



*Trapped
In Paradise*

Deatri King-Bey

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank God for my matching my talent with my passion. My family for their continued support, and you for coming asking for more.

Chapter One

“When Sandra finds out what you’ve done, you’re dead meat,” Ashley said from her desk.

“Then I guess she’d best not find out.” Miranda pulled various travel brochures off the display rack to expend some of her nervous energy. Of all the cockamamie ideas she had come up with over the years, this one had to be the most cockamamie of them all. Usually her sister, Sandra, kept her from attempting to carry them out, but this time Sandra was the intended target. “She won’t find out.”

“Oh, she’ll find out, and when she does, Marcus will be a widower and those sweet babies of yours...” Ashley sniffed and wiped the crocodile tears from her eyes. “The babies...” She choked up. “Don’t leave them without their mother.”

“And you call me melodramatic.” She plopped the brochures onto her desk. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Which makes what you’re doing all the more psycho. You are ten kinds of wrong on this. Stop before it’s too late.”

Though scared to the marrow, Miranda knew she was doing the right thing. “I know you’re only trying to help. I appreciate it. I really do, but I have to do what’s best for my sister.” Feeling less than confident with her plan, she dug in her heels. Nothing anyone could say would make her change her mind.

“Who are you to say what’s best for Sandra? She’s happy with her life. I highly suggest you stop interfering.”

“I’m her older sister. I know what’s best for her by default. Let’s just agree to disagree.”

She straightened her all ready neat desk. “She’ll be here any minute, and I need to calm my nerves.”

“You’re wrong, but I’m done.”

“Thank you.” Melting into the soft suede of her office chair, she gazed out the window. She had opened *Traveling the Miranda Way* five years ago and prided herself on her professionalism. Eyes closed, she inhaled and exhaled slowly. Even though the economy turned for the worse, her business still thrived. What she was about to do could ruin her reputation and all she’d worked so hard for. *I have to do this.*

Second, third and forth guessing herself, she whispered, “I have to do this.”

“Do what?”

Miranda jumped at the sound of her sister’s voice. So caught up in thought, she hadn’t heard her enter. “Ummm, nothing.”

Lips pursed and arms folded over her chest, Sandra didn’t even almost look like she believed Miranda. “You’re up to something. I just hope I’m out of town when whatever it is blows up in your face.”

Ashley choked. “Oh, excuse me.” She fanned her tearing eyes. “Soda... went down... wrong pipe.” Still hacking, she pushed away from her desk. “Sorry.” She rushed to the back office.

“Whatever you’re up to must be really big.” Sandra settled in one of the armchairs in front of Miranda’s desk.

“I’m not up to anything.”

“Sure you’re not, but I don’t even want to know what it is. I’m just here for my travel packet and I’m out. I still have a few calls to make before I pack.”

Miranda *tsked*. “Why do you always think I’m up to something?”

“Because you’re *always* up to something.”

Miranda unlocked her bottom drawer, took out the packet she had prepared for Sandra and handed it over. “I hope you aren’t planning on working. This is a *vacation*.”

“Working vacation.” She opened the packet and sorted through the information. “I said I wanted a coach seat. Why does this say first class?”

“You have more than enough money to pay for comfort.”

“I’m five-four in heels. Coach is plenty comfortable for me, and I have more than enough money because I spend and invest what I have wisely.”

“Fine, I’ll downgrade you to coach.” Ever since Sandra gave her the initial investment capital needed for *Travel Miranda’s Way*, then refused to accept payment for the “loan,” Miranda had been making her travel arrangements for her.

“Thank you.”

“You’re not seriously going to work, are you?” Proud of her sister, she wished she could tell the world of her accomplishments. Six of the seven last titles she’d written had made it to the *New York Times* Best Sellers list, but since Sandra was a ghost writer, very few people knew of her highly-sought abilities.

“What else is there to do on a boat?”

“I don’t know.” Miranda hunched her shoulders. “Meet a man, get laid.” She covertly checked the time on her computer screen. In the next twenty minutes, the second part of her plan would be walking through the agency’s door, so she needed to give her beloved sister the boot.

Laughing, Sandra shook her head. "No thank you."

"You do realize that sex is much better with two than one, right?"

"Ha, ha, very funny," Sandra said dryly. "Does your husband know you have such a dirty mind?"

"That's what he loves best." They shared a laugh. "Did I tell you there's a conference during the cruise? Readers and writers a plenty for you to hang out with. Please don't stay cooped up in your cabin."

She stood to leave. "Yes you told me. You also told me it's a romance conference. Yuck! You couldn't pay me to read that garbage."

Truly offended, Miranda grumbled, "You're such a literary snob, you make me sick." She opened her top drawer and pulled out a few books. Ever since Sandra's divorce eight years ago, she had given up on romance, on love. "Read a little Beverly Jenkins and Rochelle Alers before you turn up your nose. Speak from enlightenment instead of ignorance."

"I'm sorry. I know how serious you are about your... romance." She took the books.

"You don't have to say romance like it's a dirty word. There's nothing wrong with falling in love. Look at me and Marcus."

"Don't get me wrong." Hand rested on her chest, Sandra said, "I'm so happy for you two, and my nephews are the cutest little guys ever, but what you have is special."

"You can have it, too."

"I thought what I had with Nathan was special, but it was nothing but a misery filled trap. I know it's hard for you to comprehend, but I'm happy."

"Lonely."

"Alone, not lonely." Sandra hugged her older sister. "I need to get going."

“Call me when you land in Miami.”

“I will.”

“And promise to read these books.”

“I promise. Now let me get out of here.”

The door didn't close completely before Ashley returned. “You're going to burn in hell.”

“Didn't you say you were done?”

“I changed my mind.” She returned to her desk. “After what Nathan put her through, she deserves the right to be alone if she so chooses.”

“If she were happy, I'd leave her alone, but she's not. She's more than alone, she's lonely.”

“There's no talking sense into you.”

“No there isn't, so why don't you stop trying.”

Miranda searched through her book drawer for the perfect novel to recommend to Jeremy and set it on her desk. Just as Ashley opened her mouth, the man Miranda wanted to see entered and saved her from having to listen to another lecture on what a horrible sister she was for ensuring Sandra wouldn't be lonely.

“How's my favorite travel agent?” He nodded a hello to Ashley as he entered.

Miranda rounded her desk and gave Jeremy a big hug. “Much better, now that you're here. I thought you would weasel out on me.”

“Oh no. I said I'd allow you to make all of the arrangements for my vacation, and I meant it.”

She returned to her desk and took out his travel packet. “Well, with you being such a control freak,” she teased, “I'm truly honored.”

He chuckled. “You should be. So where am I headed?”

“A five day Jamaican cruise!”

“Cruise? I’m not sure about this.”

“Trust me on this. You’ll love it.” The disdain on his face did not sit well with her. He could be as close-minded as Sandra, reaffirming for her just how perfect they were for each other.

She watched him sort through his travel packet. Jeremy loved to read the boring books like those Sandra loved to write. Sandra was attracted to older men, and though her sister was a decade younger than Jeremy, she was mature for her thirty-four years. They both owned their own business and thought investing was a form of entertainment. A chill went down her back at the thought of the droll conversations both had put her through regarding stock options, and don’t get her started on those stupid political blogs. *Oh yeah, these two were made for each other.*

“It looks like you have everything in order.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” She smiled. “Now I hope you plan to do more than keep your nose stuck in a book.”

“I sure do. I thought I’d keep my nose stuck in several books.”

“All you do is work, read and hang out with married people. You’ll never find a wife like that.”

“I’m not trying to find a wife. I’m taking a much needed vacation.”

“But what if your Mrs. Right is on the cruise, and you miss her because you’ve stayed hidden in your cabin under a pile of books?”

He tapped the romance book setting on her desk. "I'm not the only one who's been reading, I see. Life isn't like in your romance books." He picked up the novel. "I'm not interested in some little girl who just left home. I want a strong, independent woman. Unfortunately, the type of woman I'm interested in has been put through hell and is fed up with giving a man a fair chance. Don't get me wrong. I partially blame myself. I know I helped push many a woman to the brink, but now that I'm ready to settle down..." He hunched his shoulders. "All I'm saying is my 'Mrs. Right' wouldn't see me for who I am. She'd see the pain and disappointment the men before me have put her through."

