it!* She was still allowing Ronald to live rent-free in her mind.

Thoughts of Ronald's deception and the resulting pain sprang up like a toilet leak, ruining any chance of her having a good time right now. Melanie attempted to cap it, but the damage was done. She needed to get away and think. Think this through. Think about Winston and his strong desire for her. Think about how she was going to manage being trapped aboard this ship with him and not give in.

My Lord! This was supposed to be a peaceful vacation and a wonderful writing assignment. Looking out over the water, the rhythmic slap of the ocean against the ship sounded like gentle clapping. The faster the ship moved, the louder the clapping seemed. A crescendo of joy was moving below her. Behind her, people milled about merrily as the band started another island song. And beside her stood a man who made her insides sing.

All around Melanie was a celebration of joy, yet she stood there brooding because she couldn't figure out how to take advantage of it. She wanted to stomp and scream at Winston for making her feel this way. But she knew the great feelings that he stirred weren't the reason for her lousy mood.

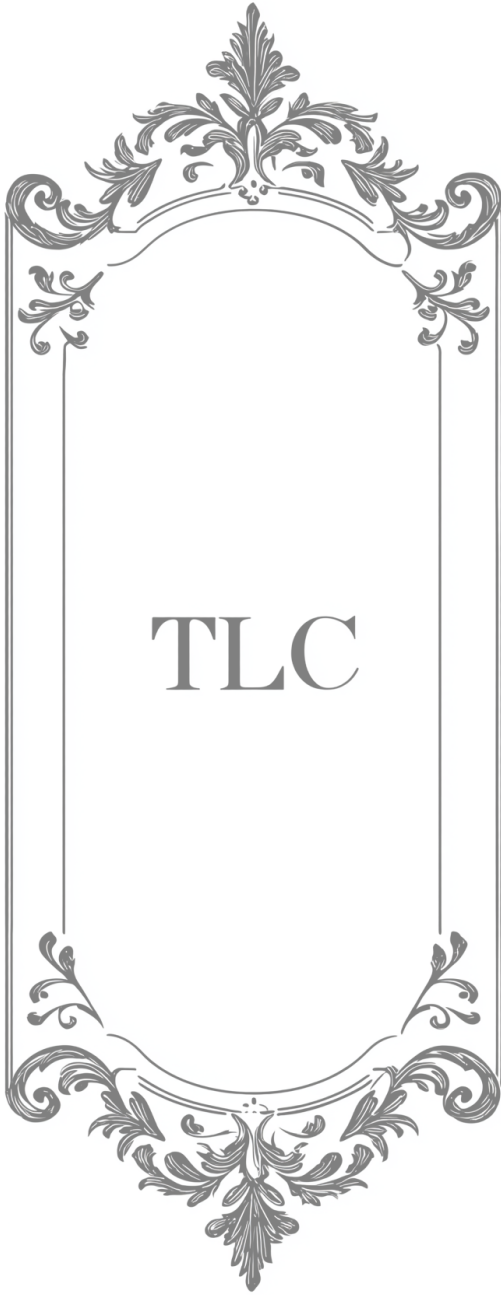
Forcing a smile, Melanie turned to face him. "If we avoid each other, I'm sure this will be a great trip for the both of us. I can't play your word games. I've got a busy day tomorrow. I'm headed to bed. Excuse me."

“Melanie?” he reached for her arm.

She stepped out of reach and walked purposefully to the exit leading to the stairwell that would take her down several flights of stairs... away from Winston, away from her annoying thoughts, away from the merriment.

Then she would be in her room where she could think more clearly.

Yet, just then, Melanie didn't know what she wanted to think about.



TLC



CHAPTER EIGHT



Cruise Day 1 – Raiatea Island

Melanie's notes on Raiatea: Raiatea means bright sky. 12,000 inhabitants, only 25 sq. miles. Second largest of the Society islands, after Tahiti. Waterfalls cascading down mountain slopes with evergreen forests. Quieter and less developed than Tahiti or Bora Bora. A fruit lover's paradise: pineapple farms, mango groves, banana trees, to name a few, are plentiful. A variety of Hibiscus flowers are in bloom all over the island.

“Go away!”
“Sandra, get up,” Melanie pleaded. “We’re in Raiatea. Let’s go get breakfast, then visit the island.”

“Why can’t you just leave me here?” Sandra whined.
“What time is it?”

“Eight.”

“Good god, stop torturing me.”

“It’s your own fault. You shouldn’t have been out so late.”

“Don’t blame me. It was the doctor, lawyer, and Indian chief’s fault.”

Melanie laughed. “What are you talking about?”

I met this doctor and his friend, the lawyer. We ended up going to the Cognac Social... for Cognac.”

“Makes sense.”

“About five Cognacs later, some joint’s chief or Indian chief, I think, joined us. All I remember is making a joke about it. But hell,” Sandra fluffed her pillow and crashed her head on it, “he could have been a chef from Indiana. I was so lit; I don’t remember too much after saying hello to him.”

“Sounds like you had fun.” Melanie was adjusting her pale blue tank top into the sides of the matching shorts. Grabbing her straw hat, notepad, camera, and bag, she headed for the door. “I’m going to grab breakfast then go research the island. Cellphone rates and roaming costs are ridiculous. Since there’s no way to find each easily, leave me a note here on where you’ll be this afternoon. My phone will be off.”

“The next sound you hear will be my snoring,” Sandra said.

“Sleep tight!” Melanie stepped out the door.

“Put the ‘Do Not Disturb’ on the door! I don’t want the maid to wake me!”

“Okay.”



ONE BEAUTY OF THE SMALLER CRUISE SHIP WAS THAT EATING could take place whenever and wherever a person wanted, with the exception of the exclusive restaurants onboard, which required reservations. Melanie decided to reserve

a place for dinner at *L'Etoile* then headed to *LeVeranda* for breakfast. She found a spot portside, so she could have a view of the island. The ship had not docked but was anchored close to shore.

The sight of the plush, foliage-covered mountain that ran the length of the island awed Melanie. Rising just over three thousand feet, the mountain seemed to reach for the heavens, appearing to float on the horizon where the sky met the ocean in a seamless expanse of aqua blue. The mountain was named *Mount Tefatoaiti* and Melanie almost laughed out loud at the butcher job Sandra would do attempting to pronounce it. Inspired, she jotted notes about its beauty and feel.

“Good morning,” a male voice said.

She looked up at the waiter. “Oh, hi!” Melanie snapped out of her reverie.

“Would you like a menu?”

“Tea, please, with cream. And I’ll help myself at the breakfast bar.”

“Certainly, Madam!” The server headed to the drink station.

Melanie went back to scribbling notes, trying to push the memory of last night far from her mind. But how could she when the heat of Winston’s kiss still lingered? Just as the tea was placed in front of her, she glanced up to thank the waiter but froze mid-sentence.

“Winston?” she frowned, her pen slipping from her fingers.

“Good morning.” He pulled out the chair next to her, his tone casual, as if they hadn’t shared that electrifying mo-

ment. “I was just heading to my meeting, but when I saw you, I couldn’t resist saying hi. May I join you for a minute?”

“No. I’m in the middle of...” Melanie trailed off as Winston sat down, clearly unbothered by her protest. Why was it so hard to resist him when he made himself so comfortable in her space?

“Middle of what?” Winston nudged the tea closer to her hand. “By the way, I had to wrestle this away from your server. I think he thought I wasn’t going to give it to you. But please, don’t let me interrupt.”

“Middle of researching an article,” she said, trying to refocus on the task at hand.

“You’re a writer?” His eyebrows lifted with genuine interest.

“Yes,” then she explained, feeling oddly self-conscious under his gaze. “I write and do photography work for cultural-focused travel platforms. I also have a travel blog.”

“I’d love to read some of your work,” Winston said, flashing a smile that nearly disarmed her. “I can’t write anything more than a prescription.”

“That’s a talent within itself,” she quipped, hoping to steer the conversation somewhere neutral.

Winston leaned in slightly, his voice dropping to a whisper. “I love your smile.”

That did it. Her pulse quickened, and she tried to resist the warmth spreading through her. “Please, don’t try...”

“I know, I know,” Winston raised a hand to stop her, his tone softening. “Let me start by saying you were right last night. I did take advantage of the situation, and I apologize for making you feel like I was being manipulative.”

“You were.”

Winston nodded, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "It's a small ship. And I don't want to avoid you."

"If we do cross paths," Melanie began, her voice firm, "I'd prefer if you were more honest and direct with me."

Winston's eyes gleamed. "If I promise to be as direct as possible and hold nothing back, will you have dinner with me tonight?"

"Sandra and I already have reservations," she replied quickly, hoping Sandra would be up for some last-minute rescuing. She didn't know if she could handle his directness. The indirect approach was causing her to dream about him, pant for him, warm for him. She could lose herself to Winston if he were to add openness and honesty to his *modus operandi*. And that scared her. Melanie felt the tension building. "Winston, I..."

"Dr. Knight," a voice called from nearby, and Winston turned to it. "You're needed."

"Thanks, Bob. I'll be there." Winston turned back to Melanie. "Then have lunch with me?" he said.

"I'm going to be on the island most of the day," she added. "Researching."

"I have to do a presentation this morning. Else I'd blow off this meeting and tour with you. It should be over in an hour or two; maybe I could join you. Will leaving in the..." Winston mentally calculated the time. "...afternoon give you enough time to research?"

"Not really."

"Understood." Winston rapidly thought of other options. "When will you be back?"

"I don't know, Winston. Besides, you need to go."

A thought hit him. “You know. When I think about it, I believe the issue with us was caused by timing,” he said, nodding. “I only get snatches of time with you. I find myself saying things that will get me the fastest response in the time I have with you. But I promised not to manipulate the conversation like that again.”

“Winston, you don’t...” Melanie started but was interrupted.

“Dr. Knight?” It was Bob again. Winston gave him a quick nod and then stood up as he reached to touch her hand.

“Let me hurry and say this so that it sounds right to you.” He came around the table and squatted down in front of her. At almost eye level he said, “I like you, Melanie. And the fact that you’ve been on my mind since the moment I saw you is making me crazy, because this is very rare for me.” He placed his hands on her thighs and squeezed. She looked down at his hands. “Touching you makes my fantasies all real.” His whisper sounded like an ache. “You even tiptoed into my dream last night.”

“Winston Knight,” Chuck said, nearing the table. “I hate to break all this up, but we’re on a tight schedule. You’re needed now.”

“Give me thirty seconds, Chuck.”

“I was told not to come back without you.” Chuck grinned at the murderous look his friend gave him. “So, I can’t leave, buddy.”

“Then turn around and give me some privacy.”

Winston leaned forward and kissed her quickly on the cheek. He whispered in her ear, “I’m getting hard, and I haven’t even seen the real you naked.” He stood and stared down

into captivating eyes. Damn, he wanted to stay. “I hope that was direct enough for you.”

Shocked, she managed to nod once. Maybe twice.

“Tell me a time to meet you onboard,” he asked. “I want to finish this conversation.”

“Uhm,” Melanie was trying to take in all that was happening to her. After that brazen statement, she couldn’t think of a suitable denial. “Around four.”

“Where?” Winston asked as Chuck pulled at his arm.

She quickly looked at the cruise schedule, hoping to find an event with lots of people to run interference, but nothing suitable was on the list.

“Any place, Melanie,” Winston insisted.

“Here then,” she said finally, trying to regain some control. She would have to set some boundaries about him freely entering her personal space and touching her. “We do need to talk.”

“This restaurant is closed at four,” Chuck volunteered, not helping the situation. “Quickly, Melanie, we have to go.”

“Meet me at my stateroom,” Winston decided. “Room 710.”

“Okay,” Melanie agreed.

“Four o’clock. Room 710,” Winston called out as Chuck dragged him from the table and out of the restaurant.

She should have shouted at Winston for what he said. But that didn’t seem like the most appropriate response after being told she had been monopolizing his thoughts. And besides, she couldn’t do it in the middle of a restaurant with his friend standing there. *Right?* she rationalized.

Who was she fooling? She enjoyed every second of knowing how she was affecting him physically. She had asked for

directness and honesty, and she got it. That would teach her to be cautious about what she asked of Winston!

Besides, she had dreamt about him too. She just didn't have the guts to tell him. Suddenly feeling a rush of heat, she crossed her legs and felt the warm wetness pooling between them. Melanie reached for her cup as a slither of erotic joy raced down her spine, making her shudder. She dropped the cup. It clanked and rattled on the saucer.

"More tea, Madam?" The happy-to-serve waiter appeared with the kettle.

Melanie needed more—but tea wasn't exactly what came to mind. "No thanks." She refused to try to stand. She wasn't sure if she could in her current state. She would give herself a few minutes before getting up to visit the breakfast bar.

Thirty minutes later, Melanie found the strength to leave the restaurant and head for the tender station to catch the motorboat to shore. She had decided on a guided tour that started in a safari vehicle with four other vacationers. They traveled through the mountain, which offered sweeping sea vistas. They stopped at *Marea Maputapuatea*, the largest sacred site in Polynesia. Its ancient stones made from volcanic rock were laid as sidewalks and were topped with larger stones that looked to Melanie as if they could have served as chairs and tables. It didn't hold much meaning for her until the tour guide detailed how this site was the temple of the sexually aggressive war god Oro around 1350 AD. She tuned in for more. It seemed sex was the only thing that got her full attention of late she thought with a grimace.

Melanie decided that pictures of the interior and lagoon would serve her memory better in describing this island in her article, so she settled on a canoe trip. But what started as

a great idea turned problematic when a rain shower arose. The tour guide navigated the boat under large trees to protect them from the weather.

“We will wait here a few minutes,” the guide stated with a thick Tahitian accent.

Melanie quickly glanced at her watch. It was two o’clock and this tour was scheduled to stop at the botanical garden.

I can still make it back in time, she thought.

One hour later, Melanie found herself pacing in the garden. *How many damn pictures of flowers did these people need?* She went to the tour guide, “Is it possible to hurry this along? I need to get back to the ship.”

“No problem, Madam?” He went to point out the breadfruit trees that grew all over the island and began explaining how baking the fruit on an open flame resulted in a tasty treat that resembled bread. “Having food is no problem with this tree around,” he explained with a grin. Then he proceeded deeper into the garden, not even pretending to pay heed to Melanie’s request.

She hated it when people showed up late for dates with her; the least she could do was try to keep her appointment. And she was sure that the look on Winston’s face and his reactions to her was proof that he would be on time. She found the guide again, “Is there a taxi I can take?”

“No need, Madam. Besides, you may have to wait longer to get a taxi.”

“I see,” she glanced at her watch. She would definitely be late. She reached for her cell phone to endure the overpriced roaming, then realized she didn’t have a way to reach Winston easily.

At five o'clock Melanie found herself racing onto the ship. She needed a shower after the wet, muggy experience on the island, but didn't want to delay any longer. Instead, she would go directly to his room first, make plans to meet him later, then go to her room to shower. Banging on the elevator button, her patience ran out before it came. She took the stairs from the tender station on Level 3 to Level 7. At his room, she knocked but no answer. She waited in the hall for another ten minutes hoping he would return.

Tired of waiting she headed to the receptionist desk.

"Hello. If I need to find someone on the ship, what's the best way of doing so?" Melanie asked.

"I can call the room, Madam. Or you can leave a note that we can deliver for you," the so-called helpful woman said, smiling.

"Please get this to Dr. Knight in room 710." Melanie scribbled a note, ending with asking him to call her room. She passed it to the receptionist.

Melanie went to her room to shower and dress for dinner. Hopefully, he would call her in time to make the seven o'clock reservation. She called his room a little after six. No answer. Melanie decided to look for Winston at the poolside since a live band event was taking place there. As she opened the door, Sandra strolled into the room.

"Heyyy, Girl!" Sandra said. "If I had known doctors could be this much fun, I would have dated a few at the hospital."

Melanie was hopeful. "Are they all meeting somewhere?"

"They were all at the restaurant next to the pool. I saw Winston and Chuck there, too!"

"I'm headed up there to find Winston."

“Don’t bother,” Sandra said. “They left right before I did. Everyone’s going to take a quick shower and change for dinner. Most of them are planning to meet in the Casino Bar first.”

“Winston, too?”

“He was already dressed and said he would meet us. But I wouldn’t hang around him today if I were you.”

Melanie turned around quickly, “Why? What did he say?”

“It was what he didn’t say. That man’s in a pissy mood.”

Oh, no! It’s all my fault. Melanie called his room again. He didn’t answer. “Sandra, I’m going up to see if Winston is in his room. I’ll meet you at the Casino Bar.” Melanie was out the door.

Melanie couldn’t find him in his room, or poolside or the other places she checked. Entering the Casino Bar, she looked about. She saw Sandra at a table with two men, a few other faces she recognized but no Winston. Making her way through the rows of tables and mingling people, she joined Sandra.

“Hey, Girl!” Sandra said merrily. “Come sit here between Ralph and me. Meet two of the threesome. Remember that Indian chief story? This is Dr. Marcus Lowell and Attorney Ralph Day.”

Melanie greeted them before sitting. “So, there was a real Indian chieftain?”

“No,” Ralph, the lawyer, said. “He’s a retired coach for the Kansas City Chiefs.”

“Well, I was close!” Sandra retorted.

They all laughed.

“What are you drinking, Melanie?” Ralph asked. He leaned unnecessarily close to her.

“White wine.”

“Let me go get you a drink,” Ralph offered.

Ralph returned, setting his drink on the table while his hand casually found her shoulder. He leaned in close. “Anything else?”

“Breathing room,” Melanie replied with a sharp smile, brushing his hand off.

Ralph, a little taken aback, backed up and found his seat again. “So, Melanie,” he began, trying to recover, “I hear you’re a writer?”

Melanie turned to him after giving Sandra a don’t-find-men-for-me look. “Nonfiction, not fiction.”

“Sandra mentioned you’re researching the romantic elements of French Polynesia.” Ralph leaned closer again, far too eager. “I could teach you a few things, starting with French kissing.” His hand crept back onto her shoulder.

She was *definitely* not in the mood for this. Just as she was about to tell Ralph exactly where he could shove his hand, she caught a glimpse of Winston out of the corner of her eye.

“Excuse me,” Melanie said quickly, rising from the table. “I see a friend.”

Melanie weaved through the crowd, her heart racing—not from Ralph’s cheesy advances, but from the sight of Winston. She made her way to the entrance of the Casino Bar, but Winston was no longer in sight. Frustration bubbled up as she scanned the room. Where had he gone?

He couldn’t have disappeared that fast. She hurried toward the nearest elevator, but he wasn’t there either. Then,

glancing up the stairwell, she caught sight of the tail of his navy silk shirt disappearing around the corner.

“Winston!” she called, her voice echoing in the stairwell, but the shirt kept moving. Now she was getting angry. She rushed up the stairs, taking them two at a time. By the time she reached Level 7, she was out of breath, her frustration fueling her forward.

She rounded the corner and there he was. “Winston, wait!”

Winston stopped but didn’t turn around.

She marched up to him, breathless from the chase and her rising temper. “I *know* you heard me calling you.”

Winston turned slowly, his arms folding across his broad chest, his eyes drifting lazily over her, from the tendrils of her loose bun to her ruby earrings, across the sheer black blouse that did little to hide the red lace spaghetti strap tank-top underneath. His gaze lingered on her fitted black skirt that flowed down to the floor, taking her in fully before he finally spoke.

“So, you weren’t captured by the natives,” he said dryly, his tone betraying his irritation.

Melanie huffed. He had every right to be mad, and she wasn’t about to pretend otherwise. “Did you get my note?”

“The one that arrived two hours late?”

“I didn’t mean to be late,” she started, but the excitement she had felt all day at the thought of seeing him again was draining away. She had wanted to be here, with him, more than she was willing to admit. And she had missed the chance.

“Melanie, you asked me to be honest and direct with you,” he said, his voice calm but firm. “That’s exactly what I was this morning. I expected the same from you.”

“I know.” Her voice softened. “I didn’t mean to be late. Everything went wrong at the end of my visit to Raiatea. It started raining, which delayed the tour, and I nearly missed the last shuttle back to the ship.”

Winston’s gaze shifted briefly to her shoulder before he looked back into her eyes. “I can accept that explanation,” he said, his voice a little cooler. “What confuses me is you and ‘octopus-man’ back in the Casino Bar. I would have preferred if you tried to fulfill *our* date instead.”

“Ralph?” She nearly laughed. “You mean Ralph?”

“Explain Ralph,” Winston said, one eyebrow raised, though he didn’t seem particularly amused.

“I’m not sure if Ralph can explain Ralph,” she said, shaking her head in disbelief. “I met him about two minutes before I saw you. Trust me, I would have preferred *you* sitting next to me.”

“Really?” Winston’s tone softened, a slight smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Yes,” she replied, more earnestly than she intended. “But I see I’ve missed my date with you. I won’t keep you.”

She turned to walk away, hoping her calm exit would save her from further embarrassment. But after just a few steps, she realized something.

He wasn’t stopping her.

Her pride wouldn’t allow her to look back, but her feet slowed anyway.

“Melanie?”

She turned, slowly. He was still standing exactly where she'd left him, his arms folded across his chest, his gaze spreading over her.

"Yes?" she asked, trying to sound unaffected.

"Did you wear that outfit for our date?"

She took two steps toward him, her heartbeat quickening. "I was going to invite you to dine with me at L'Etoile. I would've worn this, yes."

He started walking toward her, his eyes never leaving hers. "What else was in your plan for me?"

Until that very second, Melanie couldn't read what was behind his stare. She had thought, until now, that he had written her off. But as he stopped in front of her, she could see the heat forming behind his stare. It was as if she were thrown back in time to this morning. When he was telling her about his stiffness, telling her how much he wanted her, caressing her thigh, kissing her. She swallowed hard, feeling the same tension coil between them.

"I also wanted to enjoy you," Melanie whispered, her voice catching.

"Tell me how," he whispered back, his lips curving into a smile as he backed her up against the wall.

"By touch," she managed to whisper, feeling the warmth of him closing in on her. His body pressed into hers, pinning her against the wall, the heat from his chest to his thighs nearly making her dizzy.

"You wanted me to touch you?" His hands slid slowly and deliberately from her elbows up to her shoulders, sending sparks along her skin.

"Yes."

“I’m glad,” he murmured, his voice thick with desire. “Because I’ve been thinking about that all day.”

His hand moved to the buttons of her blouse, undoing them with skilled precision, revealing the red lace beneath. His fingers grazed the fabric lightly. “I like the way this feels,” he whispered, his hand sliding over the lace covering her breast.

“Me too,” she whispered back, her breath hitching as his fingers continued their gentle exploration.

They stood in a long, softly lit corridor where mirrors and masterpieces adorned the walls between the stateroom doors. They were close to Winston’s room, but the look in his eyes told her he wasn’t planning on waiting. His desire was palpable, the intensity between them almost too much to bear.

“Winston...” Melanie managed to say, her voice breathy. “We can’t... not here.”

“First,” he whispered, his mouth hovering near hers, “tell me where you wanted me to touch you.”

Her lips parted; her mind fogged with desire. “Lips.”

Winston didn’t need further prompting. His mouth claimed hers in a slow, sensual kiss. When she parted her lips, his tongue slid in, tasting her deeply, teasing her deliberately. It had her clinging to him.

Winston lessened the kiss, and then his mouth moved to her ear. “Did you want me to nibble your ear?” he whispered before his teeth gently grazed her earlobe.

“Yes,” she moaned softly.

“What about tasting your shoulder? Should I touch you there?” He was sucking and nibbling his way to her shoulder as he questioned her.

Melanie's hands curled onto the fabric of his shirt pulling him closer.

"Shall I suck your tit?" He bent to capture the hardening nipple through the soft material, and she almost screamed.

"HmMMM... ooohhhh, yesssss..." she managed. "Winston..."

Suddenly, it ended, and Melanie slumped against the wall, her senses clouded by the hot foreplay. Then awareness dawned; the sound she had heard and ignored was a door opening. Winston obviously was keenly aware of it because he had already begun righting her clothing. He pulled her by the wrist and marched her down the hall.

Melanie caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror and saw that her lipstick covered most of her lower face. She began correcting the damage.

"Dr. Knight?" a male voice called from behind.

Winston got a quick look at Melanie, then stepped in front of her. "Dr. Miller. Good evening. We were just heading to *L'Etoile* for dinner."

"Excellent! I was just headed that way myself." Dr. Miller had made his way down the hall and stopped near them.

Behind Winston's back, Melanie had finished correcting the smeared lipstick and adjusted her blouse just as Miller arrived. She moved to Winston's side. "Hello, Dr. Miller. I'm Melanie McDae."

"Hello. You're quite lovely. I know that name," Miller said. "I was reading something in *Travel Times*."

"I have published several articles with them."

"I thought so! I might look like Father Time, but the mental faculties are still with me." He pointed to his temple. "I enjoyed that piece on Winter Wonderland." He smiled

broadly, modeling an exquisite collection of caps, tooth implants, and porcelain fillings. “Well, let’s go to dinner! Besides, you two aren’t doing anything else!”



CHAPTER NINE



What Winston really wanted was to explore Melanie's luscious body in private.

From the moment Dr. Miller appeared, he knew that wasn't going to happen. Winston had mentioned the dinner reservation as an excuse to get rid of Miller so he could take Melanie to his cabin to finish what they had started in the hall. He had already pulled his room key out of his pocket when Miller had called to him.

Once Miller made the dinner suggestion, he and Melanie reluctantly agreed. As they headed toward the restaurant, Winston began planning how he would invite her back to his room for a nightcap and hopefully the night.

But at the restaurant, Winston's dreams of privacy dwindled even more. As the headwaiter approached, Dr. Miller spoke out again. "They're dining with me and the renowned Dr. Michael Poole. Give their table to someone else and make room at my table!"

“*Oui... bien sur,*” the head waiter agreed in French.

“I would love to meet Dr. Poole,” Melanie said to Miller. “I’ve heard a lot about his research in the Pacific.”

Winston squelched the annoyance. Because Dr. Miller was an elderly man who loved attention, Winston thought having dinner with Miller was the least he could do to help ease the pain aging had brought upon the older man. So, Winston followed, laughing to himself at how his plans of seduction were squashed so quickly by a man twice his age.

L’Etoile had an elegant, romantic setting. Soft lighting with warm, cream colors and exotic plants. Windows covered three sides giving all a view of the moon kissing the ocean in glowing streaks. When they got to the large circular table in a corner near the restaurant’s back windows, several people were seated. Winston shook hands with several of the men; introductions were made after everyone was seated and the waiter distributed menus. The wine steward arrived and took orders as they all sat making light conversation.

“Dr. Knight, “Poole said, “I understand you signed up for the scuba trip tomorrow.”

Winston had met Poole briefly that morning when he had joined the doctors’ meeting to brief them on his whale sanctuary and dolphin excursion. Poole, who resided in French Polynesia, was well known for the scientific research he had done on whales and dolphins for the past twenty-five years. He was also a special guest on the Paul Gauguin, lecturing on ‘The Dolphin and Whale Population of the South Pacific’ to all passengers interested.

“After hearing you speak this morning,” Winston said, “I decided it could be quite interesting.”

“The feeding habits and mating rituals of these mammals might not come in handy for what you do, but I guarantee it will be educational,” Poole said.

“It sounds like it would be,” Dr. Miller interjected. “But at seventy-eight, I can’t take that activity. I’ll attend your seminar onboard and leave scuba diving to the young bucks!”

“Mrs. Knight,” Poole said to Melanie. “You’re more than welcome to join our dive trip if you’re a certified diver.”

Melanie was ordering wine and didn’t realize the question was directed to her. She looked up and saw nine sets of eyes staring at her. Only Winston’s held humor. When she reached for her water and gulped some, he decided to take pity on her and announce she wasn’t married... yet.

Melanie answered before Winston could. “I’m going to be researching Tahaa tomorrow.”

Winston looked down at her, surprised that she hadn’t corrected Poole on mistaking them as married.

“Researching?” A doctor who looked to be in his early thirties asked.

“She’s a writer!” Dr. Miller offered. “Did this great travel piece on winter vacation spots in the highlands of Colorado. At my age, I wouldn’t consider going to some place that reminds you of downhill skiing and high-speed snowmobiling. But her article talked about the relaxing, non-adventurous stuff like renting a cabin with an outdoor Jacuzzi. Heated walkways and warmers around it so you can sit in warm bliss in the middle of winter, ordering from restaurants that deliver, so you never have to leave. Those are the types of trips I like. Learned a lot about the history of Vail and Breckenridge as well.”

“You’re going to write about Tahaa?” the young doctor asked Melanie.

“I’ve been contracted by two women’s magazines to do a kind of ‘pampering Tahitian style’ article. I also have a Travel blog, *WanderWrite*, which allows me to combine my writing, photography, and videography. I’ll focus on Moorea and Bora Bora because those islands cater to people who can afford them. They’re not as mainstream as Papeete but are more sophisticated than Raiatea and Tahaa.”

“A lot of rich people own places on Moorea and Bora Bora,” Joy, a young doctor’s wife, said. “That’s if they don’t go ahead and buy an island out here like Diana Ross and Marlon Brando had. I can see the two islands you’re researching requiring spas and salons for the clientele they get.”

“Exactly,” Melanie said. “Raiatea and Tahaa are more rural, mostly native farmers. I might include them as a place to obtain some of the great all-nature creams and healthcare remedies. I’m going to rent a bike and take my camera and see what I can see. I have the name of a bilingual guide who can help.”

“Did you discover much on Raiatea?” Winston asked her.

“Lots. I’m thinking of renting a boat and traveling back there tomorrow, depending on what I find on Tahaa.”

“Go back?” Miller questioned. “We left there at sunset and won’t dock in Tahaa until nine tomorrow morning. Seems like a long ride back to me.”

“The capital of Raiatea is only two miles or a twenty-minute motorboat ride,” another doctor offered. “These cruise ships just circle the islands or go out to sea and back to fill up your cruise time.”

“I’ll be!” Miller was amazed.

“I guess that’s why they call it ‘cruising,’” Winston said. They all laughed.

As the dinner orders were being taken, Melanie subtly moved her chair closer to Winston, her voice dropping low so the person on her other side couldn’t overhear. “Winston, why didn’t you correct him? Now they all think we’re married.”

Winston, his face calm but mischievous, slid his right hand into her lap. She tensed but didn’t stop him, her breath catching as his fingers found the split in her floor-length skirt. The fabric parted just enough to expose the warmth of her thigh. He ran his fingers lightly along the front of her thigh, then up the skin of the leg closest to him. The thrilling sensation shot up her leg and pooled between them, a delicious heat building with every touch.

“Do you really want me to disappoint everyone by telling them I’m just a lonely, single man too weak to win the heart of a famous writer?” His voice was a low, intimate murmur, his hand continuing its slow, torturous exploration.

“I’m...” Melanie started, her voice wavering, her lips moistening as she whispered, “I’m not famous. Writing is just a passion.”

Winston’s mouth moved to her ear, his breath warm against her skin. “Do you have other passions?” he asked, his voice sending a shiver down her spine.

“I... uhm, teach,” she stammered, looking around the table nervously. She was half-expecting someone to notice their very private moment, but everyone was caught up in their own conversations, laughing and talking merrily.

“Teach?” Winston’s hand squeezed her thigh gently, pulling her attention back to him. Her eyes darted to his hand,

then back to his mouth, which hovered dangerously close to hers. “Where?” he whispered, his lips brushing hers just enough to send another wave of warmth rushing through her.

“Boulder University,” she replied, her voice barely a whisper. Melanie leaned closer, placing her hand on his leg, feeling the taut muscles under his pants. “Are you trying to change the topic? You promised me directness.”

“I haven’t broken my promise.” His grin widened. “I didn’t tell them we were married. Nor did I suggest it. The question was directed at you.”

Melanie’s eyes narrowed, trying to mask the effect he was having on her. “You should’ve said something.”