"And all I'm saying is you know your Mrs. Right has been hurt. Be understanding and patient. If you give her time, she'll see you for who you are." Nathan had pushed Sandra past the brink, but Miranda knew Jeremy could bring her back.

He stared at her.

"What?" she asked.

"It's just... Are you up to something?"

Ashley broke out in a hacking-laughing fit. She quickly excused herself and rushed out the room.

"What are you up to, Miranda?" he said firmly.

Mouth agape and eyes wide, she drew her hands to her chest. "Me? I am so hurt. Why is everyone always accusing me of being up to something?"

"Because you *always* are."

"Well, I'm not this time," she said hotly. "You're my friend. I just want to make sure you don't close your eyes to what's right in front of you." She saw herself as a conduit of sorts. If she had to tell a little white lie here and there, so be it.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions.” He set the book on her desk.

“No, you keep it. Evelyn Palfrey is one of my favorite romance authors.”

“I don’t read romance.”

“Well, start. Her characters are marvelously mature and have been through a lot of what your Mrs. Right has gone through. You may actually learn a little something.”

Chapter Two

“I’m kicking myself for not flying first class,” Sandra re-adjusted her cell phone earpiece.

“Why, what happened?” Miranda asked.

“As I was boarding the plane, I saw the only man who could make me reconsider one night stands.” Giggling, she fanned herself and continued along the tunnel from the plane into the busy airport. “And wouldn’t you know the seat beside him was empty. I’ll bet it was mine.”

“That’s what you get for being cheap. What did he look like? What was he doing? Did he see you?”

“Slow your roll.” She glanced up at the signs for the baggage area. “Whew howdy, his wavy, salt-and-pepper hair called to my fingers.”

Miranda giggled. “You and your old men.”

“He wasn’t old, but mature, and his hair was more pepper than salt.”

“Whatever. How tall was he?”

“Leg’s look to be about fifty feet long.”

“Fifty feet?” Miranda laughed. “You should switch from writing non-fiction to fiction.”

“Okay, maybe not fifty.” In no hurry, she strolled toward the baggage claim area. “But he was well over six feet. He definitely needed the extra room of first class.”

“Woman, you ain’t but about two foot tall! What is up with you and tall men?”

“I don’t know. Let me ask my sister who is shorter than me and whose husband is at least six feet what’s the deal with her and tall, dark, and all too fine men.” She stopped in front of one of the many gift shops and debated purchasing her nephews a few Miami T-shirts and shipping them off before she left for her cruise. She had promised them she would pick them a little

something up on each leg of her trip. “This man fits your heroes in the romance books: tall, dark, and handsome. Make that: tall, dark, and all too fine.”

With a giggle in her voice, Miranda said, “I’m just glad you are finally reconsidering the one night stand. It’s been eight years. How can you go so long?”

“For one thing, it hasn’t been eight. It’s been five.”

Miranda broke out in another fit of laughter. “Like that’s better. You’d better corner the market on condoms, because Jamaica is full of tall, dark and all too fine men waiting on you.”

“My name ain’t Stella, and I sure don’t need to get back my groove.”

“Says who? Five years. You need a whole lot more than to get your groove back. And I’m not saying you have to marry the man... men! Shooooot, the one night stand is a beautiful thing.”

“You’re married. What do you know about one night stands?” She selected Florida Marlin’s T-shirts for the boys and a “Too Hot To Trot” T-Shirt for Miranda. She wouldn’t tell her sister, but instead of reading on the flight, she had daydreamed about making love with the handsome stranger. Never in her life had she been so attracted to a man. It was frightening. Yesterday after she’d finished packing, she read one of the romance novels Miranda had given her. The Beverly Jenkins’ novel had turned out to be surprisingly good, but now Sandra was having second thoughts, thinking her reaction to this man had been too “romance novel.”

“I know you could use one, two... hell make it three.”

“You are out of your mind.” She set her selections on the counter.

“You know I’m only playing with you. I’m just glad to see someone has set a spark in you. It’s not about the sex.” Miranda paused. “It’s not only about the sex. You’re a passionate person, but since you’re divorce, you’ve shut down.”

“I have not.” She keyed in her pin number to pay for her purchases. “I’m doing quite well for myself.”

“You know that’s not what I mean. That spark. Please do me a favor and allow that spark to grow. I’m not saying you have to become promiscuous. That’s not you. But neither is this woman who refuses to allow a man close enough to love her as she should be loved. I’m so afraid you’ll miss out on your king.”

“My *king*?” She giggled. “You’re reading way too many romance novels.”

“I’m serious.”

“Okay... I’ll pay along. I thought Nathan was my king, and he turned out to be a cruel dictator.”

“Well, you thought wrong. You were only twenty when you married. You’re older and wiser now. But you’re also scared. Don’t let fear keep you from your king. I need to get going. The boys are being entirely too quiet. Love you.”

“Love you, too. Kiss the babies for me.”

Thinking about what Miranda had said, she headed over to baggage claim. Truth be told, she wanted a king. Not to save or protect her. She didn’t need saving or protecting. She wanted to share her life with someone special. She wanted what her sister had.

The conveyor belt lurched to a start and broke her out of musing. A few minutes later, the red and black scarf she had tied onto the handle of her large suitcase caught her attention.

“Excuse me.” She squeezed through the people gathered around. Just as she reached for her bag, another passenger bumped her out of the way to grab his suitcase.

“Hey, I’m standing here,” she said to the rude man.

“Allow me,” came a deep, melodic voice that took her breath away. Tall, dark and all too fine himself reached over and easily grabbed her bag off the conveyor belt and set it before her.

Rude man completely forgotten, along with her voice, all Sandra could do was stand there and pray she didn't look as flustered as she felt.

“Is that one yours also?” *All too fine* motioned toward her medium sized southwestern print bag that had a black and red scarf tied on the handle.

Wanting to slap the silly schoolgirl jitters into oblivion, she managed a weak, “Yes.”

“Here you go, little lady.” His bright dimpled smile finished her off.

“Thank you. That was really nice of you.”

“It was nothing.” He glanced toward the belt, then back to her. “Don't move.”

Jeans had never looked as good as they did hugging his firm behind when he bent to reach his luggage. Objectifying this man into body parts was wrong on so many levels, but damn. Miranda was right. Five years was too long to go without some good loving.

Before she realized what was happening, he had led her away from the crowd. *Snap out of it*, she chastised herself. He was only a man. Granted, the epitome of drop-dread gorgeous, but a man.

“I guess I should properly introduce myself.” She held out her hand. “Sandra, Sandra Write.”

Amusement flickered in his eyes. “As in Mrs. Right?”

The reaction to her name was odd, yet intriguing at the same time. “Miss Write, actually.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not making fun of your name. It’s just a friend of mine and I were discussing...” He shook his head. “Let’s start over.” He held out his hand. “Jeremy, Jeremy King.”

“King?” *As in my king? This is straight up out of the “Twilight Zone.” Wait until I tell Miranda. She’ll never believe me.* She accepted his hand, and the moment they touched she felt something... *magnetic...* holding them together. Thinking she had only read one romance novel and was all ready turning into a mush head, she did her best to gather her faculties.

“Yes, King.”

She caught him peeking at her left hand. Probably doing the same as she had done him—checking for a ring.

“I don’t want to sound forward, but I didn’t eat before the flight. Would you like to have lunch with me?”

He released her hand. The loss of contact was much more than their touching ending, which scared and excited the mess out of her. *This is all Miranda’s fault. Her and her stupid romance novels.*

Hands up slightly, he continued, “No strings attached, just lunch.”

“Do you usually pick up women in the airport?”

A full, robust chuckle erupted from him. If she didn’t know better, she’d say there was a hint of nervousness mixed in there also.

“This is my first time. How is it going for me?”

“How could I say no to the man who saved my bags?” The flight had left entirely too early for her, and she hadn’t eaten. So besides being tired, she was starving.

“Excellent. I need to drop my luggage at the hotel. Would you like to meet somewhere,” he checked the time on his cell phone, “around one?”

“I’d love to, except I have no idea what’s around here. I’ve never been to Miami in my life. I eat just about anything, so wherever you’d like to go works for me.”

“I don’t know about you, but I could eat several horses. Let’s take our bags with us.” Before she could respond, he picked up the heavier of her two suitcases and his suitcase, then headed for the taxi stand.

Boy can this man wear a pair of jeans. She followed behind rolling her midsized suitcase. As if he had sensed her checking out his assets, he glanced over his shoulder and flashed a dimpled smile.



In the taxi, Sandra scooted so far over behind the driver’s seat that one would have thought she was exiting the car on the opposite side. Nerves a skitter, she momentarily contemplated making a run for it. What in the heck was she doing accepting this stranger’s offer for lunch? And her heart—it was beating so fast, so hard, she was sure a trip to the emergency room was in her near future. Then there was her attraction to Jeremy. It was too strong, too powerful. *Inhale, exhale, release...*

After ensuring their bags were placed in the trunk to his liking, Jeremy eased into the back seat with her, taking up the center of the seat. His knees touched the backs of the front seats and left leg rested gently against her right. This simple touch shouldn’t be affecting her so. She should be asking him to move further away, not wanting him to remain.

“Where to?” The driver moved his seat forward.

“What are you hungry for?”

Jeremy's low voice broke into her internal tirade. Mind racing back to reality, she placed things into perspective. They were only two people sharing a taxi and a meal. Nothing more. Nothing less.

"We're in Florida. How about a Cuban restaurant?" she suggested.

"Excellent choice." He turned to the cabbie. "Please take us to the best Cuban restaurant around."

The cabbie nodded his approval, then eased into the busy airport traffic.

A few minutes later, Sandra concentrated on the drizzle of rain outside, the traffic, the people walking about, everything except the man who sat beside her. Why he made her feel as if butterflies had taken domicile in her stomach was beyond her. Her mother's main complaint of her had always been that she knew no strangers and would strike up a conversation with anyone. Yet that skill seemed to have escaped her when she needed it most.

"So what's the last book you've read?" he asked.

A sigh of relief escaped her. Books. How could she have forgotten that she could talk books anytime, any place. And that he had asked such a question had her thinking he was much more than tall, dark, and all too fine. By the time they arrived at La Rosa Restaurant, the butterflies had been evicted, and she was on her "A" game again.

The hostess was kind enough to keep their luggage in the manager's office for them.

Seated at the table, Sandra looked through the menu. "Everything looks delicious."

"Have you ever had Cuban cuisine before?"

"No, not really."

"That makes two of us."

“Let’s be sure to order two different meals so we can mix and match.” Realizing she was eating lunch with a man she’d just met and not a longtime friend, she became mortified. “I’m so sorry. Forget I said that. I have been out before,” she joked. “I’m sorry.”

“I was going to suggest the same thing.”

By the time their orders of cream of split pea, shrimp scampi, veal Milanese, and snapper in garlic sauce arrived at the table, their conversation had moved from books to politics. Another of her favorite subjects. And Jeremy, to her liking, was into policy—not politics. It never ceased to amaze her how many people didn’t fully comprehend the difference.

Another difference came to her mind. Nathan. Confident, intelligent, older men had always been her Achilles heel. Unlike Jeremy, Nathan’s confidence was rooted in arrogance instead of security. Thinking back, Nathan was the one who turned her against politics and onto policy. The way he regurgitated “talking points” made him sound like an infomercial.

And Jeremy was genuinely interested in her opinion, even when they disagreed. She had taken an opposing view to his on reparations, just to see his reaction. He’d said she was wrong, but respected she supported her beliefs with facts and figures and looked forward to picking her mind on other issues. Oh yeah, she could get used to having Jeremy around.

Too stuffed from the delicious lunch, they didn’t have room for desert, but neither wanted their conversation to end.

“What’s wrong?” Jeremy asked.

That voice again. Now she fully understood the saying, “music to my ears.” And she loved how he could sense her moods. At first she found it a little unnerving, but now that she knew him, she liked the connection. This was too good to be true. He was too good to be true.

How could this man go from being a stranger to... to someone she could see herself falling for, was falling for. And falling quickly.

Boring. Miranda always accused Sandra of being boring, and to some extent she agreed, but this man was just as “boring” as her, yet Sandra found him fascinating. He got it. He got her and she understood him. Which scared the hell out of her.

“Sandra, what’s wrong?” he repeated softly.

She couldn’t tell him she was falling for him and didn’t know how to handle it. No. She needed more time to think this—whatever it was—through. “I used to be a waitress when I was in college and hated it when customers held the tables up. You know how it is. They work for tips.”

“I guess we should get going, then.”

“I guess so.”

After Jeremy called a taxi and retrieved their luggage, they watched the drizzling rain and waited for their rides.

“This isn’t it for us, Sandra.” He took her hand into his. And though she should pull away, she couldn’t.

“I’ll call you when I get settled in at the hotel,” she said. “Maybe we can go out tonight.”

“It’s a date. Let’s exchange cell numbers now.”



No way would Sandra tell Miranda about the afternoon she’d spent with Jeremy. Knowing her crazy sister, she would cook up one of her cockamamie plans, and they would all be in trouble. Jeremy was too nice of a man to subject to Miranda.

Going over lunch in her mind, she smiled. Books, books, and more books. The man loved to read and talk books as much as she did. He had even read a few of the books she'd written. But since she was a ghost writer, she didn't tell him who the real author was. He also had his head on straight about politics. It never ceased to amaze her how cavalier Americans were about the power behind their vote. That was one lunch she wished would never end.

And such a gentleman. At the end of their afternoon, instead of sharing a taxi, he placed her in a taxi and paid her fair, then said he would wait for a second taxi. She had insisted he was going overboard, but he wanted her to feel secure. Jeremy a stalker? Humph, if anything, she wanted to stalk him! After such a hiatus from men, it just didn't seem fair for God to put a man like Jeremy just out of her reach. Out of her reach because he was too good to be true. Just like Nathan had been.

As Miranda had said, she was older and wiser now, and she didn't intend to fall into the same trap. *All that glitters isn't gold*. So instead of calling him, as she had promised, she slipped into a sweat suit, grabbed the second romance novel Miranda had given her, and headed for the hotel lobby to sit in one of their big cushy armchairs to relax. Romance books turned out to be enjoyable fast reads.

Three chapters in, she found herself comparing the novel's hero to Nathan and Jeremy. Early in her relationship with Nathan, she would say he gave the novel hero a run for his money, but after they married, he fell short. Way short. And now there was Jeremy.

The fictional hero was quite nice, but the real thing was so much better. Jeremy's smile, his laugh, his easy way of speaking kept her mind whirling. What if she were wrong about contacting him? Could she be passing up on what she wanted out of fear of repeating history?

Should she call and let whatever happens happen? Was she ready to step out there and give love a chance?

Eyes closed, she held the romance novel close to her heart and made a hard admission. Though she didn't want to be like the heroines in the novels, she could see herself falling for Jeremy... had all ready fallen for him. *No. Love at first sight doesn't exist in real life.* She had thought she had fallen "in love" with Nathan, but looking back, that had been infatuation. Always attracted to older men, when he had returned her attentions, she'd fallen head over heels. Next thing she knew, she was married and he was moving her away from her family and everything she knew.

Thoughts of what Nathan had put her through resurfaced with the pain and tried to drown her. She couldn't go back. Wouldn't go back. She would never allow anyone to trap her again. Never.

"Saundra?"

Stuck in the past, she gripped the novel tighter.

"It's all right, baby."

Jeremy's soft voice brought her back to the present. She opened her eyes and saw him stooped before her.

"Jeremy? I mean, Jeremy, what are you doing here?"

The concern in his eyes was the only answer she received. He sat on the heavy oak coffee table behind him and continued to watch her.