“You brought this on yourself by not correcting them,” he teased, his tone light but his hand still dangerously close to igniting more sparks. “Now, it’s up to you to fix it.”

“Me?” Her eyebrows shot up, disbelief flashing in her eyes.

Winston chuckled, leaning in to press a soft kiss to her forehead. “Yes, you. But put your hand back,” he added softly, catching her hand before she could remove it from his leg. “Don’t stop touching me.”

He moved closer, his lips brushing her ear as he whispered, “Or I can tell them I met you for the first time on the plane ride over and that I’m so taken by you that it feels like so much longer. And I can’t stop imagining how your lace-covered nipple tasted when I kissed it.”

Melanie’s eyes widened, her breath hitching as she stared at him, completely bewildered. What was she supposed to say to that? “No, that’s... okay,” she stammered, louder than she intended, forgetting to whisper. “I’ll handle it.”

Winston smiled, clearly enjoying himself. He placed one hand at the base of her neck, massaging gently.

“Melanie,” he said softly, his voice barely audible as he mouthed the words. “I want you to handle me instead.” His hand guided hers, moving it slowly up and down his thigh. Before turning his attention back to the table, he whispered, “Please, keep it there.”

“You need help handling something?” Dr. Miller’s voice interrupted from across the table.

Winston didn’t miss a beat. “Melanie will handle it.”

Dr. Miller chuckled. “I’m sure she can handle anything she gets her hands on.”

Winston grinned, squeezing Melanie’s hand as he fought back laughter. He could feel her tense, knowing she had expected him to correct the misunderstanding about their “marriage.” Her glare sharpened, and for a brief moment, he feared she would leap up and announce the truth to the entire table, embarrassing everyone. He needed a distraction—quick.

“Would you like to order, Madam?” the waiter asked, suddenly appearing at Melanie’s side, startling her so much that her hand jerked away from Winston’s lap.

“Oui,” Winston answered smoothly in French, taking the lead.

The waiter, now switched to French, continued speaking to Winston. Melanie blinked, utterly lost, her mind still swirling from what had just happened.

Winston, fully aware of her confusion, took over the conversation, ordering for both of them in French.

This should keep her distracted enough not to shout at me, Winston thought, smiling inwardly.

He picked up the menu, and held it in front of Melanie, pointing out the meals written on the menu in English. Melanie nodded when his finger landed on the dishes she wanted. He would quickly switch back to English to confirm what she wanted before continuing in French.

“Is that all you want?” he asked. She nodded and the waiter moved away. When Melanie placed her hand back in his lap, he said, “I like your touch.” He never took his eyes off the wine list. Now that he had decided on his meal he wanted to order wine. He looked up and got the attention of the wine steward. “Would you like anything else to drink?”

“A refill, thanks,” Melanie said. “Are you always this attentive?”

“I call it making sure you’re having a good time,” Winston said.

“Do women always have a good time with you?”

Winston looked at her for several long seconds before answering. Something in her eyes said that his response to that question was critical. “I’m only interested in whether you enjoy me.”

“I do.” She looked away. “Probably more than I should.”



AFTER DINNER, MELANIE AND WINSTON TOOK A STROLL ALONG the ship’s top level. Another couple was in the area at the front of the ship with them, but soon left. They were topside, alone.

Stopping to look out over the water, Melanie said, “How serene. These islands are incredible.”

“I get the feeling this place is more like a quietness that should be enjoyed.”

Melanie started laughing.

“What?” he asked.

“Well, what do you think serene is, silly man?” She giggled again.

“I’m a master at keeping calm,” he said, and she noticed Winston wasn’t smiling. “I would think serene would include some form of happiness combined with calmness.”

His answer stopped her laughter. Melanie wanted to know what had caused him to become so serious, melancholy. “Does it have to include joy for you?”

Winston placed his hands on the guardrails and looked out into the darkness. “I get snatches of enjoyment here and there. I haven’t figured out how to put my work aside so that I can have longer periods of it. Serene is something that is out there.” His hands went out as if to include anywhere but near him. “I have a demanding career that dictates that I’m always on top of it. Even when I’m not working. I’m not sure if that represents happiness. I know damn well it doesn’t represent serene. This is a perfect example. I’m cruising a place people dream of being, and I’ve been working since I got here.”

“Do you want to enjoy this trip more?” Melanie asked.

He looked into understanding eyes. “I get the feeling you are an expert at it. Like your tomorrow. Renting a bike to ‘see what you can see’, he remembered her saying at dinner. “Taking pictures. Hanging out with natives. You’ll end up laughing, enjoying the day. I’ll be studying sea life and lecturing on preventive health care.”

Hearing the frustration in his voice, Melanie moved closer. “You can come with me, if you like.”

“I would love to, but I’ve got this thing... this presentation I’m expected to do.” Before Melanie found a response, he continued. “I envy you. You write because it’s your passion. You love doing. But I entered medicine because I was expected to follow in my father’s footsteps. I stay in it because it’s what I do. Luckily for me, I’m good at it.”

“Are you sure you haven’t forgotten a few things that were fun in your life?” she cajoled. “I heard you speak French. I only know a spattering of it, but I got the impression yours was learned through interaction. Like you lived some place it was spoken.”

Winston laughed, but it held no humor. “Melanie, I’m telling you this because you asked me to be direct with you.” He exhaled and looked directly into her eyes. “At eighteen, right after I graduated, I was put on a plane with four hundred dollars, some books about France, and a reference book on how to live cheaply abroad. My father had worked there before, so I had a visa to live there.”

His tone lowered then he added, “When I told my father I wanted to return to France for a while instead of going to medical school, he wanted to teach me a lesson. He dumped me there and told me to survive. He had a friend in Paris whom I could contact if I got desperate.” Winston looked down at the water crashing against the ship. “Calling his friend would have meant that I had failed. I refused to fail. I learned the language in order to eat, to live, to keep from being abused in that country.”

Melanie could not contain her shock and was grateful that Winston was still looking at the sea. Or else he would have seen her disapproving frown. “How did you survive?”

“One day, when I know you very well, I’ll tell you the dirty details. But well after all the money was gone and food consisted of visiting restaurant dumpsters, I found an old woman with a warm spirit and a sickly body. I took care of her: cooked, cleaned, ran errands, repaired her home. Did the things she couldn’t do for herself. In return, she gave me shelter and a little money. My father didn’t think I would last six months. I stayed two years.”

Melanie’s heart clenched, as if someone had struck it with a hammer. The weight of his words hit her harder than she’d expected. She inhaled deeply, trying to stop the ache from building in her chest. America’s streets were filled with starving teenagers who were abused and dying because of parents who had put them out. How could someone be expected to survive those conditions with the added burden of being in a strange, foreign place? It seemed to Melanie that Winston was caught up in being what everyone—except himself—wanted him to be. She wondered if he were given a chance to live his life over again, whether he would do things differently. The probable struggles he must have endured bounced around in her brain. How long had he gone without love?

Yet here he was—balanced, strong, and loving. He must have been exposed to something nurturing along the way, something that allowed him to develop such a resilient, generous spirit. The kind of man he had become—driven to be better, to rise above expectations. It was an admirable trait and one that pulled at her heart.

Feeling a tug of guilt for bringing up his past, Melanie instinctively wanted to ease his pain, to offer comfort. Stepping close, she slid one hand up his back, gently massaging the

tension there, while the other wrapped around his chest. If her touch could offer him solace, she would give it freely. She laid her head against his broad shoulder, letting her warmth and presence envelop him.

“Winston?” she whispered, her voice soft.

“Yes?” His voice rumbled in his chest, a comforting vibration beneath her ear.

“Dance with me?” She looked up into his eyes, her gaze filled with invitation.

He seemed caught off guard, a hint of surprise flashing on his face. “I think there’s a band at the Connoisseur Club.”

She smiled, gently pulling him away from the railing. “Dance with me here.”

Here?” He looked slightly confused, slightly eager. “Don’t we need music?”

Melanie stepped into his arms, wrapping herself in his embrace. The intimacy of the moment thrilled her. “The sound of the wind and the ocean will be our music. But if you like, I can sing.”

Winston’s lips curled into a teasing smile. “Do you know any great oldies?”

She looked out into the quiet blackness of the still night. Stars sprinkled the heavens as the moon kissed a path across the calm sea. A cool breeze swept the deck. It smelled of peace and joy and goodness—the way wonderful days ended in places like this.

A song came to mind, and she smiled. “I sure do.” Melanie began humming Louis Armstrong’s *What a Wonderful World*. Her humming may not have been the best, but once they started moving with the rhythm she stopped. Alone, on the deck of the ship with the moon as their spotlight, they

danced. She held him close as the sound of the waves and the rhythm of the sea became their song.

As the minutes grew in time, they moved together, held close by the music of the night, the world around them forgotten. They shared ideas and fond stories of their past. When the dance finally slowed to a stop, they still stood in each other's arms, holding on, as if letting go would break the spell.

Winston stepped back first, a soft smile on his face. The tension that had clouded his features earlier was gone, replaced by something lighter.

He took her hand and led her inside and down the hall to the elevator. Once inside, he pressed the number to her deck level.

When the doors opened, Melanie wasn't sure if she wanted to go back to her room. She looked down at her watch. It was close to midnight. Neither had spoken since the dance. She wanted to break the silence and somehow extend her time with him. Things were going so right... now. But as they stepped out of the elevator, Winston finally broke the silence as they entered the hall.

"You have a good day tomorrow and get some rest," he said, his tone signaling that the night had come to an end.

"Okay." They stopped outside her stateroom door, and she turned to him, wanting to say something—anything to prolong their time together. "Thank you, Winston, for inviting me to dinner."

He smiled warmly. "I distinctly remember that *you* invited me to dinner."

"Oh, that's right!" She laughed, the sound catching in the quiet hallway. "I did, didn't I?"

“I’ve never enjoyed dinner more,” Winston said, a playful sparkle in his eyes. He leaned in, pressing a kiss to her forehead as he hugged her close. “Good night.”

He turned to leave. As Melanie watched Winston walk away, her heart sank a little with each step.

“Winston?” she called out before she could stop herself.

He paused, turning to face her from a few steps down the hall. “Yes?”

She took a small step forward, her voice softer now. “Thanks for the dance too.”

Winston’s smile was slow, but when it spread across his face, it warmed her from the inside out. “Anytime.”

Melanie stood watching as he walked away, this time without looking back. She wondered if the hint of melancholy in his eyes had to do with the dance or something else entirely.

Either way, she found herself hoping there would be more moments like this—more dances, more laughter, more *him*.



CHAPTER TEN



Cruise Day 2 – Tahaa Island and Motu Mahana

Melanie's notes on Tahaa: Tahaa is even quieter than Raiatea. Only 5,270 inhabitants, who either farm, fish or raise livestock. Famous black pearls aplenty. Called Vanilla Island because of the abundance of vanilla bean farms, their black gold. Crime is unheard of here.

“Sandra, I’m going to rent a bike and ride around Tahaa,” Melanie said placing her camera, and notepad in her backpack. “It’s only about 42 miles of road. Sure, you don’t want to come?”

“That sounds like work, not play.” Sandra was tying a *pareu*, a popular Polynesian oversized cotton scarf, around her waist and it hung to the floor. “I’m going to the Motu Mahana. Snorkeling, kayaking, and lying in the shade are the most I’m going to do today. I think it’s the ship’s private motu. I’ll have lunch there, too, since they’re barbecuing.”

“Speaking of food,” Melanie said, “make reservations at *LeGrill* for tonight before you leave. I’ll be starving when I get back.”

Melanie took the stairs down to Level 3 to catch the tender service to the island. Black pearl farms were unique to French Polynesia. She wanted to spend time at the cultured pearl farms to not only discover how the pearls were raised and harvested but also to buy some for herself and her mother. Her mother, Candice McDae, always stressed that Black is beautiful. Melanie knew this would be the perfect gift. Black pearls, despite the name, developed natural colors that ranged from misty black to pearly white. Melanie was intrigued by the array of colors found on this farm, which included deep olive green, bluish-purple, pink, and champagne. Since the pearl farms didn’t have the ridiculous mark-up that the shops would, she purchased three golden-hued pearls to have set in a necklace with diamonds and the precious golden stone, citron. She also brought one large misty black pearl to have made into a ring for her mother.

That accomplished, she headed out by bike to find the guide who was to assist her in her visits to other farms and villages.

Five hours later, Melanie was complaining to herself that a bike tour up, down, and around hilly roads was an absolute nightmare. She returned to the ship walking like a woman sixty years her senior. A long, hot soak in the Jacuzzi would do the trick, but first, she would take a shower, rub down in Ben-Gay, and then take a nap.

“Mel!” Sandra’s shouting woke Melanie from her nap. “Oh, did I wake you up?”

“No,” Melanie sat up and stretched. “I had to get up to see what all the yelling was about.”

Sandra laughed. “Well, I’m back!” Was her only explanation. “I made dinner reservations for seven pm. I’m going to take a shower then head up to the piano bar. Take in some music and sip some wine. Wanna come?”

“You have fun.” Melanie got up and moaned from the soreness in her legs. “I’m going to the spa. First the Jacuzzi, then the steam room. I should get back in time to change for dinner.”



WHATEVER ACHES AND PAINS MELANIE HAD WHEN ENTERING the Carita Spa had eased considerably as she stepped out of the Jacuzzi. She put on a robe and went to the therapy room she had reserved. Each room had a vanity area filled with body care items and towels, a separate shower stall, and an enclosed steam room. She disrobed, picked up the body gel and shampoo off the vanity, and headed to the shower stall.

Smelling like vanilla and feeling quite refreshed, Melanie stepped out of the oversized shower stall and went to the steam room. Opening its glass door, she could barely make out the design of the room at first until the gush of steam billowed out and subsided. The hissing steam came from a heating unit in the middle of the room. Dim lights reflected on the long benches along the walls. Heading to the wide bench to her left, she laid several towels over the bench before stretching out atop them.

Exhaling contentment she reflected on the trip’s success so far: The tropical islands were wonderful; Sandra was en-

joying herself; the weather was always pleasant; and her research today was enlightening.

Then she thought about the one thing that had not gone as planned: Winston. What had happened last night, she wondered? Something had brought a change to his personality. Once past their heated discussion over her being so late, making up was delightful.

But the dance?

Melanie suggested it as a means to somehow share with him the possibility of what serenity meant to her. During the dance, he held her close and whispered things in French in her ear. It sounded like music to her, and the way he touched her while he spoke, made her think the words were erotic, provocative in nature.

Maybe I should ask him to translate what he said to me? she thought.

Then Melanie thought about their dinner conversation and the heated words he had said aloud during it. *Maybe I won't.*

That could be dangerous to her resolve, and she was already unable to turn away from him. This was strange to her because emotional relationships had not been a priority for a long time. Certainly, she had gone on dates. But it never got past the friendship stage with her. Too much pain and damage from Ronald's jealous and abusive ways, possibly. Instead, for the last year, she had concentrated on healing her broken spirit, advancing her career, enjoying time with her parents, and bonding more with close friends like Sandra. After college, Sandra had been living several states away, but they had agreed to spend time every year traveling to some exotic place. Ronald had never agreed to let that hap-

pen, so the trips didn't start until after the breakup. Melanie was content now with how the rest of her life had been going since she took control of it again; everything was going as planned.

Then Dr. Winston Knight invaded her thoughts, much like the way he had invaded her life. From the moment she had seen him, it had been that way. In the airport jewelry store, she found herself locked in a trance that she couldn't or didn't want to break free from. Something about it made her warm and cool all at once. When he kissed her, it felt like nothing familiar yet very familiar all at the same time. She couldn't explain it, but something about the way his mouth explored hers was as if he had known it by memory and had—at long last—found it again. It also seemed like he pulled a little of her from it and stored it, in safety, inside of him. And with every kiss that followed he gave her a chance to visit and reunite with the parts of her that he held stored. She could bond with, be with, fully enjoy all of him and all of herself as long as his lips touched her.

And the way Winston appeared in person whenever Melanie thought about him also made her wonder.

Just then the steam seemed to clear the room again, as if the door had been opened. Since she was lying on her back, facing away from the door, she tilted her head back to see.

“Oh, God!” Melanie gasped, jolting upright as a man walked into the steam-filled shower stall. Her heart raced, and her hands instinctively flew to cover her exposed breasts.

“I didn't mean to scare you,” Winston's deep voice echoed through the room, smooth and unbothered, as if his presence were the most natural thing in the world.

“Winston?” Melanie squeaked, incredulity thinning her voice. She was completely nude, and the closest towel was under her butt or across the room. Reaching for either would result in exposing more of her body. And since he was standing in front of her with only a towel around his waist, displaying a completely magnificent physique, she kept completely still. Looking up at him she said, “What are you doing in here?”

“Disturbing your relaxation, it seems,” Winston replied, a playful smile curving his lip. He retrieved the towel and gave it to her. “You can lie back down now.”

She ignored that as she adjusted the towel over the front of her. “How did you get in here? This is my private room.”

“Funny story, really,” he said, sitting next to her. “Sandra told me you were here. I thought I would join you in the Jacuzzi. As I walked into the lobby of the spa, Dr. Miller was about to leave. He had just finished his massage. He asked about my wife, and the receptionist told us you were in the steam room. Then she asked, since I was your husband and all, if I wanted to join you. I told her that was an excellent idea. I showered and here I am.”

Melanie’s bottom jaw moved up and down as if attempting to speak words, but nothing came out. Finally, she formed a few, “Winston, you’ve got to let the people on this ship know that we’re not married.”

“Uh, huh,” he grunted noncommittally. He changed the topic. “Lie down, finish steaming.”

“This is a bit too forward. Why come in here?”

“I needed to apologize for something.”

“You can start with apologizing for coming in here,” she suggested. “Couldn’t everything else have waited ‘til I finished steaming?” she finished in disbelief.

“It wasn’t my idea to join you in here, I came for the Jacuzzi, remember? Besides this is a big room, large enough for a dozen people. Why don’t you share it with me? The steam would do me good after that full day with the dolphins. It felt more like work than play.” Wilson sat sitting on the bench next to her.

“Since you seem to think your logic clears all this up,” she said surprised that she didn’t mind his invasion as much as she pretended to be. “Let’s move on to the reason you came. What did you want to apologize for?”

“I realized something last night.” He looked down at her. The steam softened her already tranquil features. “That maybe my approach to you was a bit strong.”

Melanie found herself laughing. It was a musical sound that filled the room. “Strong?” she echoed. *Incredibly demanding, outrageously sensual, and thoroughly overwhelming* were Melanie’s thoughts, but she didn’t voice any of it because he was talking.

Winston leaned back, placing the back of his head against the wall. His shoulder was touching hers. Reaching over, he placed his hand on her bare thigh and squeezed. Exhaling gruffly, he said, “I approached you like I approach everything else I’ve ever gone after. But that’s not fair because I didn’t give you a chance to decide if you wanted this... or to have anything to do with me.” Winston turned his head to look down at her again, “I guess I wanted to apologize for that.”

“Is that it?” Melanie asked thinking to accept his apology if he was finished with his explanation.

“No,” he offered. “I also noticed you’re a pretty good dancer to the sound of nothing.”

Melanie laughed. “We danced to the wind and ocean noises, remember.”

“And it was the dance that made me think I should slow down with you. Let you decide how we should spend our time together. I enjoyed the dance and would hate to think that I might not get to do that again.”

Winston sounded so tender and vulnerable to her. She wanted to hug him for that heartfelt statement. Obviously, her feelings were important to him. “Don’t worry about it,” Melanie said. “To be honest, your approach was a bit surprising and unsettling. And I swear I don’t know how to handle you.”

“Then, why do you?” he asked softly.

“Promise not to laugh?” she asked, and he nodded. “Back in the airport, I had looked across the giftshop’s counter at you and something in your expression touched me. In a good way.”

“Like love at first sight?” Winston teased, though his voice held an undercurrent of hope. He turned his body to her. His knee was touching her thigh as he caressed it.

“I don’t know if I’d say that,” Melanie smiled. “I just know that you’re not the first man who has approached me aggressively. You’re just the first that I’ve let go so far.”

“Why?”

The answer was simple, and it didn’t require any deep thought. “I like you,” she admitted softly. “More than I should.”

Winston's smile grew wider, more genuine. "I'm glad you said that." He gently lifted the corner of the towel covering her, dabbing the steam from her face and neck, his touch tender and unhurried. Melanie's breath caught in her throat, but she didn't pull away. Nor did she try to cover her exposed breasts this time. She held his gaze, entranced by the vulnerability she saw in his.

"I'm *very* glad you said that," Winston repeated, his voice a husky whisper. He pressed her backward to gently lay her down on the bench, his fingers trailing over her skin like fire. Every touch sent a pulse of warmth through her body, a delicious contrast to the cool air kissing the parts of her exposed. He used the towel to slowly, sensually wipe the steam from her breasts, her stomach, and her thighs before finally kneeling before her.

"Relax, Melanie," he whispered seductively, his hands warm as they traced a path along her thighs. "Nothing will happen that you don't want."

The low timbre of his voice sent a shiver down her spine, and Melanie realized she trusted him—completely. "It's too soon for intercourse," she breathed, her voice trembling with a mix of anticipation and nerves.

"I'm just asking to explore you all over," Winston said.

"I don't understand."

"If you don't want intercourse, just let me touch you the way you want to be touched."

It was an offer so tempting, so utterly intoxicating, that Melanie couldn't bring herself to refuse. She reached for his hand and placed it between her breasts.

As his fingers danced across her skin, his mouth came down on hers, his kiss an inferno of desire that left her

breathless. Their tongues tangled, their lips seeking more as the kiss grew more intense, each stroke of his tongue drawing her deeper into the vortex of passion.

“I love the taste of you,” he whispered, his voice husky with emotion. “All of you.” His mouth moved to her neck as he licked a wetter path to the breast he held. As his fingers fondled its fullness, his mouth lovingly assaulted one taut nipple.

Melanie lifted slightly moving her breast deeper into his hungry mouth. He licked the underside of her arm, then nibbled down the skin covering her ribs. Melanie turned toward his mouth bending a knee as his mouth found her hard, extended nipple again. “Yes... Win...” she moaned as the excitement roared through her body. He placed his hand between her parted legs and massaged back and forth, back and forth. “Oh, God!” She called, opening her legs wider. “Touch more of me...”

He kissed downward, down past her ribs, past her navel, and over and down to silky hairs. His mouth found her hidden place between her legs, and she started thrashing, her hips lifting off the bench, his tongue a stroke of liquid fire that left her gasping. The more he tasted the more she needed to be tasted.

“Winn... ..ston...” she called as two of his fingers pressed inside her pleasure opening while his mouth fondled her pleasure bud. The sensations overwhelmed her, shook her. A strange, delicious wave of an incredible feeling took hold, scintillating her. She trembled as tiny electric sparks burst within her. Running everywhere, starting from where Winston’s mouth touched her and splattered to her head, her toes.

She reached for Winston. “Winston! I... can’t...” she panted. His mouth moved away from her body. “...breathe. What...” The shock wave hit her again and her body began to shake in sweet spasms. She was hot and cold and moving and still all at once. She let out a cry of joy. She felt a hand against her forehead, then neck, both hands on her arms.

“I have you,” he said, lifting her off the bench. “It must be the heat in this room. Baby, don’t worry...”

She closed her eyes and felt herself floating away. Whatever was happening to her lessened but never entirely stopped. It made her tremble uncontrollably. Then she felt coolness, soon followed by a cold hardness against her back. She was standing.

“I’m going to turn on the shower,” she heard him say.

Melanie finally opened her eyes and realized she was in the shower stall. Lukewarm water went down her back as Winston’s hot body pressed her against the back wall. His knee pressing between her legs helped her stand.

“It’s okay now,” Winston whispered and kissed her cheek.

Melanie moved her mouth to press her lips to his. She inhaled the air he breathed then wrapped her arms around his neck. The powerful sensation that had started in her body earlier began to bubble inside again as Winston’s thigh pressed between her legs. The excitement called to her. She moved her hips, rubbing her womanhood against his manhood.

Winston leaned back. “Melanie?” he asked, but her open mouth found his again.

She pulled him closer. “Touch me like that, again,” she whispered moving her body against his leg. “Yes,” she said when his hand found the hidden spot between her legs.

“Like that... yes.” She began grinding his hand. “I need... I don’t...”

“Let me make this better,” he said.

“Pleeeeeeasse...”

The towel around his waist dropped. He lifted her and she wrapped her legs around him. Then he shoved the length of his fullness inside her. Gyrating before one more thrust.

She moaned in pleasure. “That’s it...” she managed to say.

He thrust again, then again and again as her body began to shake... and shake then tremble. Her growing moans ricocheted around the room. She went limp against him, heart racing, her breathing hard.

Minutes later, Winston turned off the water. She put her legs down as he held her close. She had her arms around him, her face against his chest, and her eyes were still closed.

“Melanie?” he whispered against her ear. “Baby, can you stand?” She nodded and did so. “Look at me.”

A few moments later she did. Thinking how incredible the experience was, she said silently, “What just happened to me?” Not until Winston responded did she realize she had spoken aloud.

Leaning forward, he kissed her brow, then nose, then mouth. “Sounds to me like you had an orgasm. Possibly two,” he whispered, reaching around her to pull her closer.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



“Mel! Are you in here?” Sandra called, entering the cabin. “Melanie?” she called again.

Melanie was standing on the other side of the room, looking out at the sea. With her back still to her friend, she said, “Am I the most pitiful excuse for a woman that you’ve ever seen?”

Sandra came to stand next to her. “What are you talking about?”

“What did I ever see in Ronald?” Melanie asked the glass. “How could I get to be twenty-nine years old and not understand orgasms?”

Sandra reached out and pulled Melanie around to face her. “Why don’t I understand what you’re talking about?”

“I don’t understand either.” Melanie needed to talk and with Sandra being the self-proclaimed sex expert, Melanie figured she was the best one to talk to. “That’s my point.”

“Let’s back up a minute so that I can catch up,” Sandra said. “Because I want to participate in any conversation that deals with orgasms.”

Melanie grinned, shaking her head at Sandra’s boldness. She wished she had been so free about the subject. It might have come in handy earlier.

“Last thing I knew about Ronald, the childhood so-called sweetheart you married in college. But you divorced him a year ago even though it took the asshole some time to figure out that you would. But you haven’t heard from him in a while. I got that part. Now, what’s with the misplaced orgasm?”

“I had one today!”

“Thinking of Ronald?” Sandra made a face, “Yuck!”

“With Winston.”

“You kinky bitch!” Sandra joked. “What, you masturbated while thinking of him?”

“No, *with* Winston. He was there all right.” Melanie went and sat on her bed, leaning back against the headboard.

Sandra hooped and hollered! “Thank you, Jesus! It’s about time! Over a year is a *llooonnnnggg* time to go without any. We should be celebrating, not moping!”

“I can’t,” Melanie said miserably. “I’m embarrassed over what happened.”

“Look, *embarrassed* and *orgasm* can’t go in the same sentence together. If you’re beating up on yourself because you slept with Winston in record time, then don’t. Winston is serious about you. And you know I can tell that kind of thing.”

“It’s not Winston, that’s upsetting me, but how inexperienced I am. I never had an orgasm before. I was taken so much by it that I stood blabbering about how I didn’t know

what had happened. All this time, I had thought that bullshit I was doing with Ronald was lovemaking. I'm clueless."

"You're kidding, right?" Sandra said in disbelief. "Wait. Let me sit for this." She found a seat on her own bed.

"I was a virgin when I married him. Saving myself, I thought, for my husband to teach me how to make love." Melanie shook her head. "The wedding night was awful. And it didn't get much better after that. Then he injured his knee, and his basketball career went up in smoke, and the drinking started. With him being drunk most of the time, he made having sex downright disgusting. I was relieved when he started cheating on me. I figured it was better for him to screw someone else, than for me to go through it. He even resented me for reaching my goals. Blamed me for everything, even *his* failures."

Sandra leaned over, resting her elbows on her knees. "I'm your best friend. And I'm totally shocked at just hearing this."

"Nobody wants to flaunt pain and embarrassment," Melanie offered sadly. "People tend to hide that even from friends."

"That ain't right," Sandra said. "Girl, you're about to make me cry."

"Don't. Else I'll start crying too. I knew something was wrong with our sex life. One night, I asked him to do things to make it better. He told me he never had problems with satisfying women in bed before. I was the problem."

"And today you found out differently with Winston," Sandra said merrily.

“In addition to making me miserable, the thoughtless SOB didn’t even give me an orgasm. How pitiful of a life is that?” Melanie laughed, but it held no joy.

“Was it that good with Winston?” Sarah beamed.

“Sandra... It was...” Melanie thought back on it. She tingled from the memory. Smiling, her voice dreamy, she said, “I don’t even know how to describe it. It was incredible. I couldn’t catch my breath. It shook me to the bone. I felt like I was floating and dreaming and flying and having chocolate all at the same time!”

They both laughed.

“It felt so good!” Melanie added. “I felt it all over me... and it seemed to go on forever. And when I thought it was over, it started all over again.”

Sandra’s mouth dropped open. She was stunned—a rarity—into silence. She reached for her purse and pulled out her cigarettes. Alcohol and good sex always require one. She lit one up. “Wait a minute.” She took another long drag. “I want to make sure I got this right.” She stood and paced for a few seconds. “Sounds like multiples. You mean to tell me... that your first time out with Winston,” Sandra pointed the cigarette at Melanie, “you had multiple orgasms? Were you two at it all day? I thought you went for a bike ride... I should have figured when you were asleep...”

Melanie cut her off. “It was about an hour ago. And after I got back.”

“What?” Sandra shouted in disbelief before saying, “All I want to know is, does the man have a twin brother!”

“Sandra, be serious for a moment.”

“I am,” she took another drag off the cigarette. “As a heart attack.”

“I’m too embarrassed to see him again. He probably thinks I’m some clueless, inexperienced...” Melanie stopped because Sandra was choking on the smoke she had swallowed by accident.

“Don’t want to see him again?” Sandra yelled. “Have you lost your mind!”

“Sandra, I didn’t know what was happening at first,” Melanie said her voice full of shame. “Then, when it was over, I admitted I didn’t know. He was probably feeling sorry for me and damn proud of himself when he told me I had an orgasm!”

“I can see your dilemma. I tell you what,” Sandra said matter-of-factly. “This flying and floating stuff you’re talking about is news to me. And I thought I knew it all. If you’re not going to sleep with the man anymore, I am.” Sandra was laughing as she resumed pacing.

“Sandra, please be serious!” Melanie started to laugh in spite of herself. She knew her friend would never sleep with a man she had expressed an interest in.

“Look.” Sandra stopped and pointed her cigarette at Melanie. “It’s against my religion to let an orgasm-making machine go unattended. One of us *GOT* to do it! I prefer it be you!” The cigarette was back to pointing. “Since you like the man and all. But I’ll take up the slack if need be.”

Melanie got up. She could always talk to Sandra about anything. Now that she was doing so, her misery was lessening. “I’ve moped about this long enough. Let me go throw water on my face so we can head to dinner. Besides, talking to you is getting ridiculous anyway.”

Sandra turned serious. “Ronald was an old sore for you. Them tears you’re crying inside right now are the pus from it. That sore can heal now.”

“Sandra,” Melanie said over her shoulder. “Stay away from philosophy. That pus analogy is turning my empty stomach.”

“Stop complaining,” Sandra whined, “You feel better don’tcha?”

“Yes. But I still haven’t decided what I’m going to do about Winston. I just can’t see the man again. And I’m stuck on this ship!”

Sandra added jokingly, “Let’s talk about that—and the techniques he used on you—over dinner. I need to take notes on this floating thing.”

“I’m not giving you the details!” Melanie said. “I’ve already confided too much.”

“There’s more you’re not telling?” Sandra sounded hurt. “Just because I never told you details doesn’t mean...”

The phone rang.

“Don’t answer it!” Melanie screamed from the bathroom. “It will be Winston. And I’m not sure if I have the courage to talk to him right now,” Melanie said coming out of the bathroom.