Uneasy under his gaze, she fidgeted in her seat. "You're making me nervous. Say something."

Elbows rested on his knees, he leaned forward and continued watching her, worry written all over his face.

“I don’t usually trip out in hotel lobbies,” she teased. “Umm, what are you doing here anyway?”

“I guess we have the same hotel.”

“Amazing.” She strummed her fingernails on the book.

“I know we just met, but... but something happened between us today. I believe that *something* has scared the hell out of you.”

“No, it hasn’t.”

“Then, why didn’t you call?”

Caught, all she could do was smile. “Okay, so you’re right.”

“I don’t know who hurt you, but I’m not him.” He stood and pulled her up from the chair. “Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“I’m walking you to your room.”

Without argument, she gave him her room number and allowed him to be her escort. He was right, he wasn’t Nathan, but the lessons she had learned from her experience with Nathan overshadowed everything in her life. Alone or lonely. How many times had she told Miranda she was alone, not lonely, as if wanting companionship, wanting to love and be loved, was something to be ashamed of?

He pointed at the suite next to hers. “You’ll never guess who’s staying there.”

“Who, a movie star?”

He chuckled. “Not quite. Me. You see, fate keeps putting us together.”

Eyes and mouth wide open, she couldn't believe her ears. "No way. That is not your room."

He took out his door card and entered the suite next to hers.

"Well, I'll be..." *The "Twilight Zone" has nothing on this.* A few seconds later, she heard a knock from the interior door of her room, which connected to his. She went inside and opened it. "This is entirely too crazy."

"Isn't it though. If I had known we were in the same hotel, we could have shared the taxi."

"Well." She tossed the novel onto the nightstand. "Want to order a movie?"

"That would be nice." He propped the door open on his side of the connecting suite.

"Thank you, Jeremy King."

"For what?"

"Being you." *He's not Nathan. Don't allow Nathan to keep you from your king.*

Chapter Three

Much of Jeremy's time after arriving at the hotel had been spent searching the Internet for every Saundra Right, Wright, Write and Rite he could find. Fortunately, he only found a few instances of any variation of her names. Unfortunately, none of them were his Mrs. Right. Next, he began listing publishing companies contact information. She had said she was a ghostwriter, but never stated the genre or if she wrote fiction or non-fiction. During his search, he learned of a book called the Writers Market, which listed agents and publishers. He hopped on over to Amazon and ordered the thousand plus page book. He didn't care if he had to contact every individual listed in the book to find Saundra. Then he realized he was obsessing and stopped. She would either call as she said had promised or she would run scared.

He fully understood her fear. For a short time, the fear of the impossible had gripped him until he accepted what was happening between them. When she hadn't called, he had been disappointed, but somehow knew they would meet again. Then he saw her in the lobby, and there was no doubt in his mind that they would be together.

The pain on her face when he first saw her gripping the novel in the chair had him ready to beat someone within an inch of his life. Whoever had hurt her had really done a job on her, but he would be patient and show her his heart.

As the early morning sun filled the room, he watched her sleep, so calm, so peaceful, so beautiful. Jeremy had woken with his Mrs. Right in his arms. She just didn't know it. Or at least she wasn't ready to admit to it yet. Everything had happened so quickly, too quickly. Before yesterday, he would have said the events of the last twenty-four hours were impossible. Two sensible adults didn't just fall in love over night.

With all of their conversation, they had never told where they came from or where they were going. Not that he hadn't wanted to. When he inquired or tried to give his information, Sandra would steer the conversation elsewhere, so he let it go.

The reason behind her actions worried him. She wanted to remain as close yet as distant as possible. Someone had broken more than her heart, they had broken her trust and spirit, that much he was sure of. As Miranda had said, he would have to be patient. For now all he could do was enjoy their few remaining hours.

He fingered the soft curls that framed her face. This cruise would now be a working cruise for him. A project manager by trade, winning over his Mrs. Right would be his next assignment.



From the moment Jeremy saw her to the taxi and took her cell number, Sandra felt she was making a mistake, but she couldn't trust her feelings. Now, sitting on a lounge chair on the deck of the ship, she was glad to be away from the magnetism he had over her. With no doubt in her mind he would contact her after their respective vacations, this time and distance apart would give her the space she needed to regroup and decide what her next step would be.

The past twenty-four hours had been overwhelming, to say the least. What was happening to her was all fairytale, romance novel stuff, not real life. In real life, she'd found who she thought was her king, and he'd turned out to be cruel dictator. What if her instincts were failing her again? What if Jeremy pulled a Nathan on her?

Being with Jeremy taught her an important lesson: She had never been in love with Nathan. With their breakup, her heart hadn't been broken, but her pride and spirit were. Pride was her downfall. Initially she had been too proud to let her family know she had made a

mistake. Then came the shame and guilt of knowing the situation she was in was all her fault. Miranda had warned her against marrying Nathan. Even her parents had misgivings. But she had been too pigheaded, too rebellious to listen. Truly in love with Jeremy, she couldn't fathom the pain she would have if she were wrong about him. If Jeremy hurt her, she wouldn't be able to just walk away with a bruised ego but her heart intact.

"What's that you're reading?" asked an attractive, middle-aged woman with a short afro and billion-watt smile.

Glad for a break from her non-relationship with Jeremy, she answered, "I just finished *Indigo* by Beverly Jenkins. This was my second romance. I actually liked them, which shocked the hell out of me." Sandra's mouth and eyes opened wide in surprise. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to curse."

The woman chuckled. "Don't worry yourself. I've said a few colorful words myself from time to time. I'm Bev." She held her hand out to shake.

"Sandra." They shook hands. "Pleased to meet you."

"Are you here for the Romance Slam Jam Conference?"

"Not really, but I'm seriously reconsidering." She glanced down at the second book she was carrying. Miranda had next day aired it to the hotel and insisted she read it. "Have you ever read anything by Francis Ray?"

"Oh yes, she's quite good."

"Do you actually believe in these romances? I mean the *love conquers all* and *love at first sight* mumbo jumbo?"

With a smile in her voice, she answered, "Yes, I believe in the 'mumbo jumbo.' Why don't you?"

“Don’t get me wrong. I used to, but my prince charming turned into a toad after we kissed. A mean, controlling, abusive toad at that.”

With a slight nod, Bev said, “I see. You’ve been burned by the fire once, and don’t want to be burned again.”

“Exactly! I need to have you talk to my sister. She just doesn’t get it. I’m never falling into that trap again. Never.”

A compassionate smile tipped Bev’s lips. “You know, just because it’s hot, doesn’t mean there’s fire. Passion, love, desire... all hot. I’d even say burning hot, but in a good way.” She stood to leave. “I’d best get back inside before they send a search party out for me. Come on down to the conference tomorrow and hang out with us.”

“I think I will. It was nice meeting you.”

“You, too.”

You did good, Miranda. This cruise is just what I need.

“Oh—my—God,” a young woman gushed and rushed across the deck toward Sandra. “Do you know who that was?” She pointed at the door Bev had just stepped through. “That’s THE Beverly Jenkins. I can’t believe I’m on the same cruise as Beverly Jenkins. I have got to get her autograph.”

Embarrassment warmed Sandra’s cheeks. Growing up, it seemed as though just about every other female was named Sandra. With the name Beverly being so common, she hadn’t considered the woman she had just met could be the author of the wonderful novel she had just read. “I know I did not just sit here and tell her... Never mind. I think I’ll go die now.”

Laughing, the young woman said, “Girl, don’t worry about it. I’ve been tripping all afternoon. I was on the elevator and realized Rochelle Alers was standing beside me. I just about

fainted.” She turned her cell phone screen for Sandra to see. “Look at this picture I took of you two. Would you like me to send it to your phone?”

“Oh thank you, I’ll have to forward it to my sister. She’s a huge romance fan.” She gave her the cell number.

“I’m not trying to get into your business.” She keyed in Sandra’s cell number. “But why would you let one bad relationship turn you off relationships all together?”

The price of this picture was a little bit too high for Sandra, but it was too late. There was a no return policy on it.

The young woman lifted her hands slightly. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked such a personal question. Don’t answer.”

“Oh no. It’s okay. I wish I knew the answer.”

“It’s such a calm night. Give it some thought. I’m sure it’ll come to you. By the way, my name is Reba.”

“I’m Sandra, pleased to meet you.”

“I hope to see you at the conference.” She stuffed her cell phone into her back pocket. “Let me get back inside and see who else I can just about faint over.” She chuckled and headed for the door.

Sandra relaxed on the lounge chair and looked over the calm sea. The sun had set a while ago, yet she still hadn’t gone to her room. She had been told the porters would place her bags outside of her door. She smiled, thinking she might just want to head on down to her room before she had to purchase a new wardrobe.

Why is it so hard? Why can't I move on? She picked up her purse and the two books she'd carried around with her. With four more days of her cruise left, there was plenty of time to do some serious internal scanning for the answers.

As beautiful as it was large, the *Destiny* was a magnificent ship. Whoever wrote the brochure wasn't kidding when they said the ship was as long as three football fields. Sandra would venture to guess she had walked just about all twelve decks. Once she finally found her room, she was past ready to call it an early night. Just as she had been told, her bags were sitting outside of the cabin door.

She slipped in the keycard and entered the room. To her surprise, tall, dark, and all too fine was exiting the bathroom with nothing on but a towel wrapped around his waist. A million and one thoughts flashed through her mind in the blink of an eye from full-blown lust to, "Am I being stalked?"

He stopped mid-stride.

"What are you doing in my room?" they said in unison.

The confusion in his eyes verified he wasn't some sort of high-tech, psycho stalker, but that didn't explain why he was in her room.

He brought her bags into the room fully through the narrow entranceway and closed the door. "What's going on?"

Dazed, she sat on the bed. No author would write a plot this unbelievable. "This isn't adding up. This is past coincidence. Cruise lines don't make this type of mistake." She closed her eyes as tight as she could and prayed harder than she had in years that what she thought happened hadn't really happened.

“I was supposed to fly first class but switched to coach,” she said timidly. “When I boarded, the seat next to yours was empty. Was it ever filled?” She peeked his way.

He shook his head no.

Dread filled her. “There’s only one explanation.”

“Miranda,” they said in unison.

“She’s dead meat!” Saundra pounded the bed and rose. Fury at an all time high, she paced the thin walkway from the door to the window. “What in the world was she thinking? Who does she think she is? How could she?” she verbally shot off faster than a speeding bullet. “Trapped. I walked right into her trap.” So disgusted she trembled, she bit out, “I knew she was up to something. I knew it!”

“I had a feeling she was up to something also, but this? Wow. Even for Miranda, this is over the top.” Jeremy sat on the bed.

Sexy, he was entirely too sexy with the light glistening of moisture on his body waiting for her to lick it off. Oh no. This wouldn’t work. She needed distance. Lots of distance. She sat on the bed with her back to him and focused on her anger at Miranda. “I’m so sorry about this. I shouldn’t have ignored my instincts.”

“I have never used a travel agent before. This isn’t quite what I expected,” he said with a bit of nervousness.

She turned toward him. “Please don’t turn my sister in—”

“Miranda’s your sister?”

“I’m afraid so.” She blew out a long breath. “I know what she’s done is as unethical as you can get, but she’s never done anything so…” She couldn’t think of an appropriate synonym for insane that wouldn’t make Miranda sound like the out of control nut she was.

“It’s all right, really.” He chuckled. “Miranda is what the young folk call a ‘hot mess.’”

“You have noooooo idea. She’s just bad. Has been her whole life. Instead of Miranda, Mama should have named her Manipulative. Don’t get me wrong. She tries to use her *powers* to better mankind,” she joked to lighten the mood. “But this is too much. She’s gone way past too far.”

At a complete loss, she had no idea what to do or say next. Soul mates, every fiber of her being screamed Jeremy was her soul mate, but she’d never considered the possibility of there truly being soul mates. At least not before she had read those dang blasted romance novels. *This is all Miranda’s fault.*

“Marcus has his hands full with her.”

“You can say that again.” Exhausted, she lowered her face into her palms. “So how do you know them?”

While he explained how he and Marcus had pledged the same fraternity, she thought of the many ways she could get even with her meddling sister. Death was too good for her. No, this had to be something drawn out.

“...but I think we should just share the cabin.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I spaced out for a second.”

Pearly whites shone bright and his dimples made an appearance. Sexy and cute equaled dangerous in her calculations. Staying in the cabin with him was a bad idea. A really, really bad idea.

“I said, we should share the cabin.”

“I don’t think so.”

“We are two mature, consenting adults. We shared a bed last night and—”

“That was different. I didn’t intend on sleeping with you; I fell asleep.”

“I will be on my best behavior. I promise.”

“I don’t know.”

There went that dimpled smile again. Clothes. The man needed to dress so she could think straight. She had life changing decisions to make, and all she could think about was snatching his towel and ending her five years of celibacy.

“First I need to call my beloved sister.” She speed dialed Miranda’s number.

“Hey, Sandra. How’s—”

“Oh my god!” Sandra said as if she’d been running. “The guy from the plane.” She drew in a staggered breath. “He’s stalking me. He’s a stalker.” She winked at Jeremy and continued her award winning performance.

“What? Wait a second.”

“No, you don’t understand. He’s been following me. Everywhere I go, he’s there. I’m on my way to security now.”

“Wait, wait, wait.”

“No, you’re not listening. That guy from the plane has been stalking me since the airport. He followed me to the hotel. He was lurking around my room. How did he find out where my room was? He just entered my cabin on the cruise. I barely got away.”

“Slow down. Let me speak.”

“I just called to let you know what’s going on in case something happens to me. Have the airlines track down the man in that first class seat I was supposed to be sitting beside.”

“But Sandra.”

“Oh my god! He’s behind me. I have to hurry.” She disconnected.

A look of awe on his face, Jeremy slowly said, "That was simply beautiful. You are definitely Miranda's sister."

Brow raised, lips pursed and arms folded over her chest, she said, "I'm not sure if that's a complement."

"In this instance, I meant it as a complement."

"In that case, thank you." Her phone rang, but she didn't answer. "It's Miranda. I can't deal with her right now. I'm going for a walk." She turned the cell phone off and tossed it to the side. "I need time to clear my mind." Keycard in hand and purse slung over her shoulder, she walked out.

Chapter Four

When Sandra initially walked into Jeremy's room, he thought his mind was playing tricks on him.

"Sisters... wow."

Now he could clearly see the resemblance. Both were attractive, petite women with a propensity toward the melodramatic. Chuckling lightly at Sandra's performance, all he could do was shake his head. If Sandra were even a tenth as "bad" as her sister, Marcus wouldn't be the only one with his hands full. But Jeremy was ready for the challenge.

"Sisters..."

The next move... The next move... What to do...? What to do...? He had thought he would have a week to decide the best way to pursue his reluctant Mrs. Right.

Sisters... This new revelation would take a bit to absorb.

He crossed over to the built-in desk, grabbed his cell phone and speed dialed Marcus.

"Hey, Jeremy, what's up?"

"Not much. Is Miranda around?" Though Marcus and Jeremy were best friends, Jeremy never called Miranda directly, even though the calls were to verify if she was cooking or should he bring carry out when he visited them at supper time. Somehow, he just felt calling her directly was a bit disrespectful to his and Marcus's friendship.

"She's thumping around up stairs. Wait a minute."

A few seconds later, he heard Marcus saying, "Are you all right, baby? You look sick."

"Oh, no, no, I'm fine," came Miranda's voice.

"Jeremy's on the phone for you."

"Did he sound angry?" she asked shakily.

“What did you do?”

The weary tone of Marcus’s voice brought a smile to Jeremy’s face. That woman was ALWAYS up to something. There was no way Sandra could even be a twentieth as bad as her sister.

“What did he say?” she asked.

Marcus blew out a belabored breath. “Jeremy, what has she done this time?”

“My cabin mate is none other than a certain travel agent’s sister, Sandra.”