The phone rang again, and Melanie and Sandra looked at it.

“Don’t...!” Melanie’s scream stopped short when Sandra picked up the telephone.

“Sandra’s and Melanie’s room!” Sandra said in a singsongy voice. “Winston? What a surprise.” She looked at Melanie and then arched her eyebrows.

Melanie mouthed the words: Tell-him-I’m-not-here.

“You want to speak to Mel?” Sandra watched Melanie shake her head *‘no!’* “She’s in the bathroom right now.”

“You want to hold?” Sandra said slowly.

Melanie mouthed the words: *I’m-in-the-shower.*

“She’s using the toilet,” Sandra said, shrugging when Melanie balled her fist.

“You’re thinking of coming to the room, Winston?”

No! Melanie mouthed, shaking her head.

“Well...” Sandra’s creative juices started to flow, “I’m not sure if that’s a good idea.” Sandra took the last puff of her cigarette and then crushed it in the ashtray. “You see, Melanie was a little under the weather when I got here. No, not sick. But something happened today. She wouldn’t tell me the details, mind you, but I think she wants to think it through. I think I’ll take her to dinner so we can have some girl-bonding time. Make her feel better.”

“No...” Sandra said to Winston’s question, and Melanie wondered what they were talking about. Melanie came to stand in front of her.

“Melanie didn’t say anything about *‘you’* being the cause. But if this is your fault, then I think you should come up with something damn romantic to do to fix it.”

Sandra laughed after listening for a few seconds.

“The phrase is: something *damn* romantic. Damn is a required word.” He must have repeated it because Sandra said, “Those three words coming from a man is like music to my ears! Of course, my other three favorite words are *‘Here’s my checkbook.’* But that’s another matter...” Sandra turned, bending to hang up. “Okay... I’ll tell her. Bye.”

“What all did he say?” Melanie asked.

“You heard.” Sandra walked around her, heading to the closet to get a change of clothes. “In the future, don’t be getting me in the middle of your sex life with him again unless, of course, you have videos.”

Melanie laughed at that.

“Winston didn’t say it, but I think he knew you were listening in. Winston knows you’re in hiding.”

“If you hadn’t answered the phone, he would *not* have!” Melanie corrected.

“Not answer?” Sandra feigned shock. “And miss the goofy expressions you were making trying to talk without making a sound? Never!”

Thirty minutes later Melanie and Sandra were in *LeGrill* having dinner. Sandra was starved and was enjoying her perfectly seasoned steak while Melanie, too flustered to eat, picked at hers.

“It’s not a crime, Mel.”

“Speaking of crime,” Melanie changed the topic. “Did you know that on these smaller islands, it practically doesn’t exist?”

“No, I didn’t.” Sandra picked up her glass of wine and stared at Melanie before adding, “But I was saying that sleeping with Winston isn’t a crime and you know it.”

“Yes,” Melanie said. “And I don’t think you’re going to drop the matter.”

“Correct,” Sandra agreed. “So, what happened?”

“Let’s just say Winston is a master of manipulation.” Melanie was thinking of how Winston had let the ‘husband assumption’ get him into her private room in the spa. “And every time he does it, I end up being overwhelmed by him.”

“When I was with Winston earlier,” Sandra said, “he wanted to invite you for drinks before dinner. I told him you were in the spa. So, I’m assuming he stopped by the spa or ran into you before you got there.”

“He met me at the spa,” Melanie admitted. “Steam room to be exact.”

“And that’s when things got hotter!” Sandra said. “I’m always naked when I’m in one. Lord, you gotta love the man’s approach!”

“With him in there with just a towel on, it made it hard to think straight,” Melanie confirmed.

“Thinking is the least of my concerns when I’m with a man that good-looking who’s practically naked,” Sandra admitted. “But you’re stressing over this. I know you’re not going to give me details but give me enough to figure out what went wrong.”

“Winston knows how bad I am at sex,” Melanie admitted grimly. “I was so turned on I said things I shouldn’t have. Damn near fainted.”

“If you enjoyed him and he knows it then that’s a good thing,” Sandra said. “Just because you said something to the contrary ain’t all bad. In the throes of passion, people say all kinds of things.”

“What’s bothering me more than anything else is how correct Ronald was. I can’t please a man.”

“You’ve got to turn loose of that misery, Mel,” Sandra said solemnly. “Forget about your past.”

“I wish it was that easy,” Melanie picked at a piece of meat. She couldn’t look at Sandra either when she said, “When it was over today, I knew Winston hadn’t ejaculated.

I'm having orgasms all over the place and he didn't have any. I was so disappointed with myself that I had walked away."

"You're being too hard on yourself," Sandra said. "The best way to figure out how to please a man is to ask him. I hate it when a man tries to make love to me the way he did his last lover. What you should be doing is figuring out what Winston likes and not worrying about what Ronald didn't help you to master."

"You may be right," Melanie said, then thought. If she were completely honest, she would tell how the power of the orgasm had frightened her. She desperately wanted more. She hoped that wasn't a sign of promiscuity. What plagued her thoughts since Winston's lovemaking was how great it felt and how much more she wanted. "If I ever decide to see Winston again, I'll take your advice to talk about pleasing each other."



CHAPTER TWELVE



Cruise Days 3 and 4 – Bora Bora

Melanie's note on Bora Bora: Only 10,200 inhabitants live on this jewel of an island framed within a barrier reef with only one water passage that leads into a spacious harbor. Lots of yachts. Used during WWII by American troops for Operation Bobcat. Scuba divers' heaven. Snorkeling with giant manta rays is a must-do.

“**T**he jog around the island should be nice,” Chuck said, having breakfast with Winston by the pool-side. “That line at the treadmill this morning was a joke. Too small a gym for all the healthy people on-board.”

“Yeah. Shouldn’t be too bad a run,” Winston said, reaching for his bottle of water. Chuck and Winston had started jogging together about three years ago. Chuck competed in marathons, but Winston ran just to stay in shape. “It’s about

six miles to cover just this side of the island. Mostly flat roads. We should stop at nice views along this run to take pictures.”

Chuck nodded. “You’re still speaking at the meeting today?”

“They called me this morning. Asked me to participate in several more panel discussions.”

“Winston, you keep this up, and you won’t be able to have any fun on this trip. You’re not required to be on the panels.”

“It’s what I do,” Winston said.

“Better you than me,” Chuck quipped. “Work typically excites you. So why the grumpy mood? Is something going on?” When Winston didn’t answer, Chuck mentally listed all the possibilities. The list he had come up with started and ended with a woman named Melanie. “I say a female, about five feet seven, pretty, built tight like a brick house, hazelnut chocolate in color.” When Winston looked at him, he added. “Probably tastes sweeter than that and you’re dying to find out.”

“Do you have a point? Or are you trying my patience?”

“Patients?” Chuck deliberately repeated the tired doctor’s joke. “You got lots of them.”

“Get to the point,” Winston said flatly.

“Well, you sure seem distracted since you met her. It doesn’t take a degree in psychology to figure that out. Or that she seems interested in you. I guess your mood means you struck out. Or have you found a Tahitian-flavored honey you’re trying to squeeze into this trip?” he grinned.

“Stick to medicine.” Winston leaned forward, his elbows on the table, looking out over the pool at the island of Bora

Bora. “Fortune-telling isn’t your strong suit. And Melanie is *my* business.”

“Okay. If you don’t want to talk about it, then let’s get this morning jog over with.” Chuck stood, laughing, not even phased by Winston’s attitude, “That’ll give you the think-time to sort out your problem. It’s a beautiful day, a great breeze. Which should help blow away your confusion. The sooner you figure this out, the better you’ll feel.”

Winston drank the last of his water and stood up. “Thankfully, you minored in psychology. Else I’d be concerned about your advice.”

“Brotha, you got it bad.” Chuck grinned, shaking his head. “I’m dropping the topic until you’re in a better mood.”



THE JOG AROUND BORA BORA DID DO THE TRICK. TO CIRCLE the entire island was only fifteen miles, but Winston and Chuck used all of the morning to complete the leisurely run around half of it, occasionally stopping to enjoy the breathtaking sights. They had started in the village of Vaitape. The stores, hotels, restaurants, banks, and post offices gave it the feel of a small town. Next, they headed north along the coastal road, passing the old American World War II base at Faanui Bay. A few coastal guns, a radar station, and a deserted submarine base were the only remnants of a time long ago when the U.S. occupied the area. Further along the bay, they reached Taihi Point where the ruins of a Hyatt hotel stood, a project abandoned years before due to lack of funds. Continuing, they stopped long enough to take pictures of the scenic, quiet, turquoise-colored lagoon on the east side. From there they went to the south coast, which exploded into an

area of hotels and tourist activities where they stopped for a water break. The jog ended at Bloody Mary's a restaurant famous not only for great food but also the celebrities who often dined there. Chuck noticed the guy who starred in a recent James Bond movie heading inside.

Back at the harbor, they waited to catch the tender back to the ship.

"I'm going to shower then head to the private Motu to lie out under a palm tree for a few hours. I'll be back on board for the meeting tonight," Chuck said. "What're your plans?"

"My plans haven't gotten past taking a shower," Winston said, walking up the gangplank of the ship.

"Still haven't reached any decisions on your problem?" Chuck asked.

"Not yet."

"Well, at least you agree there is a problem," Chuck said before turning to head toward his cabin. "That's a good first step. My minor in psychology makes me an expert on first steps." Chuck grinned widely over his shoulder.

"Bye, Chuck," Winston said sarcastically.

In his cabin, Winston undressed and stepped into the shower. The jog had done a lot of good, even though he hadn't said a word about Melanie to Chuck. The last thing he needed was Chuck riding him about being too attached too soon to the woman. One who lived several states away from his home. And, if Melanie's avoidance of him was a clue, he would never see her again anyway.

Winston didn't like that last thought, but it was clear she was avoiding him. Calling her cabin resulted in zilch. When Sandra answered, Melanie was never available. She wasn't even returning his calls.

The experience they shared in the spa was unbelievable. Making love to her was damn incredible. She had marveled at his caresses, responded passionately to his kisses. She had touched and held him through all of it. It seemed new to her, as if she were making love for the first time, yet she seemed familiar with a man's body, and she had not been timid with him.

She had wanted his touch, responded voraciously to it. Like she needed it, wanted him. Her intense desire for him caressed untouched parts of his soul. The parts that completed him, made him feel whole. And when he honestly reflected on this, he needed to *be* whole. To somehow link the scattered shards of joy he had experienced into one large, enormous chunk of enjoyment. He had allowed himself to give in to the temptation she sparked. And that's how he had blown it.

Melanie had made it clear that she didn't want intercourse, and she only agreed to his caressing. He had honestly meant to keep it too heavy petting, possibly a massage. But she responded so quickly, eagerly to his touches. And he didn't want to stop himself. He knew he was taking advantage of the situation again. If he had kept his touches less sexually charged, if he had not kissed the private, sweet parts of her, if he had not stroked her until she was too weak to resist, she wouldn't have walked away from him the way she had.

What bothered and intrigued Winston, and what the jog hadn't helped clear up, was her question about having an orgasm. Certainly, sex wasn't new to her. Maybe it was the fact that she had a multiple experience that bothered her.

Being the one to give her that experience should have had him strutting like a peacock. Not a man on the planet wouldn't have had his chest puffed out if a woman reacted like that to his lovemaking. And until she walked away from him, he had felt that way. Even bragged to her. Then she was gone, and he hadn't spoken to her since. The memory of it was so clear; every touch, every word that had passed between them.

She had asked, "What just happened to me?"

He had kissed her, then said, "Sounds to me like you had an orgasm. Possibly two." He stood back admiring her body and added, "You must really like me a lot." He had grinned broadly. "Let's do it again. I want one."

She gave him a look of utter anguish. "This should never have happened," she wailed then walked away from him.

He had followed her into the vanity area. She dressed slowly, as if he wasn't in the room, then turned to him. She looked at his erection then into his eyes, and seemed to want to cry, as she managed to say, "Goodbye, Winston."

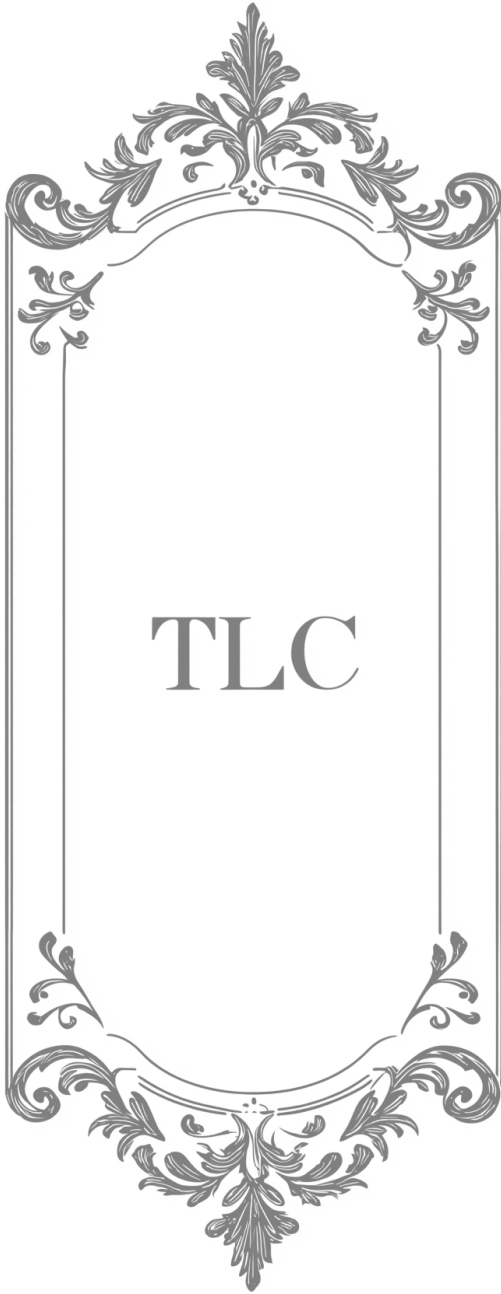
"What's wrong?" he had asked, but she opened the door and left. Running after her, nude and penis bouncing for all to see, wasn't the memorable image he wanted to present. So, he let her go.

Now, Winston stood allowing the warm water of the shower to clean his body, clear his thinking. He should ask for forgiveness, and promise, yet again, to stop taking advantage of her.

Well, there was one of his problems. He kept breaking his promises to her. He was sure she probably wouldn't forgive him now.

As Winston stepped out of the shower, another thought came to him. This trip will end on a positive note, he promised himself. Picking up the phone he dialed a familiar number.

“Hello, Sandra. It’s Winston. Are you available for lunch?”



TLC



CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Melanie had brought her camera's tripod on the trip to use for taking long-range photos of spectacular sunsets and landscapes. She was on the sun deck, the highest level of the ship, looking for a spot to set it up. She was an amateur photographer, but the classes she had taken ensured that she captured nice enough pictures to use with her articles and blog.

Her research yesterday and today had afforded her plenty of excellent material for this island. She had ended her visit to Bora Bora by sailing around the lagoon on a catamaran with a group from the ship. They sailed north from the township of Vaitape past the airport and the bungalows properties of famous people like Dustin Hoffman. The turquoise lagoon looked refreshingly clean because it was constantly replenished with ocean water from the swells that crashed over the fringe of reefs. In the center of the lagoon was a one-sided ancient volcano. Melanie had gotten pic-

tures of it before they docked. Then she and the others swam in the shallow waters of the lagoon for about an hour before returning to town, where she shopped for jewelry made from seashells.

The brilliant day had promised a wonderful sunset and Melanie was excited about taking pictures of it. This was the last day in Bora Bora, and she wanted to capture the sunset as the ship weighed anchor. The view was so perfect, she was sure she would frame some of the pictures to display in her den.

Against the golden setting sun, the blue ocean looked black. After adjusting the filter lenses, Melanie looked up at the lazy sun stretched brilliantly behind a passing cloud in the distance.

Perfect, she thought. Once it moves down as though touching the water I'll take it. She would wait.

The sun deck overlooked the pool level just below it. On the other side of the pool was the glassed-in patio restaurant and bar, *LeGrill*. She would need to make dinner reservations for 'Al Fresco' tonight if it wasn't too late. Dinner while they sailed along the coast would be nice.

Then she saw a familiar red sundress. Sandra was having cocktails with a man.

Surprise, surprise, Melanie laughed to herself. Though she and Sandra had been friends for ten years, they were complete opposites when it came to men. Sandra was bold, aggressive, outspoken, and downright lecherous. Her motto: 'Too many men and not enough time.'

If Melanie's camera hadn't already been positioned for the sunset, she would have taken a picture of Sandra leaning close to the man seated next to her. She was pretty in

her long, braided hair extensions. The red sundress always enhanced the fullness of her bustline, a treasure she had no qualms about displaying. Her date must have said something funny, because Sandra leaned back, laughing, a hand touching the skin displayed between her busty treasures.

You better watch out, Melanie thought. *Else Sandra will be reeling you in and dressing you down as tonight's featured catch of the day.* Then the man touched Sandra's hand where it rested on the table. Maybe he already knew he was caught, Melanie concluded.

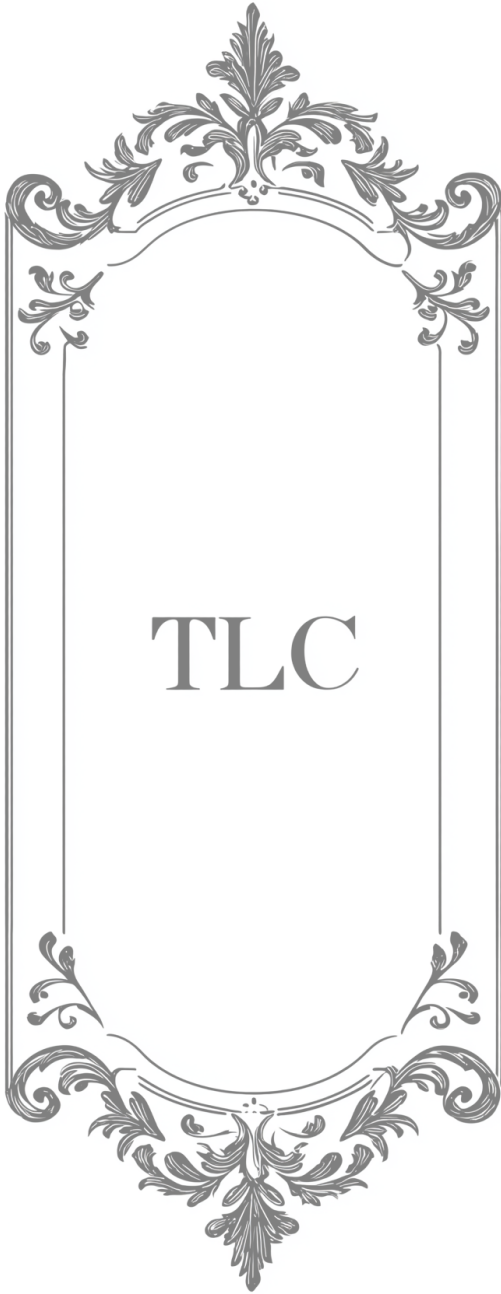
Then they stood up. Melanie lifted her hands to block the sun out of her eye to see if it was Sandra's lawyer friend, or doctor friend, or possibly that Indian chief. He was half-blocked by a pole, so she couldn't tell.

Sandra hugged him before they turned toward the pool to leave. It wasn't the lawyer or the Indian chief, Melanie realized shocked. It was the doctor, her doctor, Winston Knight, who embraced her friend, Sandra.

The setting sun kissed the horizon, a final caress before surrendering to the night. The sky blazed in hues of gold and amber, spilling its warmth onto the onyx sea below. It was a moment where heaven seemed to touch the earth, a fleeting brush of the divine.

But Melanie didn't capture any of it.

Her camera hung forgotten at her side as she stormed away, heart heavy and vision blurred with emotion. The perfect scene was unfolding before her, but the only thing she could focus on was the fading silhouette of the man she thought was hers, but apparently not.



TLC



CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Melanie was seated in the dining area of their cabin sipping a beer when Sandra breezed in. She hated beer. It was the only form of a sedative in the room's mini refrigerator. Beer was one of Ronald's favorites, and the reason she disliked it so much. She took another sip.

"Hi, Mel!" Sandra said joyously. "Sorry, I'm late. You're all changed for dinner. Great hairstyle. I like it curled and full like that!"

Melanie stood. An image of cold beer running in foamy streaks down red material flashed in her mind. She squelched the desire to fling the beer at Sandra. That, too, was one of Ronald's favorite pastimes.

"Where have you been?" Melanie asked, trying not to sound accusatory. She must have failed because Sandra gave her a funny look.

“I told you I was going to spend the day on the Bora Bora Motu. I saw Chuck there. We went snorkeling. He’s a cutie, but he’s playing hard to get. I showered and changed early so I could have drinks with another friend. I’ve given up on Chuck. There are too many men to be wasting time on one that isn’t interested.”

“Found someone else then?” Melanie asked, coming to stand next to Sandra.

“I think so,” Sandra said as she refreshed her lipstick in the mirror. “Got on my magic dress. It always works!” she joked. “I’m having a drink with him after dinner.” She picked up her purse. “Let’s get going. We’re late. I like that black lace top you’re wearing with that skirt. Kinda resembles the top of my sundress, doesn’t it?” Sandra opened the cabin door, stepped out, and began rushing down the hall. “Girl, hurry up!”

As they reached the pool level, Melanie said to Sandra. “I was looking for you earlier. Someone said they saw you in *LeGrill’s*. Were you there to make reservations for us? If so, we’re on their book twice.” Melanie was probing for the truth, wanting to give her friend a fair chance.

“Nope,” Sandra said. “Not at all.”

When they reached the entrance to *LeGrill*, Sandra looked around. “Aren’t too many people up here. Let’s head to the Connoisseur Club for a drink first. Come back in a few minutes. They’ll hold our reservation, I’m sure.”

Melanie just looked at her. She took a deep breath and decided she would deal with Sandra’s deception here and now rather than in the crowded club. “Sandra, the thing I’ve enjoyed most about our friendship is that I could always count on your honesty and trust. It was one of the things

that helped me to get through the mess with Ronald.” She bit back the urge to cry. “You were my best friend, even then. Never lied to me in all that time... or at least that I’m aware of...”

“Look, Mel, let’s talk about Ronald later.” Sandra walked around her, heading toward the Connoisseur Club. “Let’s cut through the back way. I need that drink.”

“Sandra,” Melanie said walking fast to catch up, but she had already stepped back inside the ship’s interior hall and was nearing the entrance to the club. “Sandra!” Melanie grabbed her arm. “I saw you in *LeGrill* with Winston. Let’s go back outside. I want to talk about why you lied to me, but I don’t want to do it in front of a crowd in the club.”

“So, what!” Sandra pulled away and opened the door. “All’s fair in love and war. And I thought you said you weren’t interested in him. If you want to talk, I’ll be inside the club.”

“Fine,” Melanie muttered, storming past Sandra and into the Connoisseur Club. *So be it*. If this was going to happen, it would just have to play out with an audience.

But to Melanie’s surprise, the Connoisseur Club was empty. A stroke of luck. She was glad for it—she wanted to scream, shout, and maybe throw something. Then it hit her: the club hadn’t even opened for service yet. Sandra’s mistake, fueled by her love for alcohol, had accidentally granted Melanie the privacy to deal with Sandra’s far more problematic lust for men.

Whirling around, Melanie faced Sandra, her emotions finally bubbling to the surface. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Melanie spotted movement. Of course, the cleaning staff had to pick this moment to show up.

Sandra, unfazed, looked past Melanie, her eyes widening slightly. “Not a minute too soon.”

Melanie turned, her irritation growing, “Winston?” Her voice was barely a whisper as her heart skipped a beat. She looked back at Sandra, confusion mounting. “Sandra?”

“Winston,” Sandra said sharply, turning toward him with a mix of frustration and sadness in her eyes. “You better make good on your promise to me. I lied to Melanie to get her here. Don’t make me regret it.” She turned to leave, but Melanie caught a glint of wetness in Sandra’s eyes before she hurried out the door.

Melanie stood frozen, her back to Winston, unable to move, to think. Sandra was trying to fix things, not break them.

Winston took a step closer, his presence unmistakable behind her. His warmth radiated through the small space between them, sending a shiver through her.

“I needed to see you, Melanie,” Winston said softly. “This was the only way I could. I didn’t want to deceive you. If I could start over with you,” he continued. “I would change several things that have happened. Including this crazy plan.” Winston stepped closer, the back of her touching him from chest to thigh. “But a lot I would leave exactly the same.”

Melanie stared at the door; the one Sandra had just exited through. The mix of emotions swirling inside her—anger, jealousy, frustration, sadness—was overwhelming. But in the midst of it all, one emotion rose to the surface: *relief*.

Relief that her friend hadn't betrayed her. Relief that Winston hadn't walked away. And, most of all, relief that her plans for an enjoyable trip weren't completely shattered. There was still hope, maybe even a chance—a *chance to love Winston*.

“Winston, I...” She bit her lip, struggling to keep the tears at bay. “I’m...”

He gently turned her to face him, his touch firm but tender.

“I don't even know why I'm here,” Melanie confessed, her voice softer as she stared at his chest.

“Because I talked Sandra into bringing you here,” he said, his voice low and soothing. “I couldn't go another night without seeing you, Melanie.”

That did it. The tears she'd been fighting broke free, and she covered her face with her hands, embarrassed by the rush of emotion. “I'm sorry,” she whispered through her fingers. “I... I have something in my eye.”

“Tears,” Winston said softly, brushing a tear from her cheek. “Because I hurt you.”

“No.” She wiped her eyes and looked up at him. “They're because I hurt *you* more.”

He smiled, the warmth returning to his eyes. “And just how do you think you hurt me?”

“We agreed to be honest and direct with each other,” she said, her voice trembling. “If I had had the courage to be direct, you wouldn't have needed to bribe my friend just to talk to me.”

Winston chuckled; the sound was rich and deep. “Your honesty is so refreshing. So is your smile.” He smiled as he

caressed her arms. “I said I wouldn’t change a few things, and what you just said, I’m adding it to the list.”

“What?” she asked, blinking up at him. “Why?”

“You just told me you care about me so much that you’re crying because you thought you hurt me.” His voice softened as he spoke, and Melanie’s heart fluttered.

“I shouldn’t feel this way about you,” she admitted, shaking her head.

“Why not?”

“It’s too soon. You don’t really know me.”

Winston gently wiped another stray tear from her cheek. “I know enough to care about you. Very much. Sandra told me you weren’t happy with Ronald.”

Melanie raised an eyebrow. “Oh, did she?” She knew Sandra would never share the full ugliness of her breakup with Ronald. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“You went through high school and college with him before you married,” Winston said. “I’m not sure why it ended, but Sandra mentioned it wasn’t easy for you. You spent over ten years of your life with him. Do you feel like you knew everything you could or should have about him?”

“No,” Melanie shook her head, the memories of Ronald making her heart heavy.

Winston leaned in, his eyes searching hers. “I think time is relative to how it’s used. I want to make the most of mine with you.” Then, without warning, he pulled her close and pressed his lips to hers.

Her breath caught as her lips parted slowly under the pressure of his kiss. His tongue swept inside, claiming her senses completely. She wrapped her arms around him, holding on as the kiss deepened. He tasted of wine and some-

thing else—something that felt like elation, like the joy of being found after feeling lost for too long.

“Melanie,” Winston whispered, his voice low and husky, “you make me want to try.”

“Try what?” she asked, her heart racing as she searched his eyes, seeing too much emotion in them, more than she was ready for.

“Falling in love.”

His words stunned her. She blinked, pulling him into a quick hug before stepping back. “I... we...” She glanced toward the exit, suddenly unsure of what to say.

She wanted to believe him, but the fear of another heartbreak kept her rooted in place. “I don’t know if I can,” she admitted softly, her gaze dropping to the floor. “I don’t know if I’m strong enough to take that risk again.”

“You are,” he said with quiet conviction, lifting her chin with his fingertips until her eyes met his. “You’re stronger than you think, Melanie. And I’m not asking you to jump all in. I’m just asking for a chance—a chance to show you what this could be.”

A tear slipped down her cheek, and he caught it with his thumb, his touch sending a shiver through her. “And if I fall apart?” she whispered.

“Then I’ll be there to catch you,” he said simply.

The room seemed to shrink around them, the air thick with unspoken emotion. Melanie’s heart raced as she searched his eyes, looking for any sign of deception, but all she found was honesty. Raw, unfiltered, terrifying yet mesmerizing honesty.

She exhaled shakily and nodded, a small, tentative smile curving her lips. “Okay,” she said, her voice barely audible. “But you’d better not make me regret this.”

He smiled, the warmth in his expression lighting a fire in her chest. “I won’t,” he promised.

Then, as if the tension between them demanded release, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. The world seemed to tilt as his lips met hers, soft yet insistent, a silent vow woven into every movement. Her hands slid up his chest, her fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt as she surrendered to the moment.

Melanie stopped mostly because she needed to know more. “You said earlier that you wished you could change things that had happened between us.”

“Most I wouldn’t,” he added. “Because I like those memories just as they are. Like the way you touch me.” He stepped closer and reached for her hands. He kissed the backs of them. “How you held me the first time we kissed on the plane. The dance; definitely will not change the dance.” He laughed. “Your singing... welllll? I’m not too sure if that makes the list.”

“What you have on the list is good,” she said, smiling.

“But not complete.” Winston let out a soft breath. “I’ve replayed in my mind the time we spent in the spa. Up until the point when you walked away, it was almost perfect.”

She looked at his chest. “I’m sorry about that.”

“You can make it up to me by dancing with me,” he said.

“Okay,” she said smiling. “I’ll make it up to you. But I’m not going to sing after that last comment.”

Winston led her to the dance floor.

“Wait here.” Winston walked to the door on the other side of the club. He spoke to someone on the other side of it and then he returned with a man.

“Melanie, this is Hal, the ship’s pianist.”

“Hello, Hal,” Melanie said, the soft lighting catching the onyx beads of her lace top. Her black flowing skirt swirled gently as she stepped closer to the piano.

“Winston said you have a request?” Hal asked, settling at the piano. “What’s your pleasure?”

Warmed by Winston’s thoughtfulness, Melanie smiled. “Something nice and slow.”

Hal’s fingers hovered over the keys. “How about the theme from *Titanic*? Celine’s song?”

“I distinctly remember that ship sinking,” Winston quipped, wrapping an arm around Melanie’s waist. “And right now, sinking ships aren’t what I want to think about.”

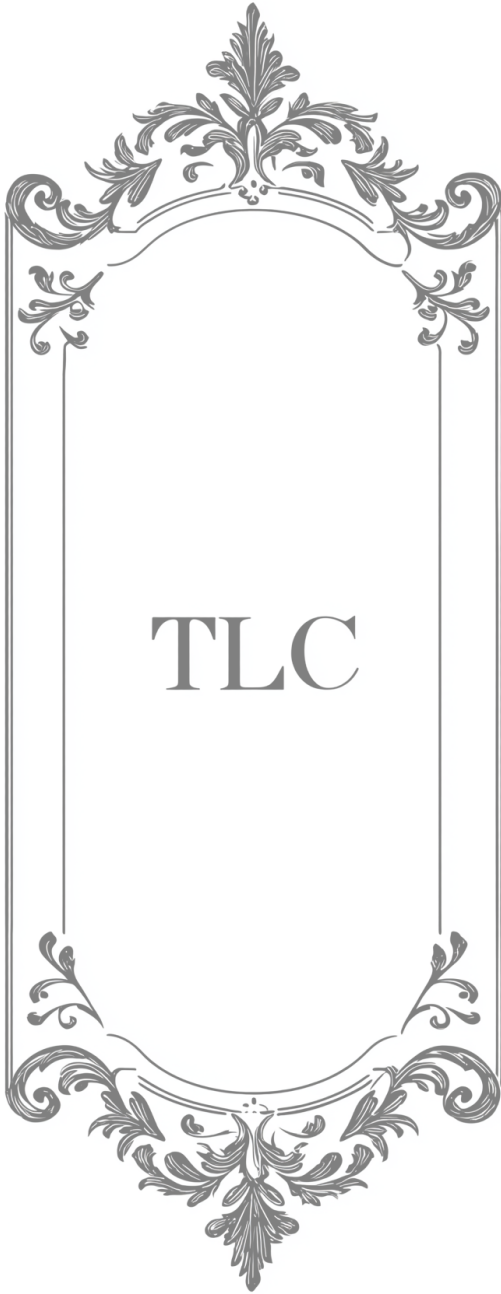
“Not the musicians’ fault it sank,” Hal joked. “Got another suggestion?”