“What...? Miranda!”

“Let me explain,” she cried.

Five minutes later, Marcus still hadn’t finished chastising Miranda. Jeremy prayed the children were nowhere within a hundred yards of the house to hear their father’s tirade.

“Jeremy. Look, man, Miranda will reimburse your vacation and pay to have you moved to a different cabin, won’t you Miranda?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” he heard in the background.

“That won’t be necessary. I just need to speak with Miranda.”

“Are you sure? She was so out of line on this one, you can’t even call it a line.”

“I’m sure. I just need to speak with her about Sandra.” He lay back on the bed. Speaking with Miranda was like inviting her to meddle in their life, but she knew Sandra better than anyone. The insight she could give would be invaluable.

“If you change your mind, let me know. How is Sandra?”

“Angry isn’t quite strong enough a word.”

“Anger is good. She just needs time to cool off, then she’ll be her old self again. Miranda, he wants to speak with you.”

“I don’t want to—”

“Woman, take the damn phone.”

A few seconds later, Miranda’s voice filled the line. “Jeremy, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to... I mean there is no excuse.”

“You’ve got to stop this behavior, Miranda. What are you teaching those boys?”

“I know. I know. It’s like I get started and can’t stop myself. Please allow me to pay for your vacation.”

“That won’t be necessary, but I do need your help.”

“Yes, anything.”

“What happened to Sandra? Who hurt her?”

“Hold up. I thought you two didn’t know each other. I mean... She just called saying you were stalking her. Are you saying you actually met?”

The thought of Sandra’s performance placed laughter in his voice. “Yes, we’ve gotten to know each other, but—”

“I knew it. I knew it! You two are made for each other!”

“Don’t start, Miranda!” came Marcus’s angry voice.

“I’m not starting anything, dang. Don’t you have some homework to grade?” she asked of her history professor husband. “Now back to you. What was she talking about security? She had me worried to death.”

“She was just giving you a dose of your own medicine.”

“I’ve been bamboozled!” Miranda broke out in laughter. “Oh no she didn’t. That was wrong.”

“I need to know what happened to her. Who hurt her?”

“Hold up now. First, I need to know what your intentions with my sister are? I was dead wrong on this. Acted in haste.”

“Miranda!” Marcus barked.

“Don’t Miranda me. I have a right to know if I need to pull the plug on this operation.”

“I’m in love with Saundra and want to make her my wife. Okay.”

“Excuse me? Did you say... Oh my God! It worked. It worked. I knew it. I knew it.

Marcus, book us a flight to Grand Cayman. I need to call my parents and let them know about the wedding.”

“What wedding?” he heard Marcus ask. “Tell Saundra to bring her butt back here and get married properly. Y’all Write women are entirely too dramatic.”

“Slow down, Miranda,” Jeremy said, sensing Miranda had slipped into her controlling, protective big sister mode. If he and Saundra were to have a real chance, he had to draw the line now and let the chips fall where they may. “There is no wedding, yet. I need to know what happened, then for you to step out of my way.”

“Excuse you?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but Saundra and I don’t need a matchmaker, plotting and scheming our lives.”

“Need I remind you, you wouldn’t be this far without my stepping in the way?”

“It’s not that you stepped in the way; it’s the how. I love you like a little sister. But Saundra is my heart. She doesn’t need or want you trying to control or manipulate her into doing your will.”

She sucked air through her teeth. “Fine.”

Saundra had met Nathan during her senior year of college. Miranda never liked Nathan and didn't agree with their relationship. It had nothing to do with him being thirteen years older than her baby sister. Something about the man just rubbed Miranda the wrong way. He would monopolize Saundra's time to ensure she couldn't spend time with her family and friends. Plus Saundra was only twenty at the time, which Miranda thought was much too young to even consider settling down.

A week after Saundra's graduation, she married Nathan. A week after that, he received a job offer in Iowa he just couldn't refuse. Saundra didn't want to leave her family and everything she knew in Dallas to move up north, but Nathan pointed out she didn't have a job yet and could start her career anywhere.

A month later, Saundra moved across the country with her husband. Things went down hill from there.

"I let her down."

"No, it wasn't your fault."

"But you don't understand. Before she left, we argued. I told her that when he turned on her, not to come running to me. I shut out my own sister. We didn't speak for years, and I was too stubborn to check on her. Too busy waiting for the day for her to say I was right. Then the day came..."

All he could hear was her crying. "It's okay, Miranda. You don't need to finish."

"I just wish that day had never come." She choked up.

A few seconds later, Marcus came on the line. "This is too much for Miranda. You go take care of your woman, and let me handle Miranda."

"I fully understand."

“Tell him, Marcus. Tell him the rest,” he heard Miranda plead.

“Baby, you need to lie down.”

“Tell him!”

Marcus blew out a breath. “Nathan was a first class ass. When Sandra got the courage to call home, she told Miranda everything, and you know how this crazy woman is. She was ready to call out a hit on homeboy. To make a long story short, Miranda *forgot* to tell me what was going on, went to Iowa with a few of her cousins, Nathan ended up in the hospital from a mysterious attack and Sandra returned home to Dallas.”

“Oh yeah, that sounds like Miranda. What about the divorce?”

“Sandra lost herself for a while, but came back stronger than before. She filed for divorce and said she wanted nothing from him but for him to leave her alone. He tried to intimidate her into returning to him, but she was with family again. Plus, there was no way in hell I’d allow anyone to harm her, including you. Got me?”

He liked how Marcus looked after Sandra, but that would be his job from now on.

“We’re good.”

“You know I had to make sure the air is clear. Look, I need to take care of my baby girl. Don’t let Sandra run.”



Sandra wandered about the Promenade deck, through the casino, which was jumping with too much life and excitement for her to deal with, and eventually found herself at the Apollo Bar. Had she just left a half-naked man in her cabin? Not just any naked man, but Jeremy King. The type of man romance novels were inspired from.

But what if this wasn't a romance? After ordering a Long Island Iced Tea, she went to find a seat in a corner somewhere to listen to the piano and vegetate.

"Hey, Sandra"

She turned and saw Reba sitting with two other women. "Hey ladies."

Reba stood and introduced Sandra to Toni and 'Cilla.

"Pleased to meet you both. Mind if I sit with you."

They all motioned toward the empty seat.

"Are you all here for the romance conference also?" Sandra took a seat.

"I try to come every year," Toni and 'Cilla said.

"I have a whole new respect for romance readers and authors." Sandra sipped her drink.

She hadn't eaten since breakfast with Jeremy and the *tea* was tasting quite good.

"You sound like you're still going through it," said Reba.

"You have no idea. Have any of you seen 'Stranger than Fiction' with Will Farrell?"

All three shook or said no.

"In it Will starts hearing a narrator in his head like his life were a novel. He begins to think he's crazy, but finds out that his life has become the work in progress of an author, and whatever she writes literally happens to him."

"That sounds really good," said Toni.

"It's a must see. Different than his usual roles." Sandra drank a little more. "Ever since I boarded the plane for Miami, my life has been the making of a romance novel, and I just don't know what to do. I mean, this is real life. What's been happening to me doesn't actually happen to real people."

"If you don't mind my asking, what's happened?" 'Cilla probed.

Two drinks later, she had spilled her guts about everything that had happened to her since she boarded the plane all the way until she left a towel clad Jeremy in the cabin.

“Let me make sure I heard correctly.” Reba scooted to the edge of her seat. “Did you say you left Mr. Tall Dark and All Too Fine alone in that cabin wearing nothing but a towel?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She tapped Sandra’s empty glass. “What are you drinking, because I want to steer clear of it?”

All four women burst out in laughter.

“You are so wrong for that.” Sandra wiped the laughter tears from her eyes. “Now don’t get me wrong. I made walking away sound way easier than it actually was.” The thought of making love with Jeremy had her juices flowing—literally. She all ready had more than enough on her mind. She didn’t need anything else clouding her judgment, so she had walked away before she had a chance to give into the temptation.

“And he held you all night and didn’t make a move on you.” Reba shook her head. “Girl, you’d better stop tripping. You don’t come across good men every day.”