Winston winked at Melanie. “*What a Wonderful World*. Louie’s song.”

“I like that one too,” she said, leaning into Winston as Hal began to play.

As the music filled the room, Winston pulled her closer, his lips brushing her ear. “Dance with me,” he said as their bodies swayed gently to the rhythm. He marveled at how perfectly she fit in his arms.

The new warmth forming between them became more than just physical. For the first time in days, Melanie felt the weight on her chest lift. Maybe this wasn’t the ending to the moment she had planned, but as she stood there in Winston’s arms, she realized it might just be the beginning she needed.



TLC



CHAPTER FIFTEEN



The dance was over. They needed to talk.

Winston invited her back to his stateroom, suggesting they could do so in private. Still feeling the warmth of the moment from their dance, Melanie suggested they order room service and talk over dinner in his room.

“Last chance to opt out for more elegant dining,” Winston teased, unlocking the door to his cabin.

“I’m dining here tonight, expecting cozy comfort,” Melanie replied with a soft smile, the kind that sent a ripple of warmth through Winston.

As they stepped inside, she took in the space. His stateroom was twice the size of hers, more like a small apartment. There was a living room with a sofa, a coffee table, and two chairs. A dining area with seating for four, a mini kitchen tucked away nearby, and down a short hallway, a bedroom. The balcony, furnished with patio furniture, looked out over the calm, endless ocean.

“Very nice,” Melanie said, her eyes lingering on the serene view outside.

“At home, my mornings start better with coffee on my patio,” Winston said, sliding off his jacket and hanging it in the closet. “Seemed fitting to wake up to one here as well.”

Melanie smiled, dialing room service. After she hung up, Winston patted the sofa beside him. “Join me.”

She did, curling her legs up on the couch, and turning to face him. The space between them felt charged, as if everything unsaid was waiting for the right moment to spill out.

“I didn’t mean to cause any problems between you and Sandra tonight,” Winston’s voice was gentle.

“I caused that,” Melanie replied, glancing down at her folded hands. “I wouldn’t have come into the club if Sandra hadn’t said the things she said. Sandra knew what she was doing.”

“Do you regret her helping?” he asked.

Melanie looked up, shaking her head. “No. I would’ve avoided you for the rest of the trip. Sandra knew that too.”

“Why would you avoid me?” Winston’s brow furrowed.

“I’ve spent so much time caring for someone who only wanted to cause me pain. It’s hard to imagine anything else.”

Winston nodded, understanding in his eyes. “I can relate. It was like that with my father. But I don’t let him make the rules for me anymore.”

Melanie tilted her head, studying him. “Is that why you’re so driven? To make better rules for yourself?”

“Maybe.” His gaze drifted to the artwork on the wall, as if reflecting on the past. “Maybe it is.”

“You seem like a man who doesn’t know how to fail,” she observed. “Or, if you do, you don’t let it define you. My ex-husband didn’t have that ability.”

“Did you leave him because of his failures?” Winston asked, his eyes searching hers.

“I divorced him because he punished me for them,” she said quietly, her voice steady but carrying the weight of past wounds.

Winston absorbed her words, then asked, “What was the most important thing you wanted from that relationship but didn’t get?”

“Honesty,” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

“And number two?” he pressed, gently.

“Allowing me to be the best I could be. I like the Melanie I’ve become. For a long time, I didn’t think I was worthy of anything better.”

Winston squeezed her hand, his expression softening. “I like this Melanie too. And I won’t break your number one or number two rule.”

“That’s nice to hear,” she said, exhaling a sigh of contentment.

“What else do you want to know about me?” he asked, a playful smile tugging at his lips.

She thought about it. “Why is it that a good-looking, fine, intriguing...” She thought about other words to describe him but because of his wide grin, she decided those were enough. “Did I say handsome?”

“No,” he said.

“I did, too!” She laughed. “I was just testing you. Honestly, men and their egos,” she said, shaking her head. “I would

think that a woman would have swept you away by now. Or that several of them were in line hoping to.”

“Swept away?” Winston repeated. “There’s no one of consequence in my life. I thought once or twice I had found someone, but it became obvious that the broom they were using to sweep me away was also their favorite form of transportation.”

“You’re so funny!” Melanie laughed. “That bad? Witches?” she said.

“Exactly,” he grinned, nodding.

Her laughter was infectious, and Winston took the opportunity to gently press her back onto the sofa, his body hovering above hers. “I love your laugh,” he whispered, his lips brushing hers. “It’s so genuine. Just like you.” He kissed her softly, then let his mouth trail down to her neck, his lips brushing the delicate skin above her breasts. He rested his head on her chest, his breathing calming as he nestled against her.

Melanie, resting on her back, wrapped her arms around him, inhaling his scent—a mix of spicy cologne and vanilla soap, a scent that made her feel warm all over.

“If you could relive one moment from your past because it was so precious to you, what would it be?” she asked softly, her fingers threading through his hair.

“Childhood or adulthood?” he asked, his voice muffled against her chest.

“Most memorable,” she replied, her voice filled with curiosity.

He thought for a moment. “The day my baby sister, Ashley, was brought home from the hospital.”

“Why that day?” Melanie asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“I was six,” Winston began, his tone softening with the memory. “My father came home one night from the hospital and told me I had a sister, but that my mother wouldn’t be coming home again. She died after giving birth. The next morning, my father brought Ashley home and told me I wouldn’t be alone anymore. Ashley grabbed my fingers and held on tight. Somehow, it made that morning better.”

“I’m so sorry,” Melanie whispered, tightening her hold around him and pressing a kiss to his forehead.

“It was a long time ago,” Winston murmured. “I didn’t know how to mourn at that age. But I do remember the mornings felt a lot lonelier without my mom.”

Melanie squeezed him tighter, her heart aching for the boy he once was. “Are you and your sister close?”

“Very,” he said, a small smile playing on his lips. “Ashley lives near LA. After the cruise, I’m spending a week with her before heading home. She says she has a big surprise for me, but I have no idea what it could be.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Dinner’s here,” Melanie said, though neither of them moved immediately.

Reluctantly, Winston stood, tucking his shirt back into his pants. “Coming!” he called when the knock came again. Before opening the door, he turned back to her, his smile soft and genuine. “And before I forget—thank you for understanding tonight.”

Melanie smiled back, her eyes twinkling with warmth. “My pleasure,” she whispered.



THEY ENJOYED DINNER IN SILENCE OF TWO PEOPLE IN LOVE. They didn't need many words; their eyes and occasional soft touches spoke volumes in the coziness of the softly lit balcony. After dinner, they finished their meals and sat sipping wine as the ship slowly cruised along the coast.

"Having fun?" Melanie asked, sitting with her bare feet resting on one of the lower railings of the balcony. Ocean waves splashed by.

"Having peace," Winston said standing. "Let's go inside."

When she rounded the table and came to stand next to him, he took her hand and led her to the bedroom.

Until that moment, Melanie had felt comfortable with him and with herself. She didn't want to go into the bedroom because that meant having sex. She was not good at it and didn't want to ruin their evening.

"Winston?" She said stopping. He looked back. "I was... Can..." she looked into the dark bedroom. He folded his arms across his chest and stood silently, as she considered the best way to tell him she didn't want to disappoint him tonight. "Can we just cuddle?"

"I was hoping you would say something like that." He stepped inside and turned on a light, which barely illuminated the room. He took off his shoes and socks and then climbed into the center of the bed. Lying on his back, he placed his hands under his head.

Melanie stood at the side of the bed. Because of the dim lighting, she couldn't tell if his eyes were open. But the angle of his head indicated that he was looking at her. She needed to know.

Leaning, she turned on a table lamp and then crawled into bed next to him, lying on her side, her head on the pillow next to his arm.

“Did you finish your research?” he asked softly.

“What?” Melanie leaned up on an elbow. Research was the farthest thing from her mind, and it took her a few seconds to figure out what he was talking about. “Oh... yes. I got all I need about Bora Bora. Did you tour any of it?”

“Chuck and I jogged part of the island the first day. Well, it started as a jog, but we ended up walking and touring. Today, we jogged up and down the harbor side. Picked up trinkets and a few gifts.”

“Did you find it to be charmingly sophisticated, warm, and friendly? The interior so beautiful and the outskirts so inviting.”

Winston reached up and caressed her cheek with the back of his hand, starting at her brow and slowly moving down to the corner of her mouth.

“Yes,” he finally said as he drank in her lovely features. Winston reached for her hand and placed it on his chest. Slowly she moved her hand back and forth, as he exhaled a pleasurable sigh. Melanie wanted to make it happen again. Looking at his closed eyes, she asked. “How do you like to be touched?”

He turned to her. “Any way you want.”

“Yes, but,” she said, searching for the best phrase. “What turns you on? What do you really like?”

“You touching me as often as you can, with as many parts of your body as possible.”

Melanie undid the buttons of his shirt. With the lights on, she watched as her hand explored the tautness of his

chest, the firmness of his stomach. She loved the sprinkling of hair that encircled his small nipples and traveled down his stomach before disappearing under his pants. Following that trail of hair, her fingers disappeared as well.

“Mmmmmmm,” Winston groaned deeply, and that excited her.

She moved her hand across the material covering his manhood and squeezed.

“I like that,” he said.

Melanie wanted to touch more of him, experience more of his reactions to her touch. She wanted to touch his legs with hers. She started to move, but her foot was caught in the fullness of her skirt. That was not going to stop her from touching as much of his body with as much of her body as she could. She climbed out of bed.

The sleeveless, black beaded bodysuit she wore fit more like a swimsuit. And for that reason, she wasn't uncomfortable in wearing it by itself. Standing, she bent and pushed the skirt down her hips, over her thighs to the floor.

“God, Melanie.” His voice was raspy.

Slightly bent, she looked back over her shoulder. He was staring at her backside. Her bodysuit fitted like a thong, and he was enjoying the sight of her. She had become numb to having a man enjoy something as simple as watching her take off her clothes. Ronald had just wanted her naked and in bed. Frilly under things wasn't a consideration. Ronald would crawl atop her sometimes dressed, and mostly drunk. Five minutes later it was over. Numbness had been a survival technique.

All men aren't like Ronald, she told herself firmly. *And Winston desires me*. She would change this situation to her benefit.

Slowly turning, she allowed him to enjoy the view of more of her body. Crawling back into bed, she rested on her knees as she looked directly into his eyes.

“Have you forgotten your request to cuddle?” Winston asked.

“I haven’t forgotten. Can you take off your pants?”

“Should I forget?”

“No.” She grinned at that. “I want to touch more of your body.”

Standing, he removed his pants and tossed them on a nearby chair. Returning to stand facing her, he linked his thumbs in his briefs. “Anything else?”

She could do this! “Those, too,” she said and watched, in appreciation, as his body was fully revealed to her. All of him was firm and beautiful.

Winston got back in bed and lay in front of her. Melanie lay on her side facing him. She leaned over and kissed his lips as her hand caressed his chest. The more she touched him, the deeper, more demanding his kiss became.

“Do you like this?” Melanie asked.

“Yes,” Winston said against her mouth, then he reached to pull her hips toward his erection.

She kissed his cheek, the side of his face, she rubbed her lips on his ear. “How do you like to be kissed?” she whispered.

“The way you’ve been doing it.”

“Not your mouth.” She looked into his eyes as her hand moved between his legs and gently encircled his manhood. She stroked.

He reached up with both his hands and pulled her mouth to his. His tongue danced with hers, dipped and tasted the

top, the corners of her lips. He sucked her tongue before holding it between his teeth. Moving his head slowly back and forth he continued to suck. Melanie gave in completely to the powerful sensations the kiss aroused in her. She moaned and demandingly returned the kiss, suckling, tasting, licking.

He pulled back. "Just like that."

Melanie kissed his neck then moved her lips down to his chest where she sucked his small nipples. His moans were reassuring. She continued down to his stomach, tasted his navel. All of him smelled of spice and vanilla making her want to nibble all his skin. The more she tasted and enjoyed, the more Winston moaned and sighed.

"Oooohhhhhh, Melanie!" he grunted when her mouth closed around the tip of his manhood and tantalizingly caressed. "Yes... That's... so... good..." Then she moved faster. He reached for her. "Don't... Or... I'll..." She continued her assault, ignoring his pleas because she knew how much pleasure she was giving him. The more she tasted, the more he enjoyed it. "Mel..." He reached for her.

Then he burst into pieces of exhilaration, spilling into utter pleasure. As he trembled from the climax, she kissed him softly all the way up his body to his mouth.

"Did you like that?" she softly asked.

"God, yes." His breathing was labored.

"Not too bad for our first time doing this, huh?"

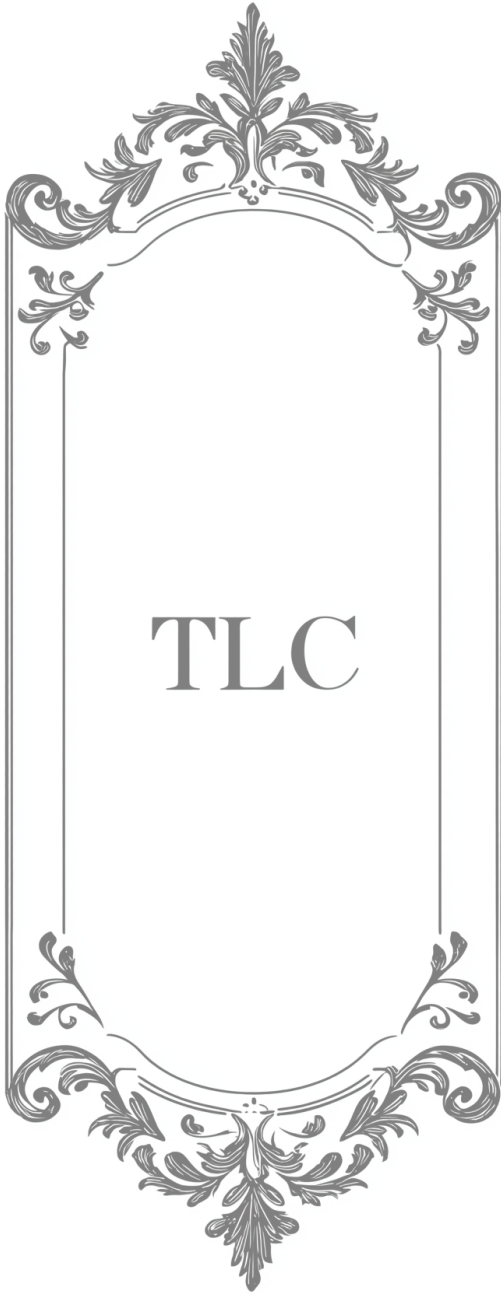
He stared at her. "Baby, you're incredible."

She lay on top of him and held him, feeling his labored breathing against her chest. He was so warm and so pleased, and it was because of her.

This was good, she thought.

Winston wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tightly.

As they lay in each other's arms, the ship moved smoothly toward Moorea Island, lulling them to sleep.



TLC



CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Days 5 and 6, Moorea Island

Melanie's notes on Moorea: It's ruggedly mountainous. The 16,000 inhabitants range from rural farmers to the elite. Coffee, coconut and pineapple plantations are plentiful. Pulp of Noni fruit shipped to America. Noni pulp is full of nutrients, reinforces the immune system, and slows tumor growth. One hospital here and it services other islands (Raiatea and Tahaa). Famous Cook's Bay named after British Captain James Cook, who was the first European to visit the islands of Huahine, Tahaa, and Raiatea. Hollywood's Mutiny on the Bounty filmed in Moorea. Beautiful Protestant and Catholic churches.

Winston and Chuck sat by the pool having breakfast. Winston hadn't seen Melanie since he fell asleep holding her. He woke up this morning to a note that indicated she needed to do some reading before attending the onboard presentation on 'Ancient Mysteries,

Medicines and Gods of Tahiti.’ Then she was going parasailing before heading to shore.

He didn’t like Melanie just leaving him, not saying good-bye. He felt alone—a feeling he no longer wanted. He would have to tell her that she should wake him in the future.

But then the note ended with the part he liked the most. He smiled. Melanie had asked to have dinner with him tonight.

“I’m looking forward to the dive trip to The Ledges this afternoon. I hear the coral reef extends more than 200 feet,” Chuck said.

“I can do without the sharks on this dive. They’re more plentiful near this island than at Bora Bora.”

“That’s because they’re always feeding the damn things,” Chuck offered. “Did you see the write-up about diving while they feed them?”

“I hope they meant feeding them fish, not scuba divers.” They laughed, then Winston said, “After the dive, I’m headed to Moorea. I’m not going to the medical meeting tonight.”

“Whoa!” Chuck said, surprised. “I think you’re serious. You’re on the panel for this meeting.”

“I want to enjoy some of the island tonight,” Winston said. “I was thinking of spending the night at one of those hotels that have those grass huts on stilts sitting out over the lagoon. They’re called overwater bungalows, but the rooms have all the luxuries of an upscale hotel. The flooring is part glass so you can watch the sea life. I think that it would be something damn...” Winston stopped himself from saying *romantic* and added, “interesting.” He sliced a piece of pineapple.

Chuck started laughing. “Have you just realized that there’s more to life than work? Or are you having a flashback of the last dive with the shark?”

“The thing bumped into me. The shark looked more surprised than I did. And it was only three feet long.”

“Then what?” When Winston didn’t answer, Chuck sliced into a melon and mentally revisited his Top-10 list of things that might be distracting Winston. “I still say female, about five-feet-seven, skin reminds you of smooth honeyed chocolate, the face of an angel with a hell of a body. But you’ve had a taste and decided to have that sweet thing’s sweet thang again.”

“I still say your career as a psychic is going straight to hell.”

“And I say you’re full of sh...” Chuck was interrupted by a high-pitched shriek.

“Dr. Knight!” It was Ethel Hightower, with her husband in tow, coming their way.

“Good morning, Mrs. Hightower,” Winston said. “You remember Dr. Rogers.”

“Absolutely! Good morning to you both. Bill and I have been having the best fiftieth! I must say...” And she did. At record speed, she recapped their tours on Raiatea and Tahaa. And how the snorkeling on the Motu was absolutely breathtaking. Actually, it had taken her breath away when she had swallowed too much water and almost drowned. But she managed to put her feet down in the three-foot water, coughed herself back to life, and then continued with her snorkeling adventure.

When Winston and Chuck were about to mentally fade out of the discussion, it got interesting.

Surprisingly so.

“I heard the marvelous news, Dr. Knight.” Mrs. Hightower’s whisper was still too loud for Winston when she added, “About your marriage onboard! Did the captain do it? You know they’re licensed for those sorts of things!”

Chuck looked at Winston, who hurriedly picked up his orange juice.

“Who told you that lie?” Chuck asked when Winston kept drinking.

“It was the talk at the dinner table last night,” Mrs. Hightower said, offended at being called a liar. “Dr. Miller told all of us about it.” She turned her attention back to Winston. “And that your wife is a famous writer!”

“Mrs. Hightower,” Winston finally said, “Melanie and I didn’t get married on this ship. We aren’t...”

“I thought so!” Mrs. Hightower interrupted. “I told Bill,” she patted her husband’s arm, “that I thought you did it on the island. It’s more romantic that way! That’s the exact same way we renewed our vows on our twentieth.” Mrs. Hightower bent and attempted another too-loud whisper. “But the ring, Dr. Knight? I think you could have done more with the wedding ring. Especially since we’re in the land of black pearls!” Mrs. Hightower’s excitement was growing. “Diamonds and a black pearl would be fitting for an island ring! I’m an expert on pearls and have examined some of the ones at the shops on the islands. The nacre thickness is extremely important. And then there’s the shape. Perfectly round and pear-shaped are rare. They only make up two percent of all that is harvested. I was telling...”

“Mrs. Hightower?” Winston said, standing. He needed to shut her up. Too many details about nothing of value. And not enough truth.

“Yes, dear?” She craned her neck up to see him better.

“I didn’t pick out the ring Melanie is wearing either. She’s been attached to it since the moment we met.” Winston figured that much was the absolute truth. He had noticed the ring the moment he had seen her at the airport.

“Sentimental value possibly,” Mrs. Hightower concluded.

“I was wondering if you could help me with picking out a ring for Melanie, since you know so much about them. Moorea probably has a shop where we can get one. Would you consider helping...”

“Absolutely, dear!” Mrs. Hightower brightened. “I just knew you had a perfect explanation!” She went into deep thought, slowing her speech. “I say. This should take some careful planning with you on your honeymoon and all. I better go scout out some places today, then afterward take you to see my choices.”

“I really do like that idea,” Winston said.

Mrs. Hightower beamed again. “We need to go. Bill,” she looked at her husband, “didn’t I tell you Melanie and Dr. Knight would be perfect together?”

Winston and Chuck looked at Mr. Hightower. He was using a celery stick to chase an ice cube around the glass of what looked like a long-gone Bloody Mary. Hightower tipped up the glass and downed the ice, the final drops of tomato juice and vodka. He crunched on the celery stick as if attempting to get more drink from it. He looked in their

general direction and smiled. Winston assumed that was as close to an answer as they were going to get.

“Bill and I,” Mrs. Hightower said, regaining their attention, “are off to do your bidding!”

“Winston?” Chuck asked, raising an eyebrow as they watched Mrs. Hightower make her way across the ship’s deck, stopping to chat with every person in her path. “Do you think there’s a cure for that woman’s mouth? I swear, I haven’t seen it close since we got onboard.”

Winston laughed, settling back into his chair. “If there is, it’s in high demand.”

Chuck smirked. “So, what’s this I hear? Married now?”

“You know I’m not,” Winston replied, reaching for his juice.

“Melanie was called Mrs. Knight at dinner. She never corrected the error, and now it’s grown.”

“So, Melanie also wants people to think you’re married?”

“Not exactly. She said she would correct the rumor. I’m letting her handle it.”

Chuck leaned forward, eyes twinkling with amusement. “According to motor-mouth over there,” he nodded toward Mrs. Hightower, “that rumor is spreading faster than a wild-fire. And the assignment you just gave her won’t help matters.”

Winston, shrugged, unfazed. “The rumor is limited to this ship. No harm done.”

Chuck crossed his arms over his chest, giving Winston a knowing look. “This explains a few things.”

Winston raised an eyebrow. “I’m sure you’re dying to enlighten me.”

“Oh, if you insist.” Chuck leaned in, adopting a mock-serious tone. “You’ve just taken her off the market. Remember Charles? He mentioned last night he was interested in Melanie but changed his tune at dinner, muttering something about her being *happily married*.”

Winston snorted. “If Charles paid half as much attention to his wife as he does other women, maybe he wouldn’t have marital problems.”

Chuck waved him off. “And those looks Melanie gets when she strolls around the pool in that swimsuit? Every guy here would be chasing after her, but now they think she belongs to *you*.”

Winston didn’t respond, his gaze drifting over the turquoise waters surrounding Moorea Island.

Chuck, never one to let a good ribbing die, added, “I wonder what Daphne would say if this rumor ever escaped the ship. You know, she was counting on being *Mrs. Dr. Winston Knight*.”

That got Winston’s attention. “It’s over between Daphne and me.”

Chuck raised an eyebrow. “Is that why you argued with her the night before we left L.A.?”

“She was upset because I uninvited her on this cruise,” Winston admitted. “I wasn’t about to change my mind at the last minute. She wants back in my life, but I’m not interested. That relationship was draining.”

“So, it’s really over this time?” Chuck asked, skeptical.

“It was over the *first* time,” Winston said firmly.

Chuck shot him a pointed look. “But does *Daphne* know that?”

Winston chuckled, but Chuck wasn’t done.

“You know,” Chuck continued, leaning back, “you’ve been smiling a lot more lately. Is that because Daphne’s gone or because Melanie’s here?”

Winston sighed, leaning back in his chair. “Chuck, let me be honest with you.”

“About time!” Chuck said, grinning.

“Melanie is... different. She’s refreshing. I came here for a getaway, not expecting to meet anyone. But she’s been a breath of fresh air. She knows I’m a doctor, but she doesn’t care about the title or the money. She’s more interested in what makes me laugh, what makes me *happy*. She just wants to be kind, to care. I’ve never had that.”

Chuck raised his eyebrows. “Well, I’ll be damned. Sounds like I’ve been wrong about you. You don’t have it bad—you’ve got it *just right*.” He shook his head, grinning. “I’ve heard enough about the women who’ve drained you. If you can keep Melanie, you’d better.”

“That’s the plan,” Winston said with a grin.

“I thought she lived somewhere up north,” Chuck mused. “Dakota? Delaware?”

“Denver,” Winston corrected, shaking his head at his friend’s lack of geography skills.

Chuck chuckled. “That’s a long commute for a Friday night date.”

“Yeah, I’d prefer Dallas to be the D-word if I had my way,” Winston said, his smile turning thoughtful.

“What are you going to do about it?” Chuck asked, his curiosity piqued.

Winston’s expression grew serious, his voice steady with resolve. “I’m not going to lose her, that’s for sure. I’ll worry about the logistics later.”



MELANIE AND SANDRA WERE GOING DOWN THE STAIRS TO LEVEL 3 to catch the tender to Moorea Island. Sandra had decided to spend the day with Melanie researching because she enjoyed the workshop on island myths they had attended that morning. When they reached Level 3, the elevator in the back of them opened, and out walked the Hightowers.

“*Mrs. Knight!*” Mrs. Hightower called to Melanie, but she kept walking. “*Mrs. Knight. Melanie!*”

Melanie turned, placing her straw hat on her head. “Hi there,” she said, trying to sound cheerful. “Were you calling me?”

“You really do have to get used to your new name, Dear!” Mrs. Hightower explained. “Are you headed to shore now?”

“No!” Sandra interjected quickly, her hangover turning into a full-blown avoidance tactic. The tender had a top and bottom level and could seat at least forty people comfortably, but Sandra didn’t want to take a chance on being seated next to them and hear all that yapping, especially with her hangover. Tenders left just about every twenty minutes, and if necessary, she and Melanie would wait for the next one. “We’re not leaving yet!”

“Oh, that’s a shame,” Mrs. Hightower said, her face full of sympathy. “By the way, what’s your ring size, dear?”

“Seven. Why?” Melanie asked, completely confused.

“Oh, nothing! Your *husband* asked me to do a little investigating for him. Just wanted to confirm a few details. What’s your favorite color?”

“Yellow. What husband? I’m not married.”

“Poor, Dear,” Mrs. Hightower sympathetically shook her head as she patted Melanie’s arm. “I had the same problem too with remembering at first. But after fifty years you can’t forget!”

“I’m *divorced*,” Melanie said, trying to inject some sanity into the conversation.

Sandra’s question was said even louder. “Who is she married to?”

“You haven’t heard about the romantic private wedding they had on the island? It was absolutely beautiful. Dr. Knight told me all about it. I’m sure Melanie will tell you all the details. I must go. The tender is about to leave. Dr. Knight’s such a wonderful man, and I’m sure he’ll be an even better husband. *Toodlee-loo!*” With that, Mrs. Hightower floated away, leaving them stunned.

Sandra and Melanie stood there, wide-eyed, watching the Hightowers make their way past security and down to the tender.

“Melanie,” Sandra said slowly, turning to her, “I know you were mad and reconsidering our friendship because I helped Winston, but I would’ve thought I’d at least be in the wedding.”

“Sandra, *I* wasn’t even in the wedding!” Melanie exclaimed, exasperated.

Sandra frowned, her hangover making everything seem even more ridiculous. “Diarrhea-mouth just said...” She trailed off, reconsidering the source. “I’m sure her husband was lit. Every time I’ve seen him, he’s got a drink in his hand. But his wife seemed almost sane—until now.”

“And according to her, Winston told her we were married,” Melanie added, shaking her head.

“He must’ve been joking!” Sandra’s eyes widened.

“He *better* has a damn good reason for letting this rumor spiral out of control,” Melanie added, slightly annoyed.

“You mean you’ve already heard it?”

“Actually,” Melanie admitted sheepishly, “I sort of *started* it.”

Sandra stared at her, incredulous. “And I suppose you’ve got some *perfectly valid* excuse for letting folks believe you’re married to the finest man onboard?”

“He’s not the finest,” Melanie corrected with a smirk, “just the cutest.”

“Pardon my error.” Sandra crossed her arms, narrowing her eyes. “We have twenty minutes to kill before the next tender. I’m expecting to get all the details on this!”

“Sandra, why do you always have to know *everything*?” Melanie turned on her heel and started up the stairs. “Let’s go to the board game area and work on that jigsaw puzzle for a bit.”

Sandra followed her, huffing. “That puzzle? Everyone’s been working on it since we opened the box. It’s probably finished by now! Which gives you plenty of time to talk about this *play-play* wedding.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Melanie replied, her tone casual. “One night at dinner, some people assumed we were married. Maybe because we were sitting together and most of them were couples. Since they’re Winston’s colleagues, I figure he should handle it.”

Sandra raised an eyebrow, sensing there was more to the story. “And why exactly did Mrs. Hightower want your ring size?”

“If you hadn’t declined the ride over with them,” Melanie said, smirking, “we might’ve found out.”

“My hangover and Mrs. Hightower’s nonstop talking are allergic to each other,” Sandra grumbled.

When they reached the puzzle table, they found it had, indeed, been completed.

“This ‘one big happy family’ vibe on this ship is getting out of control,” Sandra whined. “We can’t even finish a puzzle without someone else swooping in to do it!”

Melanie laughed, shaking her head. “Let’s swing by the library. I want to pick up that book on Polynesian myths. I’ll drop it off in the room, and then we’ll head to the island.”

On land, they met the private tour guide and went to a village to experience the old, traditional Tahitian ways. Melanie and Sandra watched tikis being carved and the tie-dying of *pareus*—the Polynesian sarongs—using natural ingredients like fruit. In what seemed like record time, they witnessed a woman weave a basket out of coconut palms.

“Let’s go over there and watch the men.” Sandra tugged at Melanie’s arm.

“They’re only getting tattoos, Sandra.”

“But they barely dressed. That’s the part that makes watching the tattooing enjoyable.”

The guide was explaining the ceremony surrounding ancient tattooing as they watched the process. “Tattooing was sometimes followed by human sacrifices in the old days, but not to worry, Miss,” he said, grinning at Sandra. “We stopped doing that when the missionaries came to the islands.”

“Amen,” Sandra said, and Melanie laughed.

“The tattoos today are just for show,” the guide said, “and are applied with electric needles and China ink. Much faster!”

They also learned about the traditional plants used by ancient Tahitians to make soap from ginger, sacred oils, and perfumes infused with sandalwood and candlenut. They had ingredients that were wonderful for adding moisture to the skin.

After watching several dancers move smoothly to the music of men playing guitars and ukuleles, they headed to the jeep.

“I love air conditioning,” Sandra said, getting into the backseat. “Turn it up high!”

They went to the eight-sided church built in 1822 by Protestant missionaries. It was the oldest European building still standing on the Society Islands. From there, they went to *Opunohu Bay* before visiting *Belvedere*, a vista point that looked out over dreamy mountains with waterfalls and rolling hills that sloped and peaked, all covered with green vegetation. Driving farther around the fruit-tree-lined bay, they passed a botanical garden and more vanilla and fruit farms.

When the trip was just about to get boring for Sandra, who had seen one too many fruit plantations, they came across an open-air market bustling with people. They stopped to shop for gifts and trinkets.

“The craftsmanship is incredible,” Melanie said as she looked at a belt made from shells of the black pearl oysters strung together.

“Buy it!” Sandra said, trying on one. “Actually, buy two and give me one!”

Melanie smiled and looked for matching earrings. "Having fun on the educational tour?"

"I am," Sandra admitted.

"St. Joseph's Catholic Church is close by," Melanie said. "I want to get pictures of its altar; the one made from mother-of-pearl."

"Sounds good." Sandra tried on a bracelet.

"What do you think of this dress?" Melanie asked, holding up a colorful sundress of burgundy and golden hues. "Maybe I'll wear it to dinner tonight."

"I like. And so will Winston."

"I had a great time with him last night," Melanie said dreamily. "It feels so good. I can't wait to be with him."

"You need to hurry up and forgive me for butting in!" Sandra said. "You smile every time you talk about him. I'm responsible for that."

"Sandra, when we talked about it this morning, I told you that I wasn't happy with you getting involved, but I'm extremely happy with the way it turned out. And for that reason, I've forgiven you."

"Just didn't make any sense you letting that fine man get away without having more of him." Sandra picked up some earrings.

"Winston has good intentions," Melanie said. "And I do enjoy being with him."

"Well, he *is* your husband!" Sandra burst out laughing. "That's too much how the rumor is going around like it is."

"I never thought about it a second time the night of the mix-up. I told Winston to tell his fellow doctors the truth. I guess it slipped his mind."

“I guess.” Sandra didn’t seem convinced. “But they also think you had an island wedding. Mistaken identity is one thing, but putting events around it is another.”

“You know how rumors are. Once they start spreading, it’s like a wildfire.”

“What are you going to say to Winston?”

“That he has to deal with this,” Melanie said. “I invited him and Chuck to dinner tonight. You’re coming, aren’t you?”

“You aren’t trying to hook me up with Chuck, are you?”

“You don’t need me to get you guys,” Melanie laughed. “I just thought it would be nice for all of us to have dinner together.”

“I’m coming to witness you newlyweds up close,” Sandra said, following Melanie to the cashier.

“That’s not funny!”

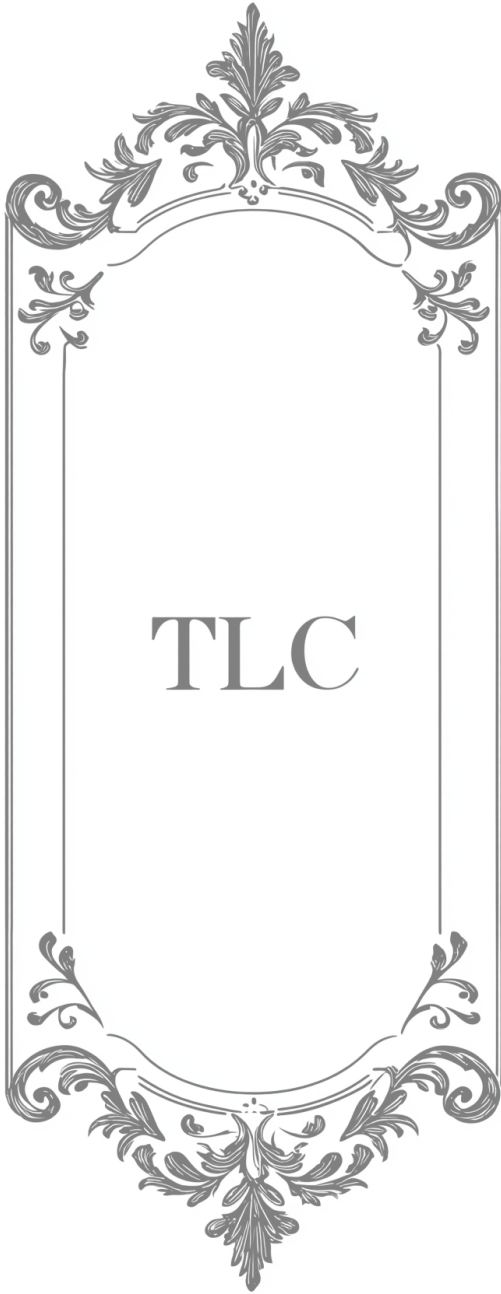
“Rumor has it...”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to join the rumor mill, too!”

“Me?” Sandra laughed. “Course not, Mrs. Knight!”

They left the market and headed to the church, then east past Cook’s Bay to the aquarium and later to the art gallery called *Galerie Aad Van der Heyde* built in 1970 by a resident artist to showcase his primitive paintings of Pacific art.

They finished their tour and headed back to the bay to catch the tender to the ship. Melanie wanted to nap before dinner. She had expected to spend time with Winston after dinner and didn’t want to be too tired for it. The day on Moorea was great, though exhausting. Still, she and Sandra planned to have just as much fun at dinner.



TLC



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



“**A** toast!” Sandra raised her glass high, grinning mischievously as she sat at the cozy table for four in LeVeranda restaurant. “To more great days and even better nights!”

“I’ll drink to that,” Chuck chimed in, lifting his glass.

Winston and Melanie joined in, clinking their glasses together with Sandra and Chuck’s. They all took a sip, savoring the moment.

“And also,” Chuck added with a smirk, “to new beginnings and... *false marriages!*”

Melanie immediately began choking on her drink. Winston chuckled, giving her a few pats on the back. “Excuse me,” she managed to cough out. “I’m okay.” Melanie glanced up, eyes watering, to see Sandra doubled over, howling with laughter. “Sandra, I’m choking—that’s not funny!”

“Oh, but it *is!*” Sandra gasped between giggles; her face flushed. She barely managed to get out, “When are you two going to tell everyone the truth?”

“Melanie’s handling it,” Winston said casually, flipping open his menu as if discussing the weather.

“*Me?*” Melanie gaped, pointing at herself in disbelief. “These are *your* friends and associates! *You* should correct them!”

“If you had addressed it when Dr. Poole first got the wrong idea, it wouldn’t have spiraled into this circus,” Winston replied calmly.

“You were right next to me!” Melanie shot back. “You had just as much opportunity as I did to correct him.”

Sandra was nearly in tears at this point. “Awwwww, ain’t that sweet? Married only one day and already bickering like an *old* married couple!”

Melanie narrowed her eyes but couldn’t quite suppress a grin, while Chuck, grinning ear to ear, offered. “Counseling, definitely a must!” he said, wiping an imaginary tear. “I know a guy—a doctor, of course—who specializes in cases like this. Might even give you a referral discount!”

“Sounds like the honeymoon’s already over,” Sandra teased.

Chuck jumped in, “Wait, it started already?” Chuck and Sandra hooted in laughter.

Sandra, still catching her breath, piped up again. “Oh! This woman stopped me earlier, wanting to know if Melanie wore one of those *traditional* exotic flower headdresses at the wedding.” She wheezed with laughter, barely able to continue. “I *almost* forgot she’s pretending to be married, so I had to

improvise. I told her Melanie went with the *bamboo and banana leaf* look. You know, something more modern!”

Melanie’s jaw dropped. “Sandra, banana leaves are *as tall as I am!* How could I possibly wear them on my head?”

Sandra shrugged, still laughing. “Look, I’m not great at making things up on the fly, okay? But she seemed impressed! I think she’s picturing you walking down the aisle with bananas dangling from your ears like earrings. Just wait until the gossip mill gets ahold of that!”

By this point, both Sandra and Chuck were in fits of laughter again, Sandra dabbing at her eyes while Chuck slapped his thigh in delight. Winston and Melanie tried to hold back, but the absurdity of it all soon had them joining in, laughing until their sides hurt.

“These people,” Sandra gasped between chuckles, “have *way* too much free time on their hands. I don’t understand it! I’m busy from the moment I get up until I crash at night, and yet here they are, cooking up wild stories.”

Melanie wiped away a tear of laughter. “This ship is small, Sandra. Everyone meets everyone at least twice.”

“I guess,” Sandra sighed dramatically, “but Lord, do they have to be *this* creative?”

Just then, the waiter approached their table, an elegant bottle of champagne in hand. “Mr. and Mrs. Knight?” he addressed them, a broad smile on his face. “Mr. Carpenter and his wife send their congratulations to you both.”

The laughter erupted all over again, filling the restaurant with their mirth.



“THANKS FOR ASKING ME TO DINNER,” WINSTON SAID AS HE and Melanie strolled down the corridor of Level 6, their footsteps soft against the plush carpet.

“You mean the comedy show we just left?” Melanie teased as they reached the elevator. “Sandra and Chuck were laughing at us the entire time.”

Winston smirked, pressing the button for Level 3. “I’d say we’re pretty entertaining.”

When the elevator doors opened, he led her toward the tender station.

“We’re leaving the ship?” Melanie asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” he said casually, stepping down toward the shore. “Feel like a movie tonight?”

“A movie? In Moorea?” She laughed. “I don’t think they have movie theaters here.”

“I have connections,” Winston said, his grin widening as he led her toward a waiting taxi. “And it’s my treat.”

“Well, in that case—okay!”

The evening breeze played with the soft material of her new burgundy and gold sundress, swirling it around her calves. As they waited for the taxi, Winston couldn’t help but admire her. She looked like the perfect picture of island elegance, the sun setting behind her casting a golden glow around her.

“You’re staring,” Melanie teased, bumping his arm lightly as they got into the taxi.

“Can you blame me?” he said with a grin. “You look stunning.”

After settling into the taxi, Winston gave the driver directions in French. Melanie snuggled close to him, rested her head on his shoulder.

A short drive later, they arrived at a hotel entrance. Melanie blinked, confused. “Winston, these are bungalows, not a movie theater. Are we lost?”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Stop complaining. I rented one of these this afternoon. It’s got all the comforts of a movie theater *and* home.”

She laughed, rolling her eyes playfully. “Well, aren’t you full of surprises?”

They walked down the softly lit, winding wooden dock. Several large huts, built on stilts, sat over the aqua waters of the bay. Marine life frolicked beneath them under the glow of the lights.

“We’re here,” Winston said, unlocking the door to one of the huts.

“How lovely!” Melanie said.

The flooring was hardwood with a glass center. Melanie looked through it, to see the ocean creatures. The walls were lined with a material that reminded her of thick parchment. The furnishings were made from bamboo and wood. Bright tropical colors brightened the bedspread, pillows, and curtains.

“They are nice,” Winston agreed, turning on the television.

“I visited a pearl farm on Bora Bora,” she said. “I had to take a boat to it. The huts looked a lot like this one on the outside with the palm leaves for a roof, but nothing compared to this on the inside.”

Winston picked up the remote to start the movie. “Movie. As promised.”

“Great! What are we watching?”

“It’s *Mutiny on the Bounty* starring Marlon Brando. Filmed here in Moorea in 1962. The only other movie based on this island was Disney’s *Moana*. I figured this one was more up your alley. But I have *Moana* too.”

She laughed. “Mutiny it is. I could use a little Brando tonight.”

“Have you seen it before?” When she said no, he added, “Let’s try to find spots we’ve been to in the movie.”

“Sounds like fun,” Melanie said as he started the movie. “I read that Brando had bought an island and built a home out here after falling in love with his Tahitian co-star in the movie. We’ll have to rate their love scenes. Let’s see if we can tell if he’s just acting or having a good time.”

“Good idea,” Winston said joining her on the bed.

They cuddled up to watch the movie, which reenacted the actual mutiny that took place on Captain Bligh’s ship, the ‘Bounty,’ and the way the twenty-four mutineers under the guidance of Fletcher Christian took over the ship in 1789. They loved the Polynesian islands more than they did their captain, so after they seized the ship, they traveled back to recapture the bliss they had found there. The ending, more Hollywood liberties than reality, was tragic but touching.

As the credits rolled, Winston took his last sip of pineapple juice. “That wasn’t too bad. I’ve seen some of those mountain views before. Well, what did you think of the love scenes?” he asked with a grin.

“They were good,” she said thoughtfully. “Some seemed a little *too* real. But that’s what happens when you fall for your co-star in real life.”

Winston got up to turn off the TV, the gentle hush of the ocean filling the quiet room. “This was a nice idea,” Melanie said, stretching out on the bed, feeling relaxed.

“Something *damn* romantic, if you ask me,” Winston replied, his tone teasing.

Melanie chuckled. “I remember Sandra telling you to do that.”

He got back in bed beside her. He was resting against pillows braced on the headboard. “So, you *were* in the room when I called looking for you?”

“Yes,” Melanie wrapped her arm around him as she lay next to him. “But that was long ago, when I didn’t think we should be spending time together.”

“And now?”

“I want to enjoy you while I have you,” she said.

“Melanie, what do you want to happen with us when we return to the real world?”

“Do you want to try to continue what we’ve started?” she asked.

“We live over a thousand miles apart,” Winston said. “My practice is thriving in Dallas. You’ve managed to work out a plan with the university in Boulder that allows you to teach but still have the freedom to pursue your passion for writing. It seems like we both have obligations that will keep us apart.”

“I’ve thought about this,” Melanie admitted, “but I haven’t figured out anything.”

“Do you want it to end between us?” he asked softly.

Melanie smiled at him. "It's interesting how you ask questions without having to admit anything about what you want." She leaned up and kissed him softly. "I'll open up first. Because it sounds like you're searching for something."

"I am," he said gazing into her eyes. "I want to know how you feel about me."

"I hoped it was obvious. But I know better than anyone that actions and words need to go together." She exhaled slowly. "I want you, Winston. I want there to be an us. But I'm not going to demand anything you aren't willing to give to me. I have feelings for you, but I don't know how to interpret them."

"Why not?"

"I had spent almost ten years loving a man. But I discovered, after the fact, it was never really love. I was looking to be the perfect girlfriend, the best bride, the wholesome wife. But that didn't define me. It was just a part of who I had become. I found my true self after leaving him, but that made me question what I believed about caring for someone. I thought love was being what the other person wanted you to be. I don't believe that now."

"What is it then?" Winston asked.

"To me?" she said reflecting, "It's feeling as though you complete something that is more than you are. That I can be myself when I'm with someone. I take all of me and add to him. I don't take away, nor do I need him to feel complete. It's the togetherness that makes us better than ourselves. And through that, something special should grow." She looked back up at him. "Does that sound as confusing as I believe it did?"

“I think I understand,” he said smiling. “You want to be able to willingly share all of yourself with someone.”

“Yes,” she said.

“And you want the other person to love you for who and what you are.”

“Yes,” she laughed. “You do this better than I do.”

“No, I don’t,” Winston said. “I wouldn’t have said any of it if you hadn’t inspired the thoughts.”

“Winston?” she asked softly. “Can I ask you something? And I want you to be honest with me.”

“Always.”

“Is it okay if I fall in love with you?” she asked.

Winston fell silent. He leaned over, placing his mouth on her chest, and exhaled his warmth through her skin and into her heart. Then he lay his head to the side to listen to her heartbeat. Melanie didn’t repeat her question, nor did she feel Winston was ignoring her. He needed time. Long minutes later he turned his head and kissed the skin covering her heart. Moving up, he kissed her brow, then her temple, then her cheek.

Looking down tenderly, lovingly, at her, Winston said, “I would like that.” He kissed her lips. “Because I’ve already started to fall in love with you.”

Melanie wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply. The more she kissed him, the more she wanted him. “Let’s cuddle.”

“We *are* cuddling,” he grinned.

“You know what I mean!” she said. “You just want me to ask outright.”

“Ask.”

“Okay.” The new Melanie was comfortable with who she was and could speak her thoughts. “Do me a favor and let me make love to you?”

“Sure,” he said laughing. “I love the way you ask questions.” He got out of bed and took off his shirt. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out several condoms. “It was careless before by not having one of these handy. That’s not like me.”

“Okay,” she said taking the foiled packet. “Winston?” she said, and he turned to her. Melanie sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, toes touching the floor. Honesty, she thought. “I want to do it better this time. I know I didn’t please you when we were in the spa, but I really would like to try tonight.”

He started laughing. “Why do you think you didn’t please me?”

“You... didn’t...” Melanie pulled at inner strength. This was exposure of a weakness, one that had haunted her for years. She wasn’t any good at lovemaking. “Didn’t ejac... uhm, cum when we had intercourse. And you told me you didn’t. Besides, I saw your erection before I left.”

He sat beside her. “Melanie, that’s not a major requirement for me to enjoy you. I was satisfied knowing you enjoyed me.” Winston thought about it. “Was Ronald the only other man you’ve slept with?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

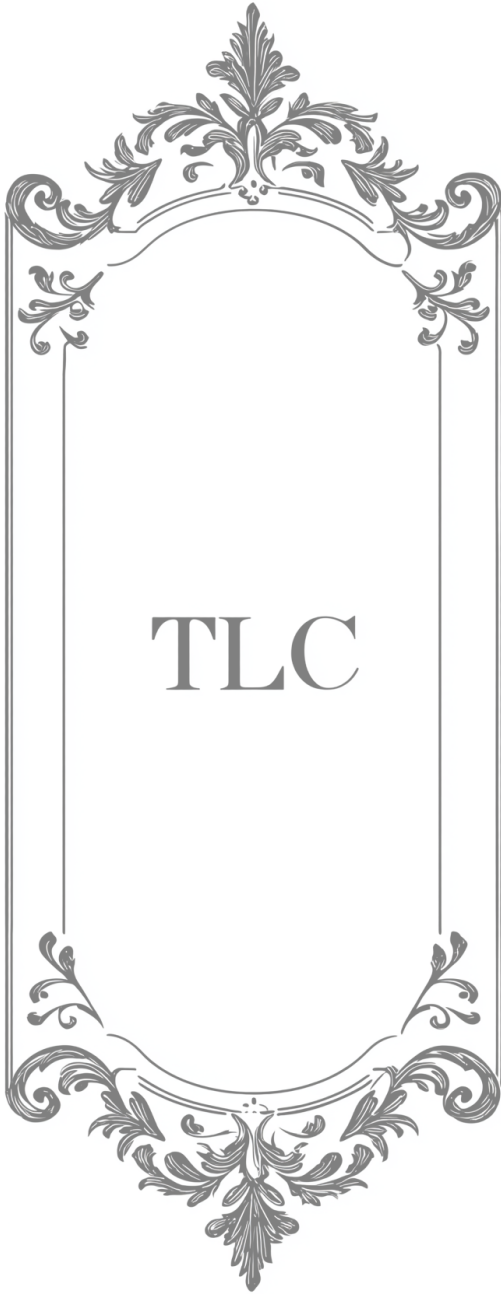
“Don’t use him as our yardstick.”

She leaned over and kissed him. “It was never like it is with us.” She lay back pulling him into her arms. “And I want you so much.”

Winston's words dripped with lust as he whispered, "You can have me however you desire. Never deny us this." With ferocious hunger, they tore at each other's clothes and bared their bodies to one another. Winston's hands roamed every inch of her skin, igniting a fire within her that she couldn't quell. He ravished her with deep kisses while simultaneously trailing his lips down her neck and chest, taking her breast into his mouth and sucking on it with reckless abandon.

As they fell onto the bed in a frenzy of passion, Winston expertly teased and pleased her body, driving her wild with need. When she begged for him, he thrust himself inside her with a force that bordered on primal, igniting an inferno of pleasure between them. The intensity only grew as they moved together in perfect harmony, exploring every inch of each other's bodies until they both reached an explosive climax that left them breathless and spent.

"You please me beyond measure, Melanie," Winston murmured in her ear as they lay tangled in each other's arms. And as the tranquil sound of waves lapped against the shore outside their window, they drifted into a euphoric state of bliss together.



TLC



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Cruise Day 7, Papeete, Tahiti

Melanie's notes on Papeete: In 1818, London Missionary Society built the church at the waterfront that helped the port grow in earnest; the Paofai Church now occupies the site. The airport was built in 1961 and launched the now-booming tourism and increased business. Vaima Shopping Center has exquisite boutiques. A must-do tour: Gauguin Museum, Faarumai Waterfalls, the Tairapu Peninsula, and the impressive Musee de Tahiti et des Iles. Papeete is the capital city of French Polynesia. Over 178,000 people live in this fast-paced Tahiti, which helps prepare travelers for leaving, headed back with the right mindset of the real world. Yet I'm sad...

This was the last day the Paul Gauguin would be in Moorea. The ship would leave at six o'clock that evening and dock three hours later in Papeete.

Winston woke up smiling.

The first thing he saw was the bright colors of the bungalow's curtains at the window. Turning, he reached for Melanie and touched the paper instead. She was gone and he was alone.

Winston lost his smile; the loneliness dawned.

It was another note from Melanie, and it bothered him. For some reason, she felt it was okay to leave him there, alone, to endure the emptiness. And after their lovemaking, it was the last thing he wanted to feel. To squelch the ache, he got up and slipped on the complimentary housecoat. He went out onto the balcony and looked out over the brilliant blue waters surrounding the bungalow. The view, the sound, the breeze brought on the peacefulness he wanted. After several deep breaths, he felt much better and smiled. Looking down, sea creatures swam by. He remembered the fish food packets he had brought yesterday and left inside. He had planned to sit with Melanie on the small balcony, sipping coffee, feeding the fish, and enjoying each other's company.

But Melanie's note said she had gone out to research and would see him tonight. Winston figured he should stop sulking and start his day as well. He went back inside to shower and dress. He would head back to the ship and hopefully join Chuck for breakfast before going to his onboard medical workshop.

Aboard the ship, Winston entered the restaurant and spotted Chuck having breakfast with old Dr. Miller. The man really did look like Father Time.

"Good morning, Dr. Miller," Winston said, walking up to the table. "Chuck." Winston nodded to his friend.

"Join us," Miller said, flashing his dentist's marvelous handiwork. "We were just talking about you."

Winston pulled up a chair. “Care to fill me in?”

“Your input at the workshop meetings has been great,” Miller said. “I was just wondering if your honeymoon would continue to prevent you from presenting at the other meetings. At least that’s what Dr. Rogers thinks.” Miller looked at Chuck.

Winston noticed Chuck’s wide grin and looked back at Miller. “I’m planning to speak at the workshop today.”

“Great!” Miller enthused. “I think it fascinating how you combine traditional Western medicine practices with Eastern medical wisdom.”

“A lot of my patients come to me in great pain,” Winston said. “Most have lifestyles that are mentally and physically stressful as well. They need more than just prescription drugs. Self-healing helps.”

“The National Institute of Mental Health preaches that over seventy percent of all illnesses are due to stress,” Chuck added. “That includes chronic pain conditions. What Winston talks about are ways to release that stress.”

“Yes, but what are these Tai Chi and QiGong techniques I hear you’re going to talk about today?” Miller asked.

“I’ll give the details in the workshop,” Winston said. “Are you planning to be there?”

“Depends on what you tell me now,” Miller said.

“Tai Chi and QiGong combine specialized breathing techniques with visualization exercises.”

“Chuck, I thought you said Winston was going to give pointers for reducing anxiety, depression, and mood disturbances,” Miller said.

“Those are benefits of Tai Chi and QiGong, but the techniques can also boost the immune system, lower high

blood pressure and raise energy,” Winston said, taking the menu from the waiter. “I’ll have a coffee.”

“Deep breathing does all that?” Miller asked, laughing. “I’ve been away from practicing medicine too long!”

“QiGong means breathing exercise and Tai Chi is slow motion movement,” Winston said. “Together you get the benefits.”

“QiGong is 2,000 years old,” Chuck added. “But the way it can be incorporated today is cutting edge. I had a patient who suffered in pain for years from a whiplash injury, but after a few weeks of Tai Chi her pain greatly reduced.”

“My word!” Miller said. “It makes sense. I guess you might be able to teach this old dog a new trick or two,” Miller laughed.

“I’d love to have you at the workshop,” Winston smiled, then turned to give his breakfast order to the waiter.

“Count me in,” Miller said merrily, then he said to Winston in hushed tones. “Mrs. Hightower told me at dinner that you two are going shopping for wedding rings today. I know it’s all hush-hush! I’ll keep it a secret.”

Chuck choked on his coffee, unable to contain his laughter.

“Are you going to be okay?” Miller asked Chuck.

“It’s amazing how fast news travels,” Chuck managed to say.

“Good news at that!” Miller said. “I hear you had to grab something last-minute for the surprise wedding on the island, but plan on correcting that today.”

“I’ll see what today brings,” Winston said evasively.

Winston considered correcting the misunderstanding about his nuptials but figured at this junction no one would

believe him anyway. He sipped on his coffee and watched Chuck still trying not to strangle to death on his own coffee. Poor Dr. Miller looked confused.

After the workshop, Winston spent the remainder of the day touring and shopping in Moorea and got back in time to catch the last tender to the ship before it departed.

Melanie's note had indicated that he should meet her at the poolside at sunset for the ship's departure. He went to his room to drop off the gifts he had brought in Moorea. He wanted to take a shower and change before heading topside. He would also pack before meeting Melanie, as luggage would be picked up later that night and stored for tomorrow's departure.

Since they planned to attend the Broadway-style show onboard tonight, Winston dressed in olive-colored cotton slacks and a tan button-up shirt. 'Country Club casual' was the ship's mandate for dress code.

Stepping outside on the pool level, Winston looked around for Melanie. Melanie was on the sun deck, adjusting her tripod and looking out at the beautiful sunset. She was wearing another one of those lace tops that he found himself loving. This one was white, and she wore it with a red *pareu* with white flowers wrapped around her waist, fitting like a long skirt. When she saw him, she waved, her loose hair blowing in the wind. She made the perfect picture, he thought, her smile always entralling.

Winston stood for several moments appreciating the sight of her. She took the camera off the tripod and aimed it at him. He headed her way. He had been missing her and needed to hold her since this morning.

Morning, he thought, as a spark of annoyance washed over him. He knew he had to fix that problem now. Walking purposely, he headed around the pool, up the stairs, around the sun deck's bar, and over to where she stood waiting.

Melanie had repositioned the camera on the tripod. She took a step toward him and threw her arms around his neck. "I was just thinking about you." She kissed him quickly. "It's funny how I sometimes think of you, and you just appear. How did your day go?"

Winston concentrated on the part that he most wanted to correct. He had been thinking of her too. "My day went well," he said. "It was this morning I could have done without."

Melanie blinked, clearly puzzled. "This morning? What about it?"

He let out a small, frustrated sigh. "Is it too much to ask for you to stay longer in the mornings? Why can't I ever find you in bed when I wake up?"

She laughed, that melodic sound that always made his heart skip. "Didn't you get my note?"

"I wanted more than a piece of paper, Melanie," he said, his tone a little sharper than he intended.

She raised an eyebrow. "What did you want, Winston? A morning cuddle or something more... *intimate*?"

That wasn't it. What he needed wasn't about the physical—it was having *her* there, in the quiet moments, to talk, to laugh, to hold. He searched for the right words, but they felt tangled in the mix of his emotions.

"I asked you a question," he said, realizing a bit too late that it sounded more like a demand.

“Winston,” she said softly as she caressed his cheek. “You’ve been honest with what you’ve wanted since the moment we met. But I think you *needed* me... this morning. That’s different. And you’re upset about it.”

“Melanie,” he pulled her to him. “Be with me the next time. Don’t leave me sleeping in the morning.” It was a demand, and he knew it shouldn’t be.

She gazed up at him, her eyes filled with warmth. “I won’t say no if you ask me.”

Much softer, he asked. “Please stay. Have breakfast with me. Talk to me before you go.” It sounded like a plea.

Melanie tiptoed up and kissed him softly on the lips. “I won’t leave,” she whispered, her promise hanging in the air between them.

He deepened the kiss, pulling her closer, feeling her body melt against his as the tension in his chest finally eased.

“Ugh, *get a room*, you two!” Sandra’s voice interrupted them as she walked up with a dramatic eyeroll. “Some of us don’t have a partner to kiss, you know. It’s downright frustrating.”

“Hi, Sandra.” Winston turned to her.

“Hi, yourself,” Sandra said. “Papeete in a few hours. You guys planning to get off the ship tonight?”

“I’m going to have a relaxing night onboard,” Melanie said. “Possibly go to the musical.”

“I’m doing what Melanie’s doing,” Winston added.

Sandra grinned. “You two do that,” she said. “I’ll find something to do with myself tonight.” She turned to leave then stopped. “Mel? Do you still want to meet for breakfast in the morning?”

Melanie smiled up at Winston. “Sure, but let’s make it a little later than planned. Say eight instead of seven? Then we’ll head to the disembarkation meeting together.”

“Don’t forget to pack tonight and put the luggage you want to go to the airport outside the room door,” Sandra said. “They’ll pick it up to be stored to take to the airport.”

“I’ve already packed,” Melanie said. “I’m taking my camera, toiletries, a change of clothing, and my swimsuit to the hotel. Everything else I can live without until I get to LA.”

“Remember to not pack your jacket,” Sandra laughed. “So that you won’t freeze on the plane this time.”

“Oh, you’re so funny,” Melanie said, smiling.

Sandra turned to Winston. “Are you joining Mel and me on the tour of the city tomorrow?”

“I have a final meeting in Papeete,” Winston said, looking back at Melanie, “You have a day room at the *LeMeridien* Hotel?” When she said yes, he added, “So do I. I’ll meet you both at the hotel for a late lunch. We’ll spend some time at the beach or something before heading to the airport.”

“I like the plan,” Sandra said.

After saying their goodbyes to Sandra, Winston stood beside Melanie as she took pictures of the vibrant sunset. The multi-blue colors of the sky bled into the ocean, painting everything with a soft, golden hue.

“That was an incredible sunset,” Winston said, watching her adjust the lens. “You’ll have to get me prints of those.”

“I’ll do you one better,” Melanie replied with a playful smile, her eyes never leaving the horizon. “I’ll have a couple of the nicer sunsets I’ve captured enlarged for you.”

“Are you always this thoughtful?” Winston asked, stepping closer until he was right beside her. “You’re always thinking of things to make me smile. You’re wonderful to be with, incredible in bed, and now you’re giving me gifts.”

Melanie glanced up at him, a little surprised but clearly intrigued. “Am I?”

“Yes, you’re amazing to be with,” he said, his voice low and sincere.

“No, no. Am I *really* incredible in bed?” she asked, her brow slightly furrowed as if this were a question that needed serious contemplation.

Winston chuckled, charmed by her earnestness. He closed the space between them and wrapped his arms around her waist. “When you’re not making love to me, I’m dreaming that you are. Every time with you feels like an adventure.” He leaned in, his voice dropping to a husky whisper. “I love the sounds you make when you’re in my arms. I love how you’re open and explore your desires with me. Just thinking about it is turning me on.”

Melanie raised an eyebrow, a teasing smile on her lips. “So, I guess that means, yes?”

Winston’s eyes darkened with desire as he leaned in closer, his lips hovering near hers. “It means I can’t imagine being with anyone else but you.”

Her heart swelled at his words, and she couldn’t stop the smile that spread across her face. This was the kind of connection she had doubted she’d ever find. She had pleased him in ways she never thought possible and hearing him say it out loud made it all feel real.

“You keep talking like that, Winston,” she murmured, her fingers tracing the back of his neck, “and I’m going to get addicted to you.”

“Please do,” he whispered back before kissing her softly, his lips lingering just long enough to make her breath catch.

When he pulled back, she smiled, her voice playful. “So, what other plans do you have for me tonight, Dr. Knight?”

“First, dinner,” he said, kissing her brow tenderly. “Then the show,” he added, pressing a kiss to the corner of her eye. “And then, I’m taking you to bed,” he finished, brushing his lips along her cheek. “And we’re not sleeping.”

A low, sultry laugh escaped her lips as she tilted her head to meet his gaze. “Ohhh, I definitely like that last part,” she whispered, her voice filled with anticipation.

Winston grinned. “I can help you pack up your camera, then,” he teased, “so we can get started.”