“If he’s so good, then he will wait until I figure out which way is up. I’ve been discombobulated since I first saw him on the plane.”

Toni and ‘Cilla nodded in agreement.

Reba relaxed in her seat. “I think you’re acting ‘romance heroine’ and blowing this whole thing out of proportion. You have a man who obviously loves you, and you love him. It’s cut and dry. Black and white.”

“The good news is, since your life has become a romance, you’ll have a happy ending,” added Toni.

“Let me tell you about the first time I was introduced to ‘romance.’” Wishing she had eaten something before she had gone to the bar, Sandra’s stomach was beginning to object to the liquor. Just a little while longer, and she would go eat. “One of my friends who knew I was anti-romance novel said they had the perfect romance for me. That I’d love this one. Sooooo, I love to read. I figured, why not. I’ll give it a try. I *loved* the book. Turned out to be one of my favorite novels of all time.”

“So what’s the problem?” asked ‘Cilla.

“*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is not a romance, but a romantic tragedy. What if this... this... whatever it is that is happening to me isn’t a romance, but a romantic tragedy?”

Toni’s eyes lit up. “Oh I love Zora Neale Hurst, but yeah, that’s definitely a romantic tragedy.” Toni ordered another round of drinks for everyone.

“I really do need to get some food into my stomach.” Sandra liked hanging out with this crew. They were so laid back and welcomed her into their fold so easily. She would be sure to attend future Slam Jams with the ladies, but for now, she needed to decide what to do about Jeremy. The hour had grown late, so she may not be able to move to a different cabin until tomorrow.

The thought of another night in his arms took her mind where it shouldn’t be—exactly where she wanted to be. But she couldn’t. There was more than a night of mind-blowing sex on the line.

“Let’s finish up this round, then we can all grab something to eat,” Reba suggested.

“That’ll work,” Sandra agreed.

‘Cilla toyed with her apple martini. “I think you may be coming at this wrong. The judgment of a twenty year old is completely different than that of a thirty-four year old. I can’t

believe this Nathan fellow just turned into a monster over night. What signs did you miss, and is Jeremy showing any of them.”

Though she felt light-headed, she wanted to continue the conversation. She felt a break through in her near future. “Miranda didn’t like Nathan from day one. She’s actually a great judge of character.”

“Why didn’t you listen to her then?” Reba asked.

“Because she’s also an attention hog. Nathan was my first serious relationship, and I was spending time with him that I usually spent with her. She accused him of monopolizing my time, and looking back, I see her point. He was really slick with it.” She sipped at her drink. “He would plan excursions and dinners out on the town. How could I get mad at him for being attentive?”

“But when I’d try to plan something, he’d always make me feel guilty, as if I were saying his plans weren’t good enough. And family activities, he would come, but arrange for us to have another date or whatever so we’d have to leave early. He’d also invite Miranda, knowing she wouldn’t come. Who wants to be a third wheel? So when Miranda and I would argue, I’d point out that she was invited, and he wanted to spend time getting to know her also, but she was the one who always turned down the invitations.” She slowly shook her head and felt as if it were spinning. She leaned back in her seat.

“Needless to say, he was placing a wedge between us, and I fell right into the trap.”

“You say you are trapped a lot,” Cilla pointed out. “I think it’s time we gave your romance of a life a title.”

Reba sucked air through her teeth. “All I have to say is she left Mr. Tall, Dark and All Too Fine in nothing but a towel back in the cabin. The man held her *all night long!* The only

kind of trap she's been in since she boarded that plane is trapped in paradise. Again, stop acting like a romance heroine. This is real life. Go get your man."

"I'm not feeling very well." Sandra's stomach cramped up something terrible.

"You don't look much better," Reba teased. "I'd be sick too if I left God's gift to women in the cabin wearing *only a towel* while I was out here getting sauced with a bunch of women."

"Don't listen to Reba. She needs to read more romances. Toni and I are the experts. You're in a classic example of the dark moment portion of the novel. Take time to figure out what you ultimately want from Jeremy, then go for it. What do you want?"

It didn't take any soul searching or sobriety for her to know the answer. "Marriage," she reluctantly admitted.

"From all you've said, he's the marrying type and perfect for you," Toni added.

"But we just met. How can I want to marry a man I don't truly know?"

"See, that's your problem there." Cilla took another sip of her apple martini. "You're trying to make an emotional piece fit into a logical hole. It doesn't work like that. Sometimes you just have to step out on faith."

Reba rapped her nails on the table, drawing everyone's attention. "Look at the door. Do you see what I see? That man is toooooo fine." The women snuck peeks toward the door.

Sandra's eyes connected with Jeremy's, and her heart did that skip a beat thing she had heard happens in romance novels. In the past she had thought for sure that was an indication of some sort of heart attack, but her cynicism was nowhere in sight.

Long, swift strides brought Jeremy to their table, but his movements seemed elongated to her.

"Hello, ladies." He knelt before Sandra.

“Hello, Jeremy.” They giggled and tipped their drinks his way.

He took Sandra’s hands into his and gazed into her eyes. Oh how she loved the depth of his dark eyes, but right now they reminded her of the richest coffee. She could really use a cup. And a muffin. Make that two. “I don’t feel very well.”

“How much have you had to drink?”

“Too much. My stomach is on fire and my head is going to pop off any second now.”

Chuckling, he wrapped her arms around his neck. “Well, we can’t have that, can we?”

“I kind of like my head. I’d like to keep it.” She leaned her throbbing head on his shoulder and allowed him to lift her.

“Goodnight, ladies.”

“Goodnight, Jeremy...” they cooed with a mixture of giggles.

As Jeremy carried her off, Sandra heard Reba throw out, “You can trap me in paradise with a man like that any day.”

Chapter Five

As if it weren't humiliating enough to be carried across a busy ship because she was too sloshed to walk, Sandra knew what was left of the liquor in her stomach would be making an appearance soon. Jeremy lowered her onto the bed, and she rushed into the tiny bathroom. Puking into the toilet was not cute no matter what pose you struck, so she didn't even try.

"You need some food in your stomach," he said from the doorway.

Dry heaves followed her Long Island Iced Tea explosion. *Never again*, she swore. Never again would she drink on an empty stomach. She felt his hand caress her back, which made her feel even worse. Everything she hated about the romance novel heroine stereotype, she had become since she first set eyes on Jeremy. Was this what true love reduced you to? If so, she didn't want any parts of it.

He dampened a hand towel, then helped her stand and wiped her face. "You make a cute drunk," he teased.

She licked her tongue out at him and wished the blasted thing would fall out of her mouth. It tasted like something had died on it three weeks ago. "Toothbrush. Have you seen my small duffle?"

He stepped out and returned with her patchwork duffle.

"You are a savior." She dug through and found her toothbrush and paste. "Thanks for finding me."

"It's no problem. I spoke with Miranda." He leaned his long body against the doorframe.

"I'm afraid to even ask." She began brushing her teeth.

"All I can say is don't be surprised if there is a wedding party waiting for us in Grand Cayman."

Choking on toothpaste, she fanned at the tears in her eyes. “Grand Cayman?” she barely got out. “She’s special.”

“You can say that again. The pizza on board is quite good. I’ve already had two. What type do you want?”

“How can you ask an inebriated woman such a complicated question?” She brushed her tongue. She was so hungry she didn’t care what kind of pizza he brought. “Spinach, goat cheese, artichokes, mushrooms and onions. If they don’t have that, pepperoni will do.”

He stared at her a few moments, as if to see if she were serious.

“What?” She hunched her shoulders.

“I’m just wondering what you’ll eat when you’re pregnant with my baby.” Before she could comprehend what he’d said or comment, he kissed her on the forehead. “I’ll be right back.” He left her standing there with a small amount of toothpaste on the front on her shirt.