Melanie laughed as she turned to dismantle her tripod, her movements quick and eager. Winston, ever the gentleman, began helping her, but not without stealing lingering touches and soft kisses along the way, each one building the tension between them.

The sun had set, but the night ahead promised a different kind of glow—one filled with heat, laughter, and the intoxicating closeness that only they seemed to share.



THE NEXT MORNING THE SUNSHINE WARMLY KISSED THE DECK of the Paul Gauguin. Melanie lay in bed, holding Winston’s warmer, nude body. She had been awake for about ten minutes waiting for him to stir. He was sleeping soundly on his back as she lay on her side caressing his chest.

Melanie really wanted to get up and work on putting the finishing touches on the content for the magazine and her blog. She had completed several versions and wanted to add more facts about the islands to them. Slipping her leg from under his, she carefully got out of bed, not wanting to wake him. She would at least brush her teeth, she thought.

In the bathroom, Melanie decided to do more. She took a quick shower. Afterward, she put on vanilla lotion then pulled her hair back into a ponytail. She went and got her purse and put on a touch of lip gloss. Liking the look, she returned to the bedroom. Winston had moved and was resting on his side, his back to her. She found the shirt he had worn last night and slipped it over her nude body. She wanted his spicy, manly smell all around her.

Maybe she would keep this shirt to carry back to Denver with her. Denver, she thought. So very far away from Winston. Holding him when he woke would be impossible.

Working out a teaching arrangement with the university had been troublesome for her. Being able to start over in a different city would be difficult. Her writing income was nice, but the extra income from teaching allowed her to enhance her lifestyle.

What were they going to do?

And was it worth it? Would it be the same back in the normal world where work and life made it hard for couples? Adding hundreds of miles between them would make it even more difficult.

She decided to think about this later.

Easing back in bed, she crawled up behind Winston and wrapped an arm around his waist. It was 6:40 a.m. and they

needed to start their day. Melanie fit her body close to his and moved her hand down over his soft penis.

“Winston,” she whispered in his ear. “I wanted to tell you how good you felt inside me last night...” Then, in provocatively erotic details, she did. Courage came easy when the other person was sleeping. She kissed his ear and nibbled his neck as she recited her tale. As she did, the spell she cast between his legs brought his manhood to life in her hand.

“Winston, I think you want to do it again,” she said.

Winston moved and squirmed, aroused as he turned toward her. Opening his eyes, he smiled. “Hey,” he said before wrapping his arms around her. “You smell good. And what you’re doing feels terrific.”

He had told her to indulge her fantasies, so she would do just that. “Want a taste?” she asked.

“Of?” he responded.

She moved over him so that her knees were on either side of his waist as she faced his feet. She leaned forward and kissed his stomach, then moved farther down. “Of me,” she said, taking his hardness in her hand. “As I taste you.”

“Don’t ever change, Melanie. I want you just the way you are.”

“And I want you just as much,” she said heatedly, enjoying the sounds he made as she explored his body.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

The tour of Papeete was more exhausting than expected. It started on Tahiti-nui, the largest of the French Polynesian islands, and ended on Tahiti-iti, the small peninsula connected to Tahiti-nui.

Before leaving on the tour, Melanie and Sandra had breakfast and attended the disembarkation meeting, where airline representatives assisted in getting luggage tagged and ticketed. Then they walked across the street to the Internet Café so Melanie could email her article outline to the magazine editors.

Later they joined a busload of tourists for a seventy-five-mile drive around the island, stopping at points of interest for lectures, pictures, and shopping, and ending at the *LeMeridien* Hotel.

Melanie was grateful. “I need a nap,” she said as she stepped off the air-conditioned bus.

“We’re supposed to meet Winston for a late lunch,” Sandra reminded her. “You want to rest for an hour or so in the room then go to the restaurant?”

“If I sleep now, I won’t get up,” Melanie said.

They checked into their hotel room, and Melanie decided on a cool shower to shock life back into her body. Because of the enjoyable late-night and early-morning romp in bed with Winston, she hadn’t gotten much rest.

As she stood in the shower, hands running over her body, it brought back memories of being with him. She was thrilled that he loved her forwardness in bed and telling her so made her want to please him even more. The surprising part for Melanie was that she didn’t feel promiscuous. She had access to a man who wanted to enjoy her just as much as she wanted to enjoy him. And he always seemed to know what she needed from him. It was that simple.

As Melanie came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, Sandra asked with a grin, “Is that a hickey on your chest?”

“No,” Melanie lied. “And you know we agreed years ago not to give details of our sexual encounters.”

“So, you admit getting laid!” Sandra practically shouted. “How many times?”

“I’m not participating in this conversation.” Melanie stepped into her aqua swimsuit. She reached for a turquoise and gold *pareu* scarf and wrapped it around her waist. “After lunch are we going to the pool or beach?”

“The pool has shade. I’m Black and my tan is just fine the way it is!”

“Put on more sunscreen,” Melanie teased, laughing. “And I’m more interested in napping after lunch.”

“Tell me more about the hickey and stop changing the subject.”

“You know the rules. Your business is yours and mine is mine.”

“If we had talked more before, you wouldn’t have had the problems you had with Ronald. I’m just trying to make sure you’re okay with Winston.”

“Nothing could have helped with Ronald. He thought he was a great lover. He wasn’t. Not by a long shot.”

“And Winston?”

“Winston allows me to indulge myself,” Melanie said, grinning. “And I’m not saying anything else about my sex life.”

“Then I guess we’re ready to go to lunch.” Sandra stood.

“I’ll call Winston and have him meet us,” Melanie said.

“Hurry up, I’m hungry.”

In the hotel’s lobby, Sandra led the way across the courtyard and found a patio table looking out at the pool and beach beyond.

“What are you and Winston going to do when we get back to the U.S. of loving A?” Sandra asked at the table.

“We haven’t decided,” Melanie admitted. “I want this with Winston, Sandra. But I don’t know how to swing losing some of my income to move to Dallas. And I know he won’t give up his practice there. It’s his life, and I won’t ask him to.”

“I can tell by the way you two respond to each other that this is more than a hot fling. I’m completely jealous.”

“You can have any man you want,” Melanie said. “You don’t want a serious relationship.”

“That’s not what I’m jealous of! I didn’t get laid not one time the whole damn cruise,” Sandra whispered, embarrassed at having to admit that. “Now it’s over!”

“What?” Melanie started to laugh. “You had plenty of opportunity!”

“I was so busy reviewing all of them that I never got around to selecting one. Besides, most didn’t seem honest enough to make me comfortable with them. Last night I tried to make a date with this doctor friend, and he gave me the brush off. Free sex and he turned it down!”

“You had probably turned him down all week,” Melanie said. “Turnabout is fair play!”

“Let’s change the subject,” Sandra replied. “I might cry if I think of all the fun times I’ve missed. Let’s go back to talking about Winston.”

“My favorite topic.”

“I have an idea.” Sandra was suddenly serious. “Don’t say anything. Just think about it for a while.”

“Okay.”

“You know I have a three-bedroom home,” Sandra offered up. “Stay with me until you decide if you want to be with Winston long-term. You can take your time looking for a job in Dallas.”

“I have my life, my job, my future in Denver. I just can’t up and move on the hopes of a relationship...”

Sandra interrupted. “I said think about it first! Don’t talk it through now or you’ll talk yourself out of it before even really considering it.”

“We’re different types of people, Sandra. I love you to death, but I’m a workaholic and you’re a party girl. I don’t think our differences will let us live together.”

“We were roommates in college,” Sandra reminded her. “We can do it again. I’ll continue to party, and you’ll do what you do.”

“I don’t know if...” Melanie started, but Sandra interrupted again.

“Just think about it, Girl!”

“Okay, I’ll think about it.” Melanie laughed.

Absorbed in their own thoughts they were both quiet for a moment.

Melanie suddenly asked, “Remember what I said in the airport after seeing Winston?”

Sandra reflected. “Yes, I do.”

“I think it’s coming true,” Melanie softly said, looking out over the pool.

“That’s reason enough to move to Dallas,” Sandra said smiling.



AS WINSTON HEADED TO THE DOOR, HIS HOTEL ROOM PHONE rang. “Melanie, again.” He smiled as he picked up the telephone, “You can’t wait to see me, right? Is that why you called?”

“Yes, it is! I’ve missed you, Sweetheart. Since I couldn’t reach you on the ship, I called the hotel.”

“Daphne?” Winston drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “I guess you do have my itinerary.”

“How was the cruise?” Daphne asked.

“Better than I could have imagined.”

“Even without me?” she pouted, and Winston knew she was poking out her bottom lip.

“I’m headed out, Daphne,” he said, wanting to end this conversation. Listening to her pout wasn’t something he wanted to do at the end of this wonderful cruise, or ever again for that matter. “I have a lunch date.”

“Okay. I just wanted to make sure we were still going to see each other as soon as you get back.”

“I haven’t changed my mind, Daphne,” Winston said flatly.

“I’m calling internationally,” Daphne answered hurriedly. “You said we’d talk when you got back! I’ll wait until then. We have a lot to talk about. Have a safe trip home.”

Before Winston could say that there was nothing to talk about, Daphne hung up the telephone with a sharp click. Mentally, he shook off the dread. Ridding himself of her was taking a lot more effort than he thought it would. Daphne was a pretty woman, model quality, but only a little of that beauty was on the inside. He had discovered a little too late that she wanted the financial security and status of being a doctor’s wife.

Daphne had said all the right things in the beginning, feeding on his loneliness. But when she started giving him her bills to pay and their dates consisted of his taking her shopping at exclusive stores, he realized she wasn’t all she made herself out to be. Her smile was too fake, her laugh too brittle, and her desire to be with him had nothing to do with enjoying him and everything to do with what she could get out of him.

Then Winston thought of Melanie. She was just the opposite. She made him feel wanted and cared only about making him smile. Her laugh was so real. She was so real.

Suddenly he felt a terrible need to be with her right then. He turned and hurried out.

Winston saw Melanie sitting with Sandra at the poolside. The ocean backdrop added a calming element to the view. It helped him to rid himself of thoughts of Daphne.

When he approached the table, Melanie turned and extended a hand to him. "Hey, Sweetie!"

"Hey, Baby," Winston said, bending to kiss her as he held her hand. "Did you have fun today?"

"Much. But I missed having you with me. It would have been a lot more fun with you."

"Just what I needed to hear." Winston kissed her again, this time longer, deeper. Tasting all of her through the kiss.

"Enough with the lovey-dovey stuff," Sandra teased.

Winston laughed and reached for his chair.

"No kiss for me?" Sandra whined and he went over and gave her a smack on the cheek. "That's better."

"We were just talking about you," Melanie said as he sat down.

"How so?"

"We went to the Gauguin Museum. I saw a print of the piece you were interested in on the ship. If I'd known the area you wanted to decorate, I would have gotten it for you."

Winston looked at her for long moments. Again, she just wanted to please him. "We have time to go back and get it. Come with me when I do?"

"I would love to. How did the meeting go?" Melanie asked.

"Just like the rest of them," he answered. "I would have preferred touring the city with you two."

“It was exhausting,” Melanie said, “but fun. Especially the museums. I like learning all about Paul Gauguin, the artist. His wife, his mistresses, the bouts with syphilis and depression, the fights with the church and his countrymen.”

Sandra added. “He seemed angry at himself and the world. I don’t see any of that in his art. Only the peacefulness of the islands.”

“That’s why I’m interested in a few prints,” Winston added before standing and pulling Melanie out of the chair. He wrapped his arm around her. “Come on, Sandra. Let’s get lunch. And then let’s head to pick up that art Melanie saw.”



FLIGHT TN2 TO LOS ANGELES WAS LEAVING ON TIME.

The three had met Chuck at the hotel, and they all rode to the airport together. The check-in was uneventful, and everyone was aboard, ready for takeoff. Melanie sat at the window with Winston next to her on the aisle, having changed seats with Sandra.

Sitting on the aisle opposite Winston, Chuck said, “This trip was worth every penny.”

“I second that,” Sandra added, seated next to him.

Winston turned to Melanie. “Are you going to keep me company or sleep this time?”

“I’ll chat with you for a while. And I’ll be here in the morning when you wake.”

He laughed. “I like doing mornings with you, especially this morning.”

“Winston, after tomorrow, when will we spend another morning together?”

Winston looked at her, his face serious. This was one of many times today that he had thought that same thing. “I’m planning to come to Colorado as soon as I can. I’ll be in LA for a week visiting my sister. I want to see you next weekend.”

“That’s a great idea,” Melanie agreed.

As the plane took off, Winston turned to her. “I won’t let you forget me. I need you in my life.” He planted a kiss on her temple. “Something very special started on that ship. I want you, Melanie McDae.”

“I want you, too.” She placed her hand on his and squeezed. “A lot.”

When leaving the USA, he had stood in the airport, certain that this trip would be just another temporary fix of joy, like taking a pain pill for a permanent illness. Now Winston had his cure. But it hadn’t happened until he had loosened his grip on his career and reached out for something more than work, something that would bring the happiness he sought. Work wasn’t what he needed, not at all. He needed someone to care for him, to love him.

At first, it had been Melanie’s laugh that called to him, her smile that beckoned him. Now it was her spirit, her kindness, her sensuality, her honesty, and her openness. He would be damned before he eased his grip on his chance for happiness with her. No matter the distance.

Those pleasant thoughts were on his mind as he drifted off to sleep.

As the night turned into morning, the captain of Flight TN2 informed the passengers that they would be in California in less than two hours.

Winston awoke dreaming of Melanie. Another morning without emptiness, he thought happily. The closer you floated to heaven surely the easier it was for prayers to be heard.

“Good morning,” Melanie said.

“Yes, it is,” Winston agreed.

After the plane landed in the U.S., they headed down the corridor to take the bus to the terminal for customs. The check-in for returning U.S. citizens was much faster, but getting luggage out of customs was a joke.

“Do you think our luggage made it back into the country?” Sandra asked, sitting on the floor, her back against the wall. “It’s been thirty minutes.” She looked at the empty luggage conveyor belt.

“Another few minutes,” Chuck said, plopping beside her.

“You’ve said that the last eight times I asked you,” Sandra complained. “They’ve probably got dogs sniffing stuff for contraband. Luckily, we can recheck it down here and not have to carry those heavy suitcases up to the terminal.”

“That’s the good part,” Chuck laughed.

“You know, Chuck,” Sandra said, looking at Winston and Melanie leaning arm-in-arm against the wall. “I take full credit for those two unmarried newlyweds getting together.”

Chuck laughed. “Melanie never did correct that little misunderstanding, did she?”

Sandra laughed, too. “I don’t think Winston really minds.”

The conveyor belt finally started, and the passengers clapped and cheered. Everyone began collecting their luggage and heading in different directions.

Since the connecting flights weren't leaving for another few hours, Winston, Melanie, Sandra, and Chuck planned to have breakfast together at the airport.

Because of the last-minute change, Winston had texted his brother-in-law to meet them at baggage claims to have breakfast with them. Greg texted that he was delayed and that Ashley would meet him at the airport instead.

Winston said as they entered Baggage Claims, "Melanie, you will love meeting my sister, Ashley."

As they entered the baggage claims area, Chuck stopped and cursed. "Oh, shit!" he said distressed and looking around. "I gotta stop, Winston."

"What?" Sandra asked after seeing the alarmed look on his face. "What's wrong?"

"We have trouble." Chuck hurried toward Winston, who was coming up from behind, holding Melanie's hand. "It's his lady friend."

"Whose?" Sandra yelled, running to keep up with Chuck, her large straw bag flopping across her shoulder.

"Winston's!"

"Lady friend? That bastard!" Sandra rushed around Chuck, heading for Melanie. "I've got to get Melanie out of this!"

"It's not what you think," Chuck said. He waved to get Winston's attention, then pointed toward Daphne.

"What is she doing here?" Winston said.

"Who are you talking about?" Melanie asked, concerned after seeing his face. Then she saw Sandra rushing toward them.

"How the hell could you do this to Melanie?" Sandra shouted at Winston.

“Winston,” Chuck said stopping next to them. “She’s here.”

“Who’s here,” Melanie asked.

“Winston’s girlfriend,” Sandra said angrily.

“Daphne,” Chuck blurted out.

“Winston!” A voice rang out, and Daphne—looking impeccably put-together in a cream sundress and pearls—rushed up to them, her smile quickly faltering when she saw Melanie. “Baby doll, welcome back!” she cooed, then turned to Melanie with narrowed eyes.

“Who the hell are you?” Daphne demanded, pointing an accusing finger at Melanie.

“What are you doing here, Daphne?” Winston asked, his voice sharp.

Daphne ignored the question. “This is why you didn’t want me in Tahiti!” Her anger bubbled. “You were taking your *trip tramp*?”

Tramp! Sandra took exception to that insult. “Bitch, you don’t know us well enough to call names!” She snatched her bag off her shoulder as she went toward Daphne.

Chuck jumped between them. “Don’t do this, Sandra.”

“She started it!” Sandra allowed Chuck to refrain her by the shoulders.

“Daphne is your girlfriend?” Melanie asked Winston.

“Yes, I am,” Daphne answered. “And I don’t appreciate you disrespecting me like this, Winston!”

“Daphne, you’re mistaken again,” Winston snapped. “There is nothing for us to talk about.”

“Chuck, take your hands off me!” Sandra’s anger was about to explode. “Melanie, let’s get out of here.”

“You said we would talk when you got back,” Daphne corrected Winston.

“Daphne!” Chuck demanded. “Please leave before this gets ugly.”

But Daphne wasn’t done. Her voice rose, trembling with emotion. “Oh, we have plenty to talk about, Winston.” Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. “I’m here because of the baby.”

Four sets of eyes all registered shock at Daphne’s loud response.

Then everyone went silent, still.

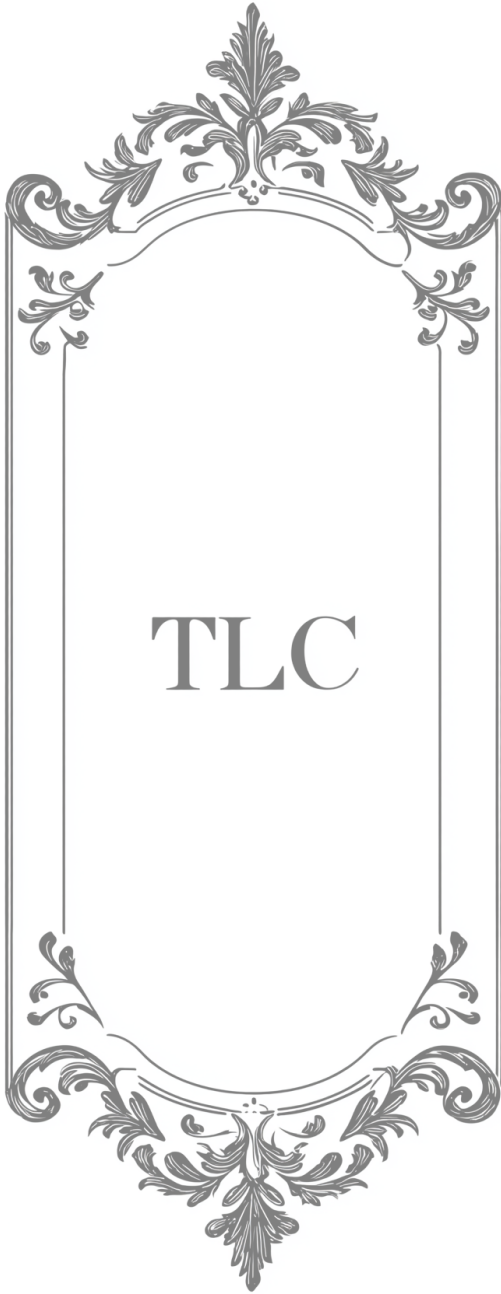
Melanie’s heart dropped as her eyes drifted down to Daphne’s stomach. For the first time, she noticed the slight roundness beneath the woman’s dress.

“Winston,” Melanie couldn’t keep the hurt out of her voice, “You call this being honest with me? You said there was no one of consequence in your life. Excuse me.” Melanie pulled her hand from his, her face contorted in disbelief and pain. Then she turned toward the terminal as Sandra hurried to catch up with her.

“Melanie, wait!” Winston called after her.

“Winston, we need to talk!” Daphne shouted, pulling him by the arm.

Melanie stopped, turned, and in a voice choking with despair said, “Don’t ever speak to me again.” Sandra took Melanie’s arm to lead her away. “We were a mistake.”



TLC



CHAPTER TWENTY



If there was ever a moment that Melanie most wanted to forget. This was it.

“Melanie, slow down!” Sandra shouted, running to catch up. “Stop!”

“Leave me alone, Sandra!” Melanie yelled over her shoulder. “If you had stayed out of my business with Winston, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Melanie!” Sandra reached for her arm, halting her. “I said stop!”

“You don’t want a piece of me right now,” Melanie snatched her arm away and continued hurrying down the airport’s corridor.

“You don’t think this is hurting me, too?” Sandra said, walking fast next to her. “This is all my fault!”

That stopped Melanie in her tracks. Everyone could claim the blame. Melanie saw tears in Sandra’s eyes. Then she pointed a finger at Sandra’s chest. “Don’t you dare cry!”

We will not talk about this now and you will not cry for me!” Melanie felt tears swell in her own eyes. “I will not allow Winston to hurt me!”

“Mel,” Sandra said softly, tears leaking. “He already has.”

Melanie started walking again, then she started to run. She ran past groups of travelers, various shops, around corners, and down halls. She ended up in a corner near an airline’s counters looking out at the day. The sun was inviting bright, the sky a heavenly blue.

But Melanie hadn’t seen any of it because it all was a wet, miserable blur. Gulping for breath, she leaned against a wall. It hurt to breathe; it hurt not to. But mostly it hurt to think of the fool she had been. How could she have trusted him with her heart?

How did she allow herself to be hurt again? *Not again, God. Please, not again.*

Then she burst into tears. Melanie wasn’t even remotely embarrassed about the sad condition she was in as people passed, some even staring. Finally, she wiped her tears, lifted her chin, and headed towards the gate where her plane was leaving, to take her away from all this misery.

She saw Sandra sitting in a chair, waiting for her. Sandra stood, walked to close the distance.

“Can I treat you to a drink?” Sandra asked.

“Can I have a hug first?” Melanie answered. She got one. “Let’s take a later flight out. I don’t feel like being here right now. I need a quiet place to think.”

They headed to a less busy restaurant.

They had been friends long enough for Sandra to know that Melanie needed to internalize her thoughts before she could talk about them. She had always handled difficult sit-

uations that way. It allowed her to review the situation and come up with sound options.

“Look what I got,” Sandra said, pulling out chocolate-covered coconut candies. “I picked them up in the airport before we left Tahiti.”

“Just what I need.” Melanie reached for a piece.

Sandra pulled her phone out of her purse. “Let’s call the airlines and schedule something out for a few days from now. We can drive to Disneyland from here and play for a couple of days.”

“I thought you planned to return to work Monday?”

“I’d rather play than work,” Sandra said. “And you need time.”

“You don’t have to give up more vacation time to nurse me. I’ll be okay in a little while.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Melanie said as more tears trickled from her eyes. “I’m fine.”

“I don’t think so,” Sandra said. “But I’m here to talk when you’re ready.”

Melanie busied digging in her bag. “I just need time to think this over by myself first.”

“You don’t have a 9-to-5 to rush back to. Come home with me and hang out for a while. When you’re ready to talk, I’ll be just a room away.”

“I don’t know.” Melanie reached for a napkin to wipe her tears. “I really need to get back to Denver.”

“No, you don’t,” Sandra corrected.

The waitress showed up. “More coffee?”

“Sure,” Melanie passed her cup and was thankful for the interruption.

When Sandra checked with the airlines, she learned all direct flights to Denver were sold out, but connecting flights were available.

“Melanie, you have a choice of connecting flights through Dallas or Arizona.”

“If I can, I’ll fly with you to Dallas,” Melanie said. “Then continue on the Denver. What time will I get home?”

Sandra asked the reservationist, then said, “Either way, you’ll get home extremely late. Why don’t you stay over in Dallas and go home tomorrow morning?”

“Fine.”

Sandra made the arrangements.

“Here’s my baggage claim ticket,” Melanie said. “See if you can get my luggage pulled off the original flight. I would prefer to have it with me than to arrive in Denver tonight.”

The remainder of the conversation was limited. And it was much the same on the flight to Dallas.

Melanie either read a novel or reviewed her research notes for her articles. It was a means of escape. She needed to put Winston out of her thoughts and concentrating on work helped.

She had cared for a deceitful man most of her adult life and thought she had gotten good at reading signs of disloyalty and deception. But since she had missed such signs with Winston, she concluded that she had more to learn. Winston had been so convincing.

Or maybe she had been so desperate for someone to nourish her heart that she overlooked clues that would have prevented this.

Winston had a girlfriend. No, Melanie thought. *Winston had a pregnant girlfriend. One who had been expecting to meet*

him upon his return to Los Angeles. She probably wanted to plan the baby's christening.

Stop it, Melanie, she scolded herself. *I was played with and used. Accept it and move on.*

Melanie exhaled a ragged breath. She was tired. The air travel that started last night had gotten the best of her. Since she was breaking this trip home into parts by staying a night with Sandra, she would have time to try to get a full night's rest. Besides, waking up alone tomorrow to an empty house was something she now realized she wanted to avoid.

She had no reason to rush home—no classes to teach, no pet to feed. The airlines had managed to stop her luggage from going to Denver, so she could actually stay in Dallas a few days, or a week for that matter, and finish her articles before returning home.

“Sandra?” When Melanie turned to her, she put down the magazine. “I’m thinking of staying a few days in Dallas. Would that be okay with you?”

“Of course,” Sandra attempted a weak smile. “I’ve already asked if you would. Remember?” When Melanie nodded, she added, “I can take off Monday and we can play in Dallas.”

“Let’s decide on that later,” Melanie said. “I’m planning to work while I’m there.”

“Work?” Sandra questioned in disbelief.

“It will help me, Sandra. And I’ll have you there if I decide I need to go out and play.”

“Okay! I’m glad you’re staying.”

Melanie took a deep breath then closed her eyes. Although she tried to stop it from happening, images of her

times with Winston filled her mind, making her heart ache more.

It would be difficult, but she would figure out a way to forget about him.

She had to...



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

There really was a baby.

Daphne had not lied about that, but she had also twisted the situation to her advantage, Winston realized much too late.

When Winston momentarily turned to calm Daphne, Melanie had disappeared into the crowd. He ran down the corridor to find her, but she was gone.

When he had returned to claim his carry-on bag from Chuck, Daphne was gone leaving a message for him to call her cell phone or meet her at his sister, Ashley's, house.

Instead, with a little finagling to get a gate pass, Winston went with Chuck, hoping Melanie would join the flight to Dallas with Sandra, since Melanie wasn't at her gate. Neither of them had been there.

Winston stood watching the departure of Chuck's plane, half-hoping Sandra and Melanie would show up late. They didn't. Frustrated and disappointed, he turned to leave. He

needed to handle this unexpected baby surprise. But first, he would rent a car. Daphne's unexpected showing up was probably the reason his sister wasn't at the airport.

Winston needed to get to his sister's place and deal with Daphne. If she were there, crying on Ashley's shoulder, this could get pretty messy.

Although Daphne was originally invited, once Winston had ended the affair and canceled her trip to Tahiti, it should have been clear to Daphne that the invitation to his sister's party was also canceled. But he knew Daphne, and being specific was a requirement with her, or she would use the vagueness to her advantage.

Why would Daphne fly all the way from Dallas? Winston wondered. Unless the pregnancy and reuniting were something she wanted to discuss immediately, possibly using his sister to help support her cause. He'd wanted to be a father one day, but not like this... Not with Daphne.

Damn!

He had taken precautions to prevent things like this, but nature sometimes had its way regardless. And being a doctor, he had seen many unplanned pregnancies that changed lives forever.

Damn! Damn!

As Winston reached the driveway of his sister's home, he was relieved to see no other cars. Maybe Daphne hadn't gotten there yet, so he would get to enjoy a little time with Ashley before dealing with the pregnancy issue. It would definitely be dealt with today.

Winston really wanted to hop on a plane to Denver to find Melanie, but even if he did, he didn't know where she

lived. And, regardless, he felt obliged to be there for his sister, although he wasn't in a partying mood.

Ashley had planned the event around his visit, and he didn't want to hurt her feelings too. He couldn't hurt another woman today.

Getting out of the car, Winston felt like one had just hit him. Inhaling strength, he mentally shook off the despair and then headed to the front door. By the time he reached it, Ashley had opened it.

"Winston!" she yelled excitedly, leaping into his arms. "I'm so glad to see you!"

"Hey, Lil Sis," Winston hugged her tight, struggling to hold a smile. "Where's Greg?"

"He's out running last-minute errands for tonight's party. He swears no one can outcook him." When Winston stepped inside the house, she stood looking outside. "Where's Daphne?"

"I'm not sure," Winston said vaguely. He wasn't sure how to broach the conversation, since Daphne wasn't supposed to be there.

"But I thought Daphne was picking you up at the airport?"

"She wasn't there when I left." Winston didn't want to relive the airport ordeal just yet. Then he frowned. One moment with Daphne and he was already back to half-truths and partial statements. Melanie had immediately picked up on the habit that had become a norm with him—a defense mechanism to appease Daphne's delicate feelings. Daphne didn't like dealing directly with issues, so he found himself telling her what she needed to hear to keep the peace. Yet Melanie had refused to deal with him when he did such

things and accused him of manipulating the conversation and misleading her. What had become an acquired art form for dealing with Daphne was now an annoyance. He liked being able to express himself honestly to the woman in his life.

Ashley interrupted his thoughts. "I hope she isn't lost. I was too sick this morning to join her on the drive. So, Daphne went by herself." Ashley said, walking past Winston to get to the family room. "I still don't understand why she would blow off a trip to Tahiti but would want to come to LA last night for a rib sandwich at the party. Anyway, I set up the second bedroom for you two."

Ashley was full of surprising news. First, she remarked that she was sick. Next, Daphne made an unannounced visit to her house last night. If only he had told his sister about the breakup, maybe this could have been avoided. Winston concentrated on the immediate issue.

"You're not feeling well?" He came to stand next to her.

"Morning sickness... Didn't you... What am I thinking? You haven't spoken to Daphne yet, so you don't know about my surprise!" Ashley glowed with delight. "I'm finally pregnant!" she cheered.

It took Winston a few moments to digest that. "So, *you're* pregnant?" he said dumbfounded.

"Yes!" Ashley admitted giggling. "I was planning to make the grand announcement tonight at the party. But... surprise!"

Winston again eagerly hugged his sister. "At least I can be happy for you."

"You know we've been trying for two years, Winston! If we hadn't made this baby, we would have adopted."

“Yeah. I know.”

Ashley stepped back. “Don’t sound so glum! I’m floating on a cloud! So be happy with me!”

Winston was becoming overwhelmed by the constant change of events that started after stepping off the plane. But he mustered up a little joy. “I am.”

“Good! Now you need to marry, get pregnant, and give my baby a cousin!” Ashley was almost bouncing when she said that, but Winston’s face fell, joy disappeared.

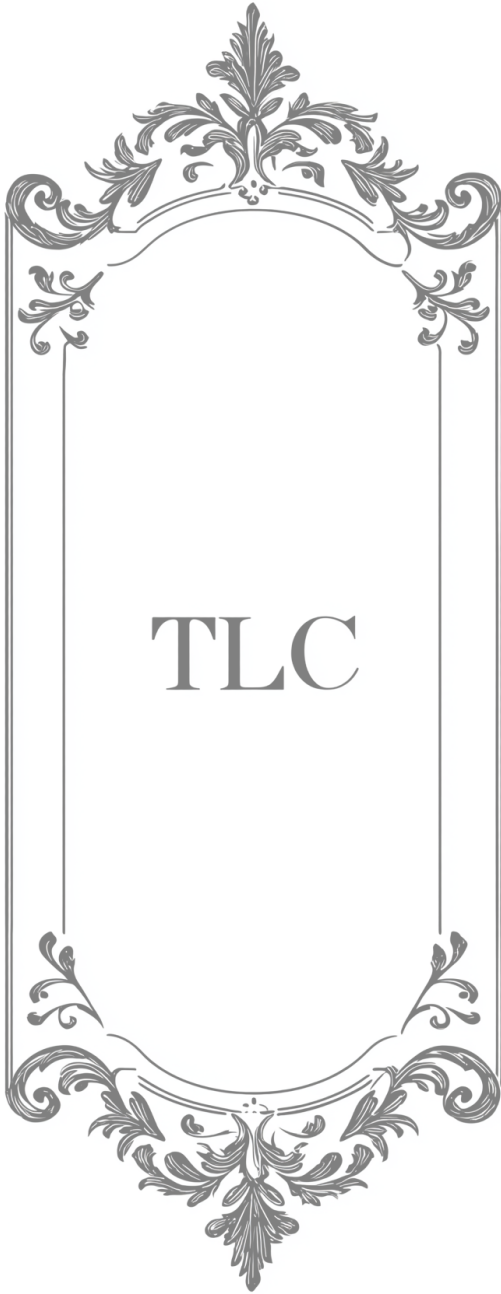
“It seems I’m going to be able to give you that very soon,” he said.

“Stop joking.” His sister turned, heading down the hall. “You said you’ll never have a baby out of wedlock. And since you’re not married...”

He bleakly interrupted. “I think Daphne is pregnant too.”

Ashley froze and quickly turned to face him. Her new-found joy bubbling. “She never said a thing, even when I told her about my morning sickness. My party is going to be great! We both have something to celebrate tonight!”

Winston needed to squelch her excitement, even though it hurt to do so. This was excruciating. “I’m afraid not, Ashley. My relationship with Daphne has been over for months. This isn’t how I wanted to be a father.”



TLC



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“Daphne had mentioned a pregnancy at the airport. God, I hope she wasn’t talking about herself but you.” Winston was finally seeing a little light at the end of the tunnel. “Things got out of hand, and very little else was said after her announcement.”

Ashley was sitting on the sofa in the living room next to him. “Wait a minute, so you did see Daphne at the airport? I’m confused.”

“It’s a long, unpleasant story that I don’t have the time to get into right now. I need to talk to Daphne and figure out what is going on. It’s over with her, and I hadn’t planned to rekindle that relationship.”

“Then what are you going to do if she’s pregnant?” Ashley asked concerned.

Winston shook his head dejected. “I was so careful to prevent this from happening.”

“And you sure she is pregnant?”

He reflected on the airport incident. Like everyone else, had glared at Daphne's stomach. It was slightly larger than normal. Perfectly distended. She looked pregnant, but maybe it was his imagination. Maybe it was his sister who Daphne had been talking about.

Winston thought to himself. *It made sense, didn't it? The morning sickness from Ashley's pregnancy?* Then Winston said to his sister, "I'm not sure of anything."

"For her to pull this unannounced visit, something must be up," Ashley concluded. "Why else would she show up here in L.A. knowing the relationship is over?"

Winston leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. Contemplating under the weight of it all. "She unexpectedly called me in Tahiti. Now, this unexpected visit. Something is up." He rubbed a frustrated hand across his head. "This is why I ended that relationship. Too much stress. Too much drama."

"I'm not one of those sisters who sticks her nose into other people's relationships, but I never thought Daphne was right for you. If she is pregnant with your baby, what will you do?"

"Let's take this one step at a time." Winston went to get the cell phone. "I'm now thinking that scene at the airport was Daphne wanting to cause problems with me and Melanie."

"Melanie?"

"You'll like her, Ash." Winston had a reason to smile again. "I certainly do. I met her on the cruise and there's something very special about her."

"I know I like the way you smile when you talk about her. This is the first genuine smile you've had since getting here."

“That’s the part I also like.” Winston dialed the number he’d wanted to erase from memory.

Daphne answered her cell phone on the second ring. When he discovered she was at a mall close to the airport, he planned to meet her in the area for lunch.

“I’m going to pack Daphne’s things,” Winston said after hanging up. “I’m not particularly interested in Daphne living here, causing static with the family.”

“Will she be a problem?” Ashley stood, concerned. “Because I’m not too pregnant that I can’t correct her if I need to. This is my house and we’re celebrating your visit and my baby. I won’t let her ruin it regardless of her condition.”

“Don’t worry, Ash,” Winston finally had a chance to grin. Ashley’s sassiness always could make him smile. “Daphne’s no fool, but I’ve got to go deal with this.”

“Go handle your business,” Ashley said. “I’ll butt out of it for now.”



THE DRIVE WAS FILLED WITH WINSTON REPLAYING THE LAST time he’d had sex with Daphne. Another attempt to make it work. She had been overly eager, almost demanding it. He knew enough about a woman’s physiology to know she’d been ovulating. That was why he made sure, particularly sure that time, to have extra condoms. She’d complained that he was ruining the mood by stopping to put it on, but he had anyway.

It had been over four months. Long enough for Daphne to show. He hoped it was weight gain, but the moment he spotted her in the restaurant, he’d known the truth.

Let her be less than four months, he prayed. A reason to question the fatherhood.

“It seems you and my sister are both pregnant.” Winston slid into the restaurant’s booth. Luckily it was near the back with no other people, adding some privacy.

“Isn’t that wonderful! Ashley’s always wanted a baby. You always talked about having a family. Now you both will be starting a family at the same time.”

Winston’s stomach turned.

“But I didn’t want you to find out like this, Sweetheart.” Daphne looked completely at peace, glowing when she said that.

“Yes, you did. You accomplished just what you hoped to do at the airport. To cause problems.”

“I can’t believe you said that!” Daphne’s big, brown eyes watered quickly. She reached for a napkin and dabbed at them trying to squeeze out tears. “I’m so emotional now that I’m pregnant.”

He ignored her strained tears. She always cried to get her way. “How far along are you?”

“Almost five months.”

It could be mine, he silently concluded. Disappointment was starting to twist his insides.

“I wasn’t going to tell you at all.” She dabbed some more. “But I can’t raise this baby by myself. I couldn’t keep your baby from you like that. That would be so wrong. When I called you in Tahiti and you said there was a chance for us, I immediately got on a plane to LA. I had to come back to you. Try and make it work for our baby’s sake. I want our child to be raised knowing his father and carrying the Knight’s name.”

Lord no! He cherished kids. Wanted his own. But having a child with a woman he'd been dreading for months, wasn't what he had planned. But he would never turn his back on his own. Winston realized his palms were sweaty and he rubbed them forcefully down the fronts of his jeans.

His happiness couldn't end like this. Not like this. There had to be another answer. He blinked a few times hoping it would wash away the nightmare.

"Let's order lunch," Daphne said sweetly, ending his hopes that it was all a bad dream.

Winston knew if he ate something it would probably come back up. He said desperately, reaching for hope, "You were seeing someone else during that same time. How can you be sure it's mine?"

An unflattering look marred Daphne's pretty face. "Why would you say something that disgusting to me!" Now she looked shocked. "This is because of that woman at the airport. You're with someone else, therefore I must have been with someone else!" She was whimpering now. Real tears formed. "You never mentioned her before. Why all of a sudden does she matter? Why all of a sudden, I don't matter!"

In the past, Winston would back off at moments like this. And Daphne knew it. It was how things worked best between them. She made demands and continued to push with emotional tears, then he would try to appease her.

But his own shock, anger, and needs came to the forefront. "Daphne, all you need to know is that she does matter. More than you'll ever understand. She's the kind of woman I've been needing in my life, which is why there can never be an us again."

“So, you were cheating on me! You admit it! Is that why you decided to take her on this trip in my place? One cruise with her and you’re throwing it all away? Turning your back on me when I need you...”

“Calm down,” Winston snapped. It was getting out of control. The next step for Daphne would be standing and shouting, making a scene he didn’t want to deal with. “You never answered my question!” he said sternly, forcing her to quiet down. “Why are you convinced it’s my child?” Winston knew he shouldn’t, wouldn’t deny his own child, but he needed hope on his side.

“It’s called making love,” she said more calmly. “Or have you forgotten everything we shared?”

Just a little hope. Please, Winston prayed. “It’s also called using protection when you do. We always had.” For a moment, Winston got the impression she was actually reexamining the facts, their history, and intimate moments. She had never told him she’d been dating someone else. But he had suspected that she had. Then he saw a glimpse of doubt that quickly vanished. Her quiet, tentative look opened the door for his next statement. “But you didn’t with the other guy, did you?” Winston was guessing at that, but he needed to know just how much Daphne was attempting to play him, use this poor baby to win him back. A desperate move, but one that couldn’t be overlooked.

“I’m in love with you,” Daphne said helplessly, avoiding his stare.

Her lack of denying that there had been another man should have been a stab to his heart. But instead of hurting, it felt more like relief. *Hope!*

Winston had to drive home his point to remove all doubt of amends with her. "I'm not interested in fathering a child from you. We have other options."

Daphne reached down and hugged her stomach as if gripping a small, injured child in her loving arms. "Kill my baby!" She sneered loudly, catching the attention of the people nearby. "Is that what you're telling me to do?"

"What I want you to understand is that I've moved on. I'm seeing someone else. That baby will not change that. And before I'd consider raising the kid you're carrying; I'll demand proof it's mine. I don't think it is, especially since I'm not sure if you're even five months pregnant."

Gone was the weak, defenseless woman in need. Daphne's fury erupted and she spit out like venom. "You slimy bastard! How could I ever think I wanted you to raise my child? You were never that good in bed in the first place! That's the reason I slept with someone else... He's the father and I..." Her anger was her downfall.

Winston was sure she didn't mean to reveal so much, but he took that for the luck it was. "That's all I needed to hear." Winston stood up and she realized a second too late what she'd just admitted. "We're done, Daphne. Stay away from me. I mean it."

Winston stormed out, leaving her ranting; her overnight bag he'd returned being kicked over. The scene should have been one of embarrassment, but Winston was far from that. Relief was all he felt.

Luckily, hope had been floating over him in that restaurant. In the back of his mind, he had already begun to plan how he would raise the child, if it were his. But in his heart, he just wanted to escape the ordeal and was given that chance

by refusing to back down to Daphne's antics. Outside the restaurant, he inhaled freedom.

He couldn't believe his morning. What should have ended as the best trip of his life went to hell in the blink of an eye because he had allowed Daphne to think there was a slither of a chance they could reunite. Now, he needed to find Melanie. If he had told her something about Daphne, her response might not have been so extreme. He would find her, talk to her. He had to.

On the return trip to his sister's, Winston mentally brushed off the final remnants of the meeting with Daphne. He asked his automated system, Siri, to look for the contact number for Melanie McDae in Denver, CO.

That was useless.

"Damn," he whispered to himself. He tried information again, giving names of surrounding cities but couldn't get a number for her. He cursed again for not getting her address and telephone number earlier—a thirty-second exchange that could have happened at any time during the trip but would have taken place over breakfast if not for Daphne. And they never needed to exchange phone numbers on the cruise because she rarely carried her phone, as she used an expensive camera for work.

Melanie had his business card, but because of what had happened that morning he knew she would never call him. Winston looked at his watch. It was too soon for Chuck or Sandra to have reached Dallas to help with Melanie's contact information. The best he could do was wait.

"Winston?" Ashley said, opening her front door again. "You don't look so good. What happened with Daphne?"

“Daphne’s on her way home,” Winston said. “She finally admitted it wasn’t my child when I suggested a paternity test.”

“How could she come here expecting you wouldn’t ask?” Ashley said in utter disbelief.

“You’ve just gotten a sample of what I’ve gone through with her. Lord, Melanie is a breath of fresh air in comparison. I really need to find her and explain. She still believes Daphne is pregnant with my baby.”

“Go call Melanie. Don’t let me hold you up.”

“I’m having a problem reaching her. I might cut my visit with you short to go to Denver. Maybe leave tomorrow or the day after if that’s okay?”

“Stay long enough to help me celebrate my baby, then do what you need to do.” Ashley patted his arm as she led the way down the hallway.

“The only thing I can do now is wait for Chuck to get home,” Winston said. “I don’t have Melanie’s phone number, if you can believe that. But Chuck has her best friend’s number.”

“Come on back to the family room,” Ashley said. “Let’s talk. I’m too much in the dark to be able to help you.”

Winston gave Ashley the highlights of meeting Melanie, the wonderful cruise because of her, Daphne’s appearance at the airport, and the following confusion leading to Melanie storming away.

“You sound serious about Melanie,” Ashley said.

“I am,” Winston agreed. “And it’s going to be at least several more hours before I can reach her.”

“I would love to meet the woman who’s got you so worked up because you can’t find her. She must be great.”

“I’m going to correct this mistake,” Winston promised. “And you’ll get to meet her soon enough.”

“The party will help take your mind off things until you can talk to Melanie,” Ashley promised. “In the meantime, why don’t you help me rearrange the patio and put out more chairs.”

It was an unbearable wait. The party provided only marginal joy for Winston. It had been six hours and still no return call from Chuck.

The sooner he talked to Melanie the better he would feel. And most definitely, the better Melanie would feel. She was probably punishing herself or regretting their experience on the ship. He needed to correct that.

Then his cell phone rang. It was Chuck.

“Glad you got my message, Chuck”. He gave him the highlights of the misunderstanding in the airport and how he dealt with Daphne before asking, “Do you know how to get in touch with Sandra?”

“Actually, I don’t. I don’t remember her last name either. She spent some time with Marcus Lowell and his friend, Ralph. Sandra has my business card. If I hear from her, I’ll let her know what’s going on.”

“Thanks, Chuck,” Winston said disappointed. “I have Marcus’s number. I’ll try him.”

“Good luck finding her,” Chuck said cheerfully before hanging up.

Luck had brought Melanie into his life; losing her was not something he would let happen—or could allow it to happen.

Winston called Marcus. After a few pleasantries, Winston learned that Marcus had no way of contacting Sandra

either, but at least he had her last name. For Sandra to have been such a flirt, she surely was cautious about giving out her number.

This had become entirely too frustrating, and that angered him. He would lose Melanie if this continued.

“Winston?” Ashley said softly, walking into the den. “Any luck?”

“I’m going to lose her, Ash.” Winston looked miserable.

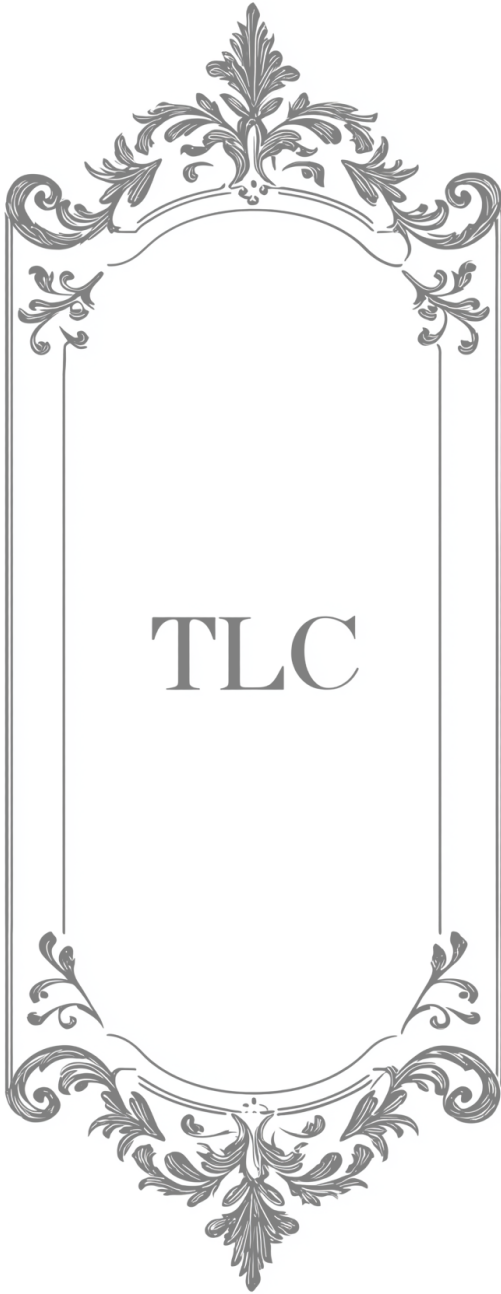
“What did she say?”

Winston stood up. “I haven’t found a way to get in touch with her.”

Ashley rounded the desk and stood next to him. She bent down and logged on to the computer sitting on the desk. “Let’s see if we can find her on the Internet.”

Winston found himself smiling. “Did I ever tell you that you’re quite resourceful?”

“Blame Dad.”



TLC



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It had been almost a week.

Melanie couldn't find a reason to go home, and Sandra didn't want her to leave. They had spent a lot of time touring Dallas and the surrounding cities. They sampled many great restaurants in Addison, TX, ventured to Negro Cowboy events in Mesquite, TX, toured the Ballpark in Arlington, home of baseball's Texas Rangers, and went clubbing around Dallas. Melanie wasn't sure what the cure for her broken heart was. So, Sandra had kept her busy, trying every way she could think of to distract from her misery.

Nothing was working, and Melanie really didn't know what to do.

"Mel, what are your plans for this evening?" Sandra asked entering her spacious family room. The bay window overlooked a sizable yard where her spring flowers were in bloom. Melanie sat sipping coffee and staring at the array of multiple-colored flowers.

“Another blog upload, then I want to market it on a few media platforms. Why?”

“It’s Friday night. Don’t you want to go dancing instead? Maybe meet for drinks after I get off work then head to a club or something?” Sandra asked.

“We did that last night.” Melanie turned back to the patio view. “I’ll skip the club hopping tonight.”

Sandra walked around the sofa and sat next to her. She reached into her lab coat pocket and pulled out something. “I found Winston’s business card in the bathroom trash this morning.”

“I put it there,” Melanie said.

“I figured that much out myself. It’s been a week, and you haven’t even tried to contact him. Is there a reason why you’re taking this lying down? You haven’t vented, shouted, or anything. Shout, Girl, at him,” Sandra pleaded. “Get this out of your system.”

“I don’t feel like shouting,” Melanie answered flatly.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Sandra said. “I love that you’re here, and we both know you don’t want to be home alone to deal with this. But you’re not talking to me about it either. Now Winston’s card is in the trash. At the very least, call and give him a piece of your mind. If you had slapped Winston’s face, at least you might have gotten some of this out of your system.”

“Have you ever been slapped, Sandra?”

“Hell, no,” Sandra said.

“I have,” Melanie said. “A few times, by Ronald, and it didn’t change my outlook toward him. So why would it change a man who had manipulated the both of us so he

could have a fling at my expense? He lost nothing and got everything out of the deal.”

“Then confront him so he’ll think twice before doing it again. You can protect the next woman,” Sandra said. “Then you can vent and bounce back. I’ve never known you to take this long to bounce back.”

“I’m bouncing, Sandra. Just not as fast as you’d like.”

“I think you’re moping because you didn’t end this right.” Sandra leaned toward Melanie; her tone held meaning. “There are so many unanswered questions. Now that I’ve had time to think about it, I remember both Chuck and Winston being surprised to see Daphne. It doesn’t seem like she was a girlfriend they didn’t want us to know about, but more like someone who wasn’t expected because she didn’t have much significance. Did you consider that, too?”

“That theory would hold true, if you didn’t overlook one important factor,” Melanie said. “Winston didn’t deny that she was his girlfriend.”

“As I said before, now that my emotions aren’t flying out of control, I can reflect more clearly. Did we really give him a chance to explain? I have to give Winston some due. He just didn’t come across as a man that would two-time and use women. And he really was attracted to you. I think you know that.”

“What I do know, Sandra, is that he had ample opportunity to explain during the cruise. I had asked him outright and he gave me the ‘no one of consequence’ crap. The woman was pregnant and slightly showing. That means as recently as a few months ago, he had been sleeping with her. Daphne was under the impression a relationship still existed.

That adds up to ‘someone of consequence.’ He should have been open with me.”

“That’s your pain talking, Melanie,” Sandra said in irritation. “You’re rationalizing to ease your wounds. Consider the short time you had together and what you did during that time. If it were me, I wouldn’t have wasted those few precious moments talking about a dip named Daphne. But I think he would have eventually mentioned her. Call him and find out.” Sandra slid the card across the table in front of Melanie.

“Enough, Sandra,” Melanie snapped. “Don’t piss me off. You’re guessing, and I’m not going to put my heart on the line because of a wrong guess. I’m upset, and I don’t want to discuss this! Just leave it alone.”

“Let me ask you one last thing,” Sandra was determined. “If Winston showed up right now to talk, would you give him a chance to explain? I think he deserves a chance.”

“If Winston showed up right now, it would mean that you stuck your nose into my business again!”

Sandra grimaced in pain, but Melanie didn’t care. Melanie wanted to shut her up. Sandra was drawing the same conclusions she had come to. The difference was that Sandra was willing to risk contacting Winston. Melanie couldn’t take any more heartache right now. She lashed out to protect herself.

“The only way he would show up is because you would have told him where I am,” Melanie continued. “And if that happened, I wouldn’t be as understanding as I was the last time you interfered.” Melanie stood to leave. “Go dancing tonight if you want, I have work to do.”

“That hurts, Mel,” Sandra said to her back as Melanie headed down the hall. “You’re hitting below the belt.”

Melanie stopped. “Life hurts, Sandra.” She turned to leave. “I need to make some calls. Try to have a nice day at work.”

“I’ll see you later.” Sandra looked down at the business card on the table. She picked it up and headed to the kitchen trashcan. Opening the lid, she dumped the card in.

Melanie’s friendship was too important to her. Sandra wouldn’t do anything to risk losing it. If her best friend wasn’t going to take any steps to resolve her issues with Winston, why should she? Sandra had tried as much as she could.

Winston’s business card brought back images of their fun aboard the Paul Gauguin ship. Sandra had enjoyed being around both Winston and Chuck. Maybe she should call and invite Chuck out for drinks. He was a man she wouldn’t mind having some fun with again. And if he played his cards right, she might give him a chance to really get to know her.

On the way out the front door heading to the hospital, Sandra decided on how to improve her options for a Friday night outing.



“HEY, SANDRA! HOW ARE YOU? I GOT YOUR MESSAGE TO CALL.”

“Chuck, I’m good,” Sandra said, standing at the hospital’s nurses’ station. “I would be better if you were interested in joining me for a drink tonight.”

“Sure,” he said. “It’ll be good to see you. How’s Melanie?”

“Surviving,” Sandra said sadly.

“You know, what happened in LA wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“Save it, Chuck.” Sandra was embarrassed. “I’m not interested in reliving that. I acted like a fool. I want to apologize for my behavior. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Crazy situation,” Chuck agreed. “But Winston wants to apologize to Melanie for it.”

“Well, Winston *should* apologize to her. Look, Chuck. That’s not my business and I’m staying out of it.”

“I hear you,” Chuck said. “You said something about treating me to a drink?”

“Like hell I did, but let’s meet and I’ll see if you deserve one.”



HOURS LATER, SANDRA CAME RUSHING INTO THE HOUSE SUGGESTING she and Melanie go out for dinner and drinks, and to her surprise, Melanie had just finished packing. Sandra asked Melanie to reconsider. When she refused, Sandra offered to take her to the airport.

“No, I’ll take an Uber.”

The Uber ended up being the best solution. It gave them a few hours to reminisce as Sandra got dressed to go out partying without having to rush or change her plans.

At the front door, Melanie turned and hugged her friend. “I didn’t mean to snap at you earlier. Thanks for not letting me get away with it.”

“But you’re leaving because of it.” Sandra couldn’t hold back the hurt.

“No,” Melanie corrected her. “I’m leaving because it’s time I faced reality. I need to get my life back on track.”

“You know you can come back if you need a friend close by.”

“I’ll call if I do,” Melanie promised. “I’m going to publish my articles, do some research for another exotic trip, and start preparing for next semester.”

“Don’t work too hard, Mel.”

“Working is what I do best.” That was the truth, Melanie thought. It was time to start anew and forget the recent past.



ONE HOUR LATER SANDRA STROLLED INTO ONE OF THE MANY fancy restaurants in the Addison area. Addison was a short distance from Dallas and was well known for its great restaurants. She had showered and changed into a form-fitting dress. She would miss having Melanie around and still felt terrible, knowing her actions to push the topic of Winston had caused her friend’s sudden return home. Tonight would help to lift her spirits.

Sandra spotted Chuck sitting in the bar area and headed his way. He stood and hugged her before they sat.

“You look great, Sandra. That dress sure fits in all the right spots.”

“You blew your chance with me?” Sandra reminded him, looking for the bartender. “We’re at the drinking and partying buddies’ status for right now.”

“Don’t be that way,” Chuck laughed. “Let me make it up to you!”

“Not a chance.” Sandra placed her purse on the bar and looked around at all the after-work mingling going on. “But go ahead and try. I’d like to see you grovel.”

“Do you think Melanie would let *me* grovel?”

Sandra spun around and looked into a set of sexy eyes that couldn't hide their sadness quickly enough from her. "Winston? I didn't know you'd be here."

"Chuck invited me," Winston said softly.

Sandra reached for her purse. "Before I leave, there are a few nasty things I want to say to you both. You won't like any of them, but I sure will."

"That's why I'm here," Winston said. "I wanted to apologize to you."

"For what?" Sandra asked. "The airport scene? Hurting my friend? Not telling Melanie about Daphne? Breaking your promise to me? Pick one."

"All of the above," Winston replied. "But mostly for not getting a chance to correct Daphne's lie."

"Lie?" Sandra asked, surprised and stunned, then looked at Chuck.

"Listen to him," Chuck urged. "This is why he's here."

Sandra listened intently as Winston explained the details. Then he said, "I don't have a way of contacting Melanie so I can tell her. You're my only chance. She might not listen, but I have to try."

"She won't listen. And I won't help you," Sandra turned to Chuck and heatedly said. "Lose my number. I don't appreciate you playing this game. I told you I was not going to be a part of this."

Winston reached for Sandra's arm. "Let me walk you out."

Outside Sandra said, "Don't waste your time, Winston. If Melanie's not returning your calls, I can't make her."

"I haven't called her. I don't have her number, and it isn't listed on any contact site. She's not at the college this semes-

ter and they aren't giving out home information, of course. I can't find her on the Internet; my travel agent got nothing from the cruise line." Winston let out a long dread-filled sigh. "Do you think I would be here now, if she didn't matter? I need to see her, Sandra."

"You've been busy, haven't you?" Sandra smiled warmly. "When I find a man who'd do everything you've done just to apologize, I'm going to marry him."

"Tell me how to reach her," Winston pleaded. "Please."

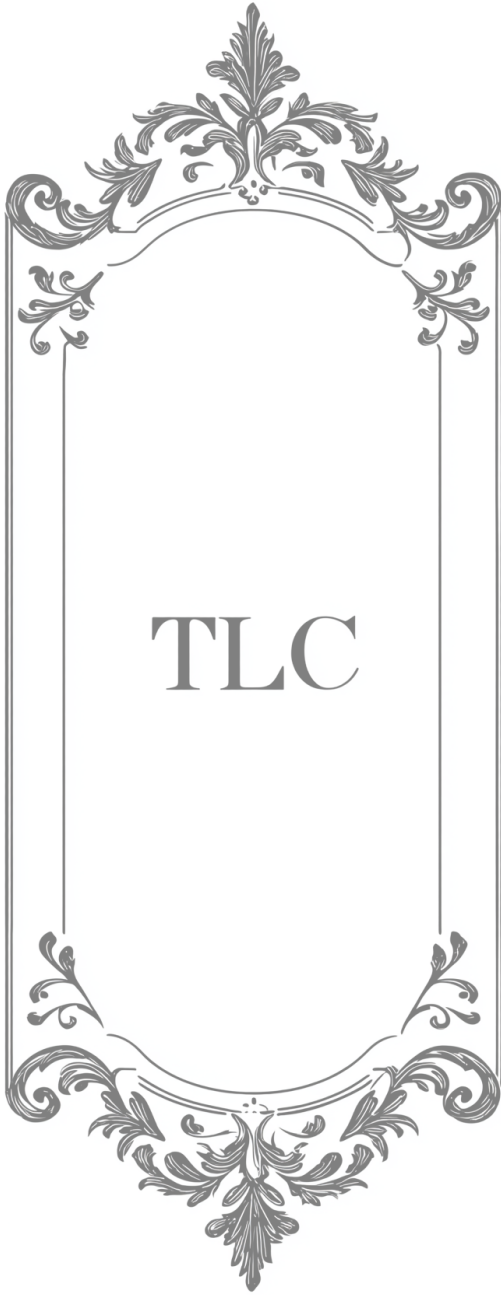
"I can't," Sandra said. She opened her car door and stood there. "Melanie would never forgive me if I did. She's hurting and attacks whenever I bring this thing up. If I force this, I'll lose her friendship. I think the two of you should probably talk this out, but she doesn't. Melanie asked that I not tell you how to find her, and I won't break that promise."

Winston did the one thing he had said he would never do again: Manipulate a situation involving Melanie to his advantage.

"What exactly did she say to you?" Winston asked. "It's all in what she asked you to do. Maybe you can keep your promise to her and still allow me to find her."

"Manipulation won't work on me," Sandra said pointedly, getting behind the wheel of the car. She started the engine. "I haven't heard one good reason why I should risk losing my best friend."

"I'm in love with her," Winston said simply.



TLC



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Stepping out of the Uber at the airport, Melanie paused, looking up at the Dallas evening sky. It was breathtaking—an array of warm, golden hues stretching across the horizon. She had captured some of these sunsets on camera while standing in Sandra’s backyard. *Sandra*. Her friendship was as golden as that evening sun, and now, more than ever, Melanie felt the weight of her regrets for having taken her frustrations out on her best friend. She had been irritable, and Sandra had been pressing too hard this morning. But deep down, Melanie knew the truth—she needed to leave before she lashed out again.

It wasn’t that she was overly emotional; it was that the space Sandra had given her wasn’t enough to clear her mind. *I need more time. More time to heal. More time to figure out what’s next.*

Melanie joined the long check-in line, debating whether she should check her email one last time. Maybe there was an update on the article proposals. She had over an hour to

kill before her flight and could use the time more constructively than just standing there. If there was an update, she could dive into work.

She unlocked her phone and realized she had missed three new messages because the phone was on silence mode. The first was an approval of her article outline—her spirits lifted slightly. *Small victories*, she thought with a smile. She tapped the next message, and Winston's deep voice filled her ear.

His message: "Melanie, if you delete this message before I'm done, you'll never know how sorry I am for hurting you. I can't change the past week, but I would give anything to erase the memory of the pain it caused you. It bothers me that I can't, but Daphne knows you're the woman I want. The wonderful news is that my sister is the only Knight that's having a baby. Not me. And if it's a boy, she wants to name him Matthew Winston. Poor kid." Winston laughed softly, and Melanie found herself laughing with him.

Then Melanie's breath caught. The laughter in his voice, familiar and warm, transported her back to the sunlit days of Tahiti, to when everything between them felt perfect. She could almost feel his hands on her.

His message continued: "If I have to call a hundred times to finish this message I will. I need you, Melanie. I have this void that has grown since I let you slip away from me. And I have this ache because I couldn't prevent you from getting hurt. I don't know what I need to do or say to get you back. But I do know that if I don't, my life will be empty. I had forgotten what happiness could feel like, until you came along. The week with you made up for so many years of not having it. I don't want to do this without you..."

There was a long silence and in that space of time Melanie whispered, "I don't want to do this without you either."

Winston's message started again, "And I..." The message abruptly stopped.

Melanie pressed the phone to her ear, attempting to hear more. Had it ended, or had Winston hung up? Did he want to say more to her?

She checked the Caller's ID and saw another message from the number Winston had called from. Fumbling she managed to press the play key.

The last message started, "Sorry about accidentally hanging up. I guess I am down to ninety-eight more times to call you, Melanie. I would prefer to tell you what I would say in those messages in person, but if you force me to leave them, I will. You have my number on my business card. But call me at home." He left his number.

Good God, she pleaded, *why am I crying?* Melanie thought as she hung up. Grabbing her suitcase, she wheeled it through the airport. She needed to leave here.



WINSTON STOOD AT HIS PATIO DOOR, LOOKING OUT AT TWO empty chairs. In the morning, he would sit on one of those chairs and remember how empty his life was. Turning, he looked at the telephone wondering what time it would ring tonight.

Sandra told him Melanie's plane was in the air and that she wouldn't get home for another few hours.

It took a lot of arm-twisting with Sandra, but in the end, he was able to get Melanie's number. Now the trick was convincing Melanie that Sandra hadn't broken her promise.

Sandra really didn't give him any address information. So, her promise of not giving information about Melanie's location was still intact. It was a weak excuse at best, but Sandra had left thinking her promise wasn't broken. Or, at least, Winston had gotten her to agree with him that it wasn't.

Weak, he thought, shaking his head. *But at least it's something*

He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled the tails out of his pants. He would change into something more comfortable. There was nothing more he could do now but wait. *Maybe I should have told her all the crazy things I went through to find her*, he mused, chuckling softly to himself. That story had softened Sandra.

Just as he turned to head upstairs, the doorbell rang.

Chuck, he thought. *At least I'll have someone to talk to.*

But when Winston opened the door, the words he had planned to say died on his lips. Standing before him, suitcase in hand, was Melanie.

"I was at the airport," she said softly, her eyes shining with a mixture of tears and hope. "Then I realized there's only one place I really want to be. Here. With you."

"How did you find me?" It was the only thing Winston could think to say, his heart pounding in his chest.

"It's seemed by the messages you left me that I never really lost you."

Then she stepped into his awaiting arms. Winston's heart raced as he held Melanie close, feeling her warmth pressed against him, the softness of her touch easing every tense moment he'd spent thinking he'd lost her. As Winston loosened his hold, he could see the shimmer of a tear in her eyes, though her smile lit her face with joy.

“Do you have any idea how much I’ve missed you?” he whispered, cupping her face and brushing his thumb over her cheek.

Melanie laughed softly, her hands still wrapped around his neck, pulling him closer. “Maybe as much as I’ve missed you.”

“Come in. Please,” he said softly. “I was just thinking about you.”

Winston picked up her suitcase, leading her into the warmth of his home, his fingers entwined with hers. The glow of the soft evening light fell over her as they stepped into the living room, and he had to pause, his breath catching. She looked more beautiful than ever, somehow radiant and a bit vulnerable, with an edge of determination he hadn’t seen before.

“Tell me something, Winston,” Melanie said, a gentle teasing lilt in her voice as she moved toward the plush sofa by the windows, setting her purse beside it.

“Anything,” he replied, watching her, captivated.

“You said you had ninety-eight more messages you wanted to give me. I thought I would stay to hear them all.”

“Promise not to leave until I’m done?” he asked.

“Not until I’ve heard the very last one.” She promised.

“Okay,” he said softly. “I figure you might need a few more outfits to wear. I’m planning to give you about two messages a year. And since you promised to stay with me until I’m done, we may have to go shopping.”

Laughing, she said, “Winston Knight, I love the way you manipulate me.”

Melanie reached out to him, and as he walked over to gather her back into his arms, their laughter quieted, re-

placed by a profound silence, where the emotions lingering between them were palpable and powerful. She leaned into him, her fingers tracing light patterns along his back, and he could feel the warmth of her breath against his cheek, her presence filling the empty spaces in his heart.

Then their lips met again in a tender, lingering kiss, a promise sealed without words. The world outside grew darker, but inside, a quiet radiance bloomed. The night stretched ahead, filled with whispers and laughter, shared dreams, and the knowledge that whatever the future held, they would face it together.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Weeks later, Dallas

Melanie's final article on Polynesia:

"Floating on a Dream" by Melanie McDae

Have you ever awakened from a dream and realized you hadn't been sleeping? It's like that when you take a relaxing cruise around the Society Islands of French Polynesia. The islands are ancient volcanic rock, covered with lush tropical foliage, whose mountainous peaks reach high toward smiling blue skies. But the real secret you'll discover upon arriving is that what you thought were high mountains on Earth are actually low valleys of heaven.

My dream vacation started with a pendant the size of a coin that launched a wish for love. Before my wish upon the coin came true, I thought making wishes was a fanciful idea that added courage to children's doubts. Now, I'm positive they are the things that could help adults rekindle their joy.

Mine went something like this...

The early morning sunbathed Dallas in soft golden light as Melanie sat on the patio, reviewing her final article. In the three weeks she had been with Winston, life had shifted in a way she hadn't imagined. They had traveled to Colorado once so she could pick up her research materials, gather more clothes, and give away her beloved plants to friends. Winston had made it clear—he wanted her in Dallas for as long as she was willing to stay. His true plan? For her to never leave.

His home had plenty of room for them both, each with their own office, but Melanie preferred working from her laptop, moving from one cozy spot to another. Her favorite place was the patio. The view of Winston's backyard, with its lush greenery, trees, shrubs, and a tranquil fountain flowing beside a gazebo, was a dreamscape—a perfect blend of nature and peace. It was the kind of home that whispered promises of comfort and belonging.

Melanie smiled to herself as she reflected on how her life had shifted. She had expanded her Blog's reach and started a travel book she wanted to self-publish. Opportunities seemed to unfold wherever she looked. When she finally stopped holding back and began to fully chase her dreams, she found that they blossomed around her. And yet, the most fulfilling part of this new chapter in her life wasn't her career—it was waking up every morning beside Winston.

Each day with him was like a new beginning. His need for her and for her love was palpable, and in turn, her heart bloomed in ways she never thought possible. Every time Winston opened his eyes to see her beside him, the way he looked at her stirred her in ways words couldn't describe.

Winston stepped onto the patio while she sat typing, carrying a fresh cup of coffee. He set it beside her and bent down to greet her with a gentle kiss.

“Good morning,” he said, his voice deep and warm. His eyes scanned the screen of her laptop. “How’s the writing coming along?”

“I just got started,” Melanie replied, her lips curling into a smile. “It’s for *Life&Love* magazine, all about love and romantic getaways.”

“Promise you’ll read it to me when it’s finished?” he asked, settling into the chair next to her.

“Absolutely,” she replied with a playful wink.

Winston grinned. “I’ve got something from my last romantic getaway that I’d like to share with you.” He reached into his pocket and placed a small black velvet box on the table in front of her.

Melanie’s breath caught. “Winston?” she whispered, her heart skipping. “Jewelry comes in boxes like this.”

“Open it,” he said softly, his eyes reflecting an emotion so deep it made her hands tremble.

She picked up the box, pressing it against her chest for a moment as she looked into his eyes. Moving from her chair, she climbed into his lap, her fingers caressing his face. His gaze held hers, so full of love, so full of promise, that she felt overwhelmed with emotion. Her hands shook slightly as she opened the box. Inside, nestled in a bed of velvet, was the most beautiful ring she had ever seen. A large, misty black pearl lay surrounded by diamonds, the band gleaming gold.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

“It’s you,” Winston said, his voice steady but filled with meaning. He gently took the ring and slid it onto her finger. “Will you wear it for me—for the next fifty or so years?”

Melanie clasped his face with both hands and kissed him solidly. “Yes,” she said softly before leaning against him so she could feel all of him. “Yes, I will.”

They stayed there, wrapped in each other’s arms, her head resting on his shoulder as she took in the feeling of completeness, of being right where she belonged.

“I knew it would be like this,” Melanie whispered.

“Did Mrs. Hightower tell you about the ring?” Winston grinned.

Melanie laughed softly, shaking her head. “No, but can I tell you what I said the first time I saw you?”

His brow lifted in curiosity. “I’ve been waiting to hear this since the moment we met,” Winston said, his smile widening.

She pulled out the necklace’s pendant the size of a nickel that was hidden inside the satin, yellow housecoat she wore. It was made of gold with gold wavy lines connecting the sides. “I had to buy this after I had seen you.” She pointed to the lines. “Those shapes resemble a man and woman about to kiss.”

“I remember when you put that around your neck in the airport,” he said. “I couldn’t stop staring at it. Or you.”

Melanie closed her hand around the pendant and pressed it against her chest. “I placed it around my neck and told Sandra I was going to make a wish. I did. Then I opened my eyes and saw you.”

“What did you wish for?”

“To fall in love with a man who would want me to love him.”

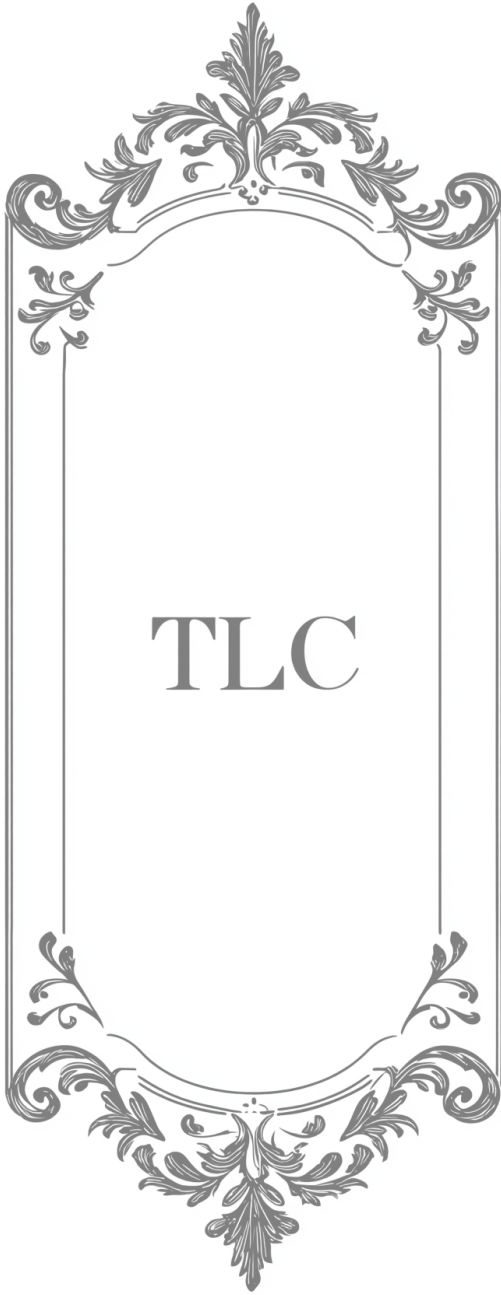
Winston's smile faded into something more tender, more vulnerable. "And did you know, right away, that I needed someone?"

"No," Melanie said, reaching around him. "I didn't realize until you kissed me that you were the man I wished for."

"Melanie," Winston sighed. He kissed her softly before laying his cheek against hers. He tightened his hold on her, his newfound reality. "I've been living a dream from the moment you kissed me back. I'm going to love you for the rest of my life. I promise."

The End





TLC

READER REVIEW

Hey there, Amazing Reader!

Want to make an author's day? (Spoiler: that's me!)

Use the QR code or click the link below and drop a quick book review. I would love to get your thoughts on my novel.

Your Reaction to: *When Dreams Float*



<https://rebrand.ly/TLC1Review>
<https://www.amazon.com/review/B0FQJPKNX1>

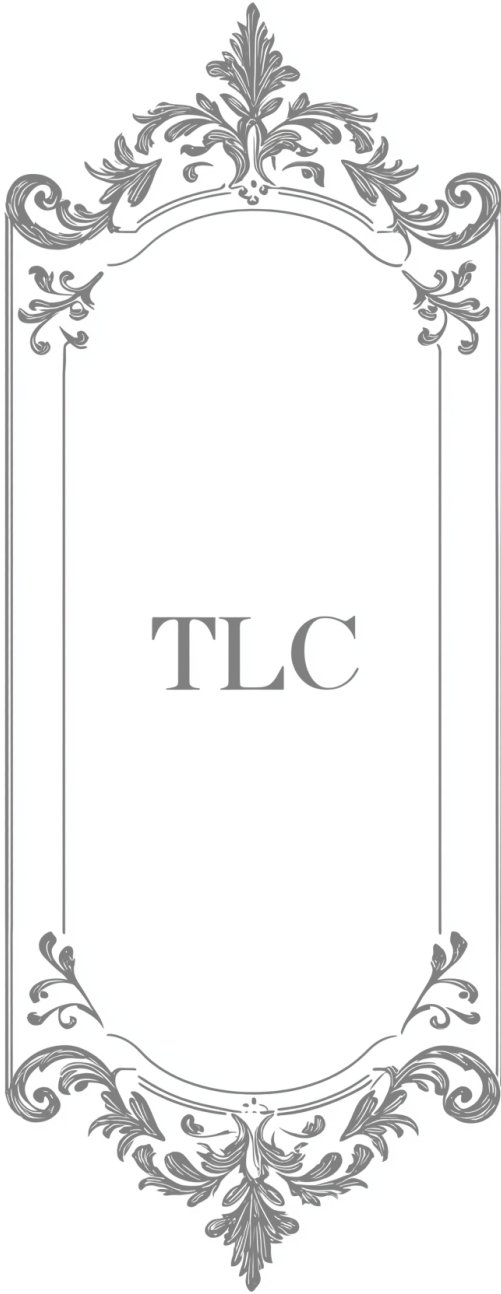


WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT “Preview Gift”

See the Ryan Family Series Book #1 Pre-read on
the *following page*.

“WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT”
BOOK EXCERPT





TLC



CHAPTER ONE



Would she make it? Pulling into the parking lot, Patricia Ryan glanced at the car's digital clock. Each second ticking away felt like a countdown to disaster. If she didn't make it, all would be lost.

Rushing, she grabbed her purse, folders, and keys, then slid from behind the wheel, making sure to lock the door. Her heart raced, urgency thumping in her chest as her heels clicked against the pavement. She turned and ran right into the solid chest of a stranger.

"Oh my!" Patricia exclaimed, stumbling backward.

Strong hands caught her before she could fall.

Her black portfolio burst open when it hit the pavement, scattering papers around her feet and those of the stranger who continued to hold her. Her purse also fell, spilling its contents over a three-foot radius. Keys clattered as they hit

the pavement, and Patricia cursed faintly. Luck, she decided, wasn't on her side tonight.

Looking up, she could not help noticing that his engaging smile had widened after she whispered what she thought was inaudible. A flicker of amusement danced in his eyes, making her suddenly more aware of how close they were.

Then he said, "In a hurry?"

She wanted to apologize for being inattentive, but the powerfully mesmerizing eyes that complimented an ebony-bronze face halted any words she wanted to say. A faint scar above his left brow added a charming quality to his manly features. His deep brown eyes held confidence. And amusement. She watched his lips, ones that had a look that promised satisfaction, curl up into a wider smile. His mouth was draped with the blackest, silkiest mustache. The smile. The looks. Or possibly his closeness? Whichever it was, it stunned her into temporary silence. She inhaled quickly and was treated to the pleasant aroma of his spicy cologne.

"No. I enjoy running into men built like a brick wall," she managed. Humor in times of desperation. Wasn't that the theory for handling stress? Caution was also warranted because she didn't know this man. She stepped backward to add distance between them, and her heel caught in the ring of her car keys. Unsure of her footing, she reached for the closest form of stability, his outstretched arms.

"Did I hurt you?"

His hands lingered at her waist, firm but gentle, grounding her. She wasn't hurt, but her senses were reacting to the feel of his hands at her waist. The brief contact left her more unsteady than the stumble itself. Less than thirty minutes ago, she had been debating with the executive team at

Brackman Advertising about the long-term benefits of implementing her new sales and marketing proposals. That had been exhausting, but it hadn't left her feeling as limp as she did now.

Just before he let go, the slight squeeze of his hand sent a ripple of warmth through her. At the same time, she was very aware of the overly familiar contact he was making with her. She cautiously stepped backward again, forcing him to drop his other hand.

"No, I'm fine." She was at a loss for words, which was very unlike her.

"Good. Let me help you pick up your things," the man suggested.

Kneeling to retrieve her belongings and gather the important documents needed for the battle with City Hall and the Mackenzy-Duran Company, Patricia remembered she was late. She graciously withheld another colorful choice of words and managed to utter a more appropriate statement.

Patricia's mind swirled, trying to refocus on the task at hand. She used the moment of silence to mentally regroup so that she could focus on the issues she wanted to present in defense of the DuBois Center. If she didn't win over the council in the meeting tonight, all was in jeopardy. A lot of poor kids were depending on her not to fail. As the president of the volunteer Board of Directors for the DuBois Center, she had been struggling to help save it from destruction. Without the positive impact the Center had on the "At-risk" families in its community, the kids who attended would be relegated to the sewers of society with its limited choices.

The Mackenzy-Duran Company was trying to purchase the land on which the Center stood and demolish the build-

ing that held hope for many of the inner-city kids. If the Center was lost, so too would be their hopes. Patricia had promised not to let that happen.

“I’m rushing to a meeting that is about to start at City Hall. I should have been watching where I was going.” They were at eye level, squatting and reaching around each other for her personal effects and wrinkled papers. “I’m sorry for running into you.”

His gaze flickered to the hem of her cream-colored skirt, which had slid to mid-thigh. The moment was brief, but her pulse quickened. As she leaned forward to get her keys, she could feel his eyes on the top of her breasts as her silk, cream-colored blouse opened slightly. A flash of heat rose within her as she wondered if he could see her heart racing. That and the humid, Florida breeze heightened her discomfort.

“Don’t be. I came up from behind. I should have said something, but I thought you were headed in the opposite direction.” He retrieved her pink lipstick container and most of her papers before standing. Stacking them neatly, he stowed them in her black leather portfolio and laid it on the hood of the champagne-colored BMW 740 parked next to her car. “You’re pretty quick on your feet.”

“Sort of,” Patricia said. “But better on a dance floor. Or at least I hope I’m more graceful.”

“I’ll bet you are,” he said.

His tone indicated more was hidden behind those words. His pulsating, deep voice reminded her of a risqué jazzy beat. One that could move you, sweep you away with its rhythm. When his charming smile returned, Patricia decided that he had read her thoughts.

“Maybe,” was all that she said.

“Got everything?” he asked, looking around until he spotted an errant sheet of paper blowing in the gentle spring breeze. “I’ll get that.”

Patricia gave an appreciative eye to the way his tailored charcoal suit fit his tall, lean form. His casual movements and relaxed demeanor replaced her usual caution with attraction.

“Here’s the last of it,” he said, retrieving her portfolio and placing the paper inside before handing it to her.

“Thank you.” She noticed he didn’t make any move to leave. “Well, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get something out of my trunk.” He stepped back against the BMW as Patricia slipped sideways into the narrow aisle that separated their cars. She caught his gaze again, the intensity of it unsettling her for a moment. She smiled slightly, nervously, and glanced at his silk burgundy tie. There should be a law against that roguish look on his face, she thought.

When she closed the trunk of her Volvo, she noticed he was still resting against the hood of his car, arms crossed on his chest, legs crossed at the ankles, eyeing her at an angle. What a good-looking man.

“I’m headed to City Hall,” he said. “I waited to see if you need any help.” He pushed himself away from the car. “It’s the least I can do for delaying you.”

It was times like this that Patricia’s vanity got in the way. She hadn’t checked her appearance before getting out of the car and wasn’t sure if their collision left her looking as disheveled and uncomfortable as she felt. She rubbed her lips together, hoping to spread what little lipstick remained. She desperately wanted to look in a mirror. The springtime

purple-blue sunset provided limited light for checking her appearance in the window's reflection. Besides, such a move would be too shallow for her liking.

"I have everything," Patricia shifted back to business, hoping to ignore the lingering warmth between them. "I'm in a hurry, but we can walk there together." Since he had been silently, closely watching her, Patricia decided he had probably seen more than she could detect from her faint reflection in the window anyway. Walking toward him and stopping a few feet away, she said, "Do I look as though I just broadsided someone?" He was also blocking the path that led to City Hall.

"Let's see." He took an intimate step toward her. He reached up and brushed what Patricia assumed to be a lock of stray hair back into place, a motion too familiar for a stranger. She got another whiff of his spicy cologne, an aroma that had a fresh, exquisitely relaxing quality about it. She drank in the smell of him, needing its soothing effect. Deep breaths cleansed the remnants of the tension about the meeting away. He stepped back to further appraise her condition. She watched as his eyes slowly moved over her from head to toe. His look was appreciative. Then he said with deliberate slowness, "Perfect."

Though she liked his warm and reassuring appraisal, the reality of the moment seized her. "Th--Thanks." She cleared her throat, hoping that anything else she said wouldn't sound like the croaking frog she had just heard.

He stepped to the side again and moved his arm to wave her through. "Let's go." As she walked past, he fell in step with her. "I'm Mac Carter."

“Patty Ryan.” Where do I know that name from? she asked herself. She said aloud, “Mac Carter? That name sounds familiar.”

“I would have remembered if we’d met before,” Mac responded, smiling. “And I don’t make a habit of accosting women in Volvos,” then he added. “But I do make restitution for my mistakes. Please, you must let me make it up to you.”

He reached for her elbow and gently held it as they ascended the steps to the building. Patricia counted to twelve before he removed his light touch from her arm. The warmth of his hand remained on her skin even after it was gone, a reminder of how easily he had crossed the invisible line into something more personal. Chivalrous and protective. She liked that.

“Name it,” Mac offered. “Launder your suit. Have your car washed.” He paused to open the door for her.

Slowing to smile up at him because of his kidding, “I really must go.”

“You can give me a few more minutes.” Mac implored. “If I’m not being too forward, I’d prefer dinner. Say tomorrow evening. At your favorite restaurant?”

He was being extremely forward, but how could any woman resist that tempting smile and seductive voice? He makes it hard to refuse him, Patricia thought.

“What can I say to an offer like that?” she said, somewhat surprised that he had made it.

“Either seven o’clock or eight o’clock would be a good choice,” he suggested.

Patricia watched his kissable mouth form that offer. She weighed her options of having dinner with him or another

dinner alone. “Maybe I can take you up on your offer at another time.” The weight of his gaze settled on her, leaving her a little breathless. “I really need to get to the DuBois Center meeting. I need to rearrange my notes if I’m going to give a worthwhile presentation on saving the Center. I think...” She stopped her statement and turned to the person calling out her name from across the corridor. She waved back.

Turning back to Mac, she saw him reach into his inside jacket pocket to produce what looked like a business card.

“Where can I reach you?” Mac said as he pulled out his cell phone.

She was about to give Mac her phone number when Councilman Cecil Wilson, a member of the Standing Committee on Land Usage and Zoning, walked up to them.

“Mr. Carter,” Wilson said. “How are you?”

“Fine, thank you.”

“Miss Ryan, are you purposely trying to lose this debate tonight? If you don’t get up there now, you won’t have a chance at all!” Wilson took Patricia’s forearm and pointed her in the direction of the elevator. “You two have met. Good! I’m surprised to see the two of you talking so amiably.” He punched the elevator button.

Wilson and Mac must both be on the committee together, Patricia assumed.

She noticed an annoyed look enter and quickly vanish from Mac’s eyes. The man did not take well to interruptions, she concluded, and made a mental note of that.

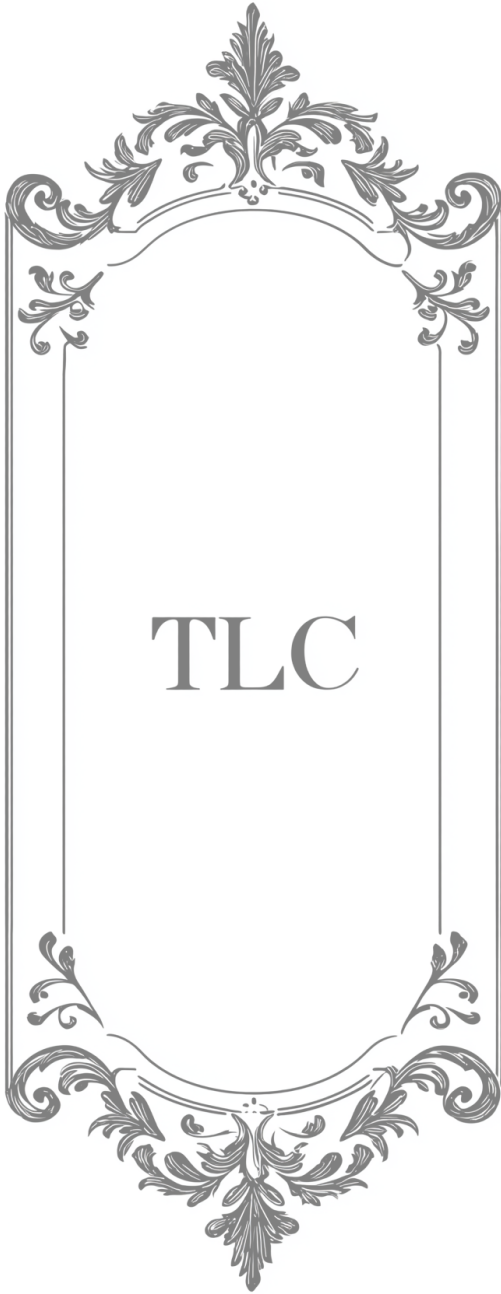
Wondering about Wilson’s last comment, Patricia asked as they stepped into the elevator, “What makes you say that Mr. Wilson?”

Wilson pressed the desired floor on the elevator panel as Mac stood next to him. “I would think the two of you would choose to be less... What can I call it? Friendly. Good to know the two of you aren’t letting business get in the way of friendship. Even though Mackenzy Carter,” Wilson tilted his head toward Mac, “Is the main owner of the Mackenzy-Duran Company. And he is planning to buy the land the Center is on to tear it down and put up a parking lot.” Wilson laughed briefly. “That’s the reason we’re all here in the first place, right?”

Shocked, Patricia looked in disbelief from Mac Carter’s unreadable face to that of Cecil Wilson. The weight of the revelation hit her like a punch. The man she was accosted by, charmed by, and considered going on a date with, was the one man she had vowed to oppose. Mac Carter was Mackenzy Carter, owner of the Mackenzy-Duran Company!

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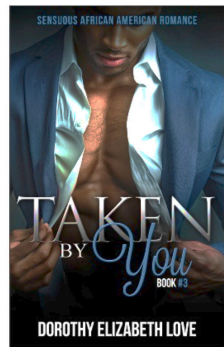
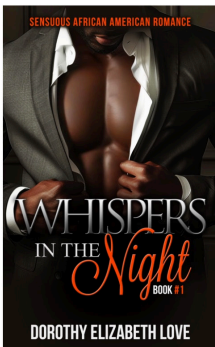
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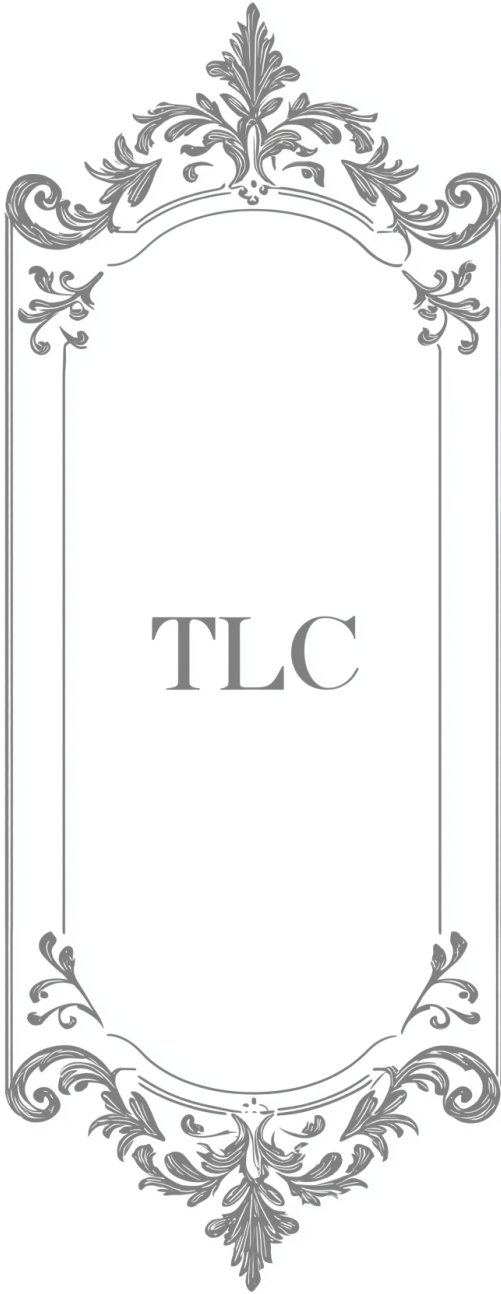
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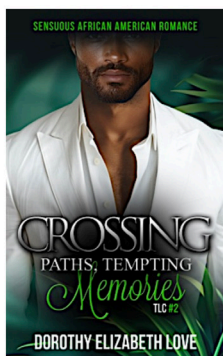
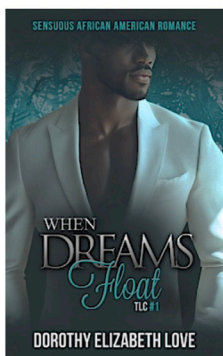
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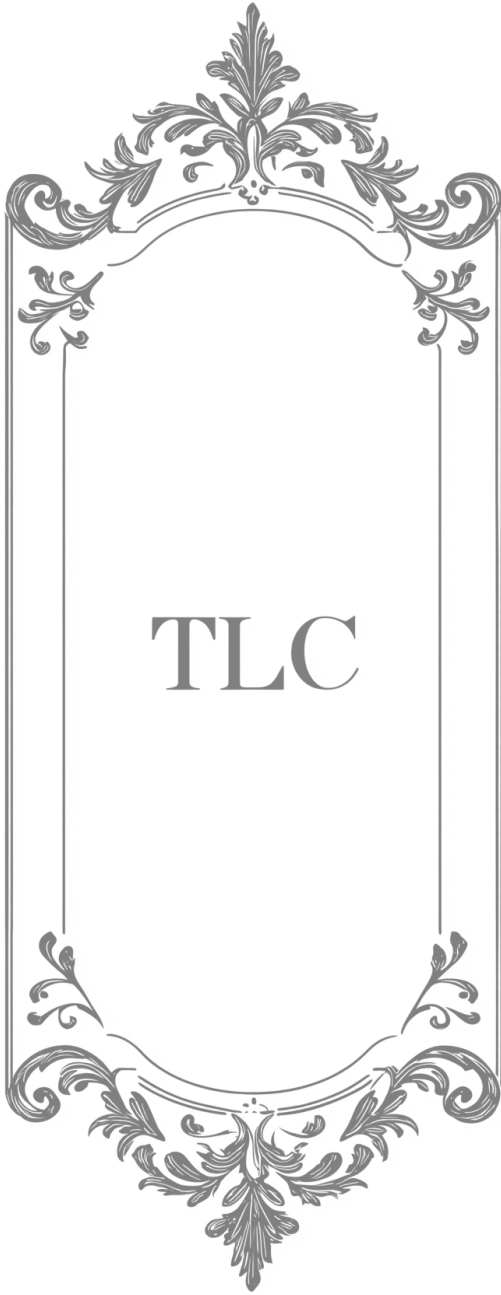
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I've always believed—unyieldingly—that love can conquer almost anything. That belief is what fuels my writing. My greatest joy is creating stories that whisk readers away from the weight of their everyday lives and carry them into a world where they can laugh, sigh, and feel deeply moved. My characters aren't perfect—they stumble, struggle, and fight to rise again, just as we all do. But their journeys are painted with passion, resilience, and a delicious touch of sexiness. Let's stay in touch:

- Website: www.DorothyElizabethLove.com
- Instagram: LedByRomance
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Every award I've received humbles me, but what truly excites me is hearing from you. I would love to know what you think of my stories via a book review.

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