“Great,” she grumbled. She drug herself over to her suitcase, which Jeremy had set in the closet. She could have sworn he’d said something about having a baby, but that didn’t make sense. It must have been the booze hearing. After pulling out fresh panties and her favorite baggy T-shirt, she undressed and hopped into the shower. This wasn’t the first time she’d had a little too much to drink, but this was the first time it had snuck up on her so quickly. The water felt like acid pellets against her skin and sounded like World War III. She quickly lathered up and rinsed off. She wanted to make a call before Jeremy returned.

After dressing, she found her phone and dialed Miranda’s number.

“Where have you been? I’ve left a million messages.”

“You are entirely too loud.” She pulled back the cushy, down comforter and sheet. “Did I wake you?”

“No.”

“Too bad. So explain to me what goes through your mind when you’re making arrangements to have your baby sister room with a complete stranger. Nix that. Make it a strange man.” She slid into the bed and settled back on the pillows.

“So my methods are a tad bit controversial, the results are what matters.”

Saundra’s laugh echoed in her head and intensified the throbbing pain. “You really believe that, don’t you?”

“You haven’t kicked Jeremy out of the cabin, have you?”

“It’s late and he hasn’t done anything wrong. If anyone is changing cabins, it will be me. Why should he be inconvenienced because I have a nut for a sister? And what is this talk about a Grand Cayman wedding? Stop. Just stop. I’m calling Mama in the morning to make sure you haven’t told her any of this craziness.”

“It’s not craziness. You’re in love.”

“Why are you so gung ho about this? And please speak softly. I have the makings of a mega-headache coming.” Eyes closed, she massaged her temples.

“We’ve been tip-towing around our issue for years.”

“What issue? The way you always meddle in my business? I haven’t tiptoed around that. I’ve asked—flat out told you to stop—but there’s no stopping you.”

“It’s time to lay all of our cards out on the table. We need to go back to what happened between us when you started seeing Nathan.”

Regretting this call, especially in her current state, she said, “That’s over with.”

“No it’s not. You don’t trust yourself when it comes to relationships because of what happened.”

“Helllllllooo! I married a man who moved me out to the middle of nowhere so he could beat me whenever the mood hit him. I have legitimate reasons to doubt my judgment in the relationship department.”

“But, Sandra.”

“Don’t ‘Sandra’ me. Even a drunk could figure that one out.”

“Why did you marry Nathan? You didn’t love him.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Liar. Oh, I take it back. You loved him, but you weren’t *in* love with him. And I’m ashamed of myself for my part in that disaster, but you married Nathan out of spite.”

“I did not.” She sat up in bed to defend herself.

“Oh please. Give me a break. Yes, you were interested in him initially, but because I voiced my dislike of him so... shall we say... colorfully, you began seeing him more. The more I objected, the more *in love* with him you claimed to be. I should have backed off, but no. I kept pushing you into his arms.”

“It was my choice.” Thinking back, she had been rebelling against Miranda, against her family. Who where they to tell her who she could and couldn’t date. She had earned her bachelors when she was only twenty years old. Unlike Miranda, had never been in any serious trouble and was very responsible and mature for her age. A late bloomer, she hadn’t even dated until her junior year of college.

“You couldn’t see his faults because you were concentrating on me. I knew you couldn’t see clearly. I shouldn’t have stood by to teach you a lesson.” Miranda sniffed.

Tears fell from Sandra’s eyes. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“But I played a role. A major role. When I think of what he put you through... How one of my stupid games hurt you. I’m so sorry. Please, baby. Don’t pass up on Jeremy because of Nathan. Your judgment is right on. Just as it always has been.”

“What you’re saying sounds so right, but...”

“But nothing. You were only twenty years old. You can’t be held responsible for your actions.”

They both released anxious laughter.

“You are my favorite nut of all times.” Sandra calmed. “I can’t really think straight right now. I’ve had too much to drink.”

Miranda giggled. “No wonder you’ve let me ramble so long. If you were sober, you would have hung up long ago. Where’s Jeremy?”

“He went to get me something to eat.” She thought about Marcus and Miranda’s relationship. “Aren’t opposites supposed to attract. Jeremy and I are so much alike. How will this work? Look at you and Marcus. Because you two are so different, it works.”

“How do I explain this...? Oh, I know. Marcus is so straight and narrow that he needs a high-strung, exciting woman to bring him out of his shell. We balance each other out. Where as you are all ready balanced. If you marry a man who isn’t balanced, you’ll be thrown out of whack. That’s why you and Jeremy are perfect for each other. I’ve never met two more boringly balanced individuals. ”

“This is scary.” She giggled. “That actually made sense. You’re unbalanced and need someone on the straight and narrow to keep you from tipping over.”

“You’re not funny.”

“Yes I am.” She paused. “Jeremy’s one of the good guys, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he’s one of the good guys. Now just remember that when you’re sober.”

The cabin door opened. “I need to get off the phone.”

“Is Jeremy back?”

“It’s either Jeremy or a really long arm connected to a pizza box. Do you think an arm can be sexy?”

“Five years is too long to go without. Don’t eat too much, you’ll throw up. Love you.”

“Love you, too.” Sandra disconnected.

Jeremy fully entered the room and went to the bedside. Yeah, five years was way too long in her estimation. Everything the man did had her ready to rip off his clothes.

“You and Miranda kiss and make up?”

“All is right in the Write sister world.” She drew in a deep breath. *Food, food, concentrate on the food, not the man carrying it.* “That smells delicious.”

He opened the box and displayed the most beautiful goat cheese, spinach, artichoke, mushroom and onion pizza she had ever seen in her life. Oh yeah, he was definitely a keeper.

“I’m still feeling queasy. I hope this doesn’t make a return performance.”

“You don’t drink much, do you?”

“No, not really. I can count the times I’ve had too much on three fingers.” She patted the bed beside her. “Eat with me.”



The hunger in Sandra’s eyes was for more than the pizza she was devouring, but Jeremy couldn’t make love to her yet. When they made love, she would have a clear mind. Until then, he’d have to settle for ice cold showers. He lathered up the bar of soap and prepared for the long night ahead of holding the woman he loved without being able to make love with her.

His patience had already worn thin. Usually, when he saw what he wanted, he went for it.
I have to be me. He smoothed the lather over his face. “I have to be me.”

They had done the impossible and fallen in love romance-novel style. The how didn't matter. All that mattered was she was his, and after tomorrow, she wouldn't be able to live in denial any longer.

Chapter Six

Saundra lay in bed and watched Jeremy sleep. After his abrupt shower last night, he had crawled into bed with her without a word and held her until she'd fallen asleep. Just what she had needed.

With the rising of the sun came quite a bit of clarity. The points Miranda had made during their conversation had remained with her. She was only twenty and in a completely different frame of mind when she'd met Nathan than she was in now. But with as loopy as she'd been acting over the past few days, she wouldn't blame Jeremy for running as fast and as far away as he could. Then add in Miranda on top with her brand of craziness. Any man in his right mind would avoid her family.

I have been seriously tripping.

In her mind, she'd been worried about the prospect of marriage with him, and the poor man hadn't even said he wanted to be more than friends. Shoot, he hadn't even tried to kiss her. Wright women had a tendency toward the melodramatic and easily blew things out of proportion. With her luck, she had done just that.

Her cell phone beeped, indicating a text message.

The caller ID brought a smile to her face. *Reba.*

We won't be angry if we don't see you today! LOL

Entirely too crazy. I need to introduce her to Miranda. She felt Jeremy stir behind her. She glanced over her shoulder just in time to see a glimpse of his firm butt as he entered the bathroom. Lord knew he could wear the hell out of a pair of briefs.

She dialed Reba's number.

"What are you doing on this phone, woman? Did you leave that man in a towel again?"

Reba teased.

"He's in the shower." *He has got to be the cleanest man ever.*

"Ooooo, I see potential there. Girl, I need to work on you. Get off the phone and join him. Remember, condoms are your friends." She disconnected.

I know she didn't just hang up on me. Shaking her head, she re-fluffed her pillow and rested. She had brushed her teeth and freshened up when she'd first woken over an hour ago, but she still didn't feel like getting up and starting the day. Maybe by noon she'd be ready to head over to the conference and listen to one of the book discussions, but for now, she felt like being a slug.

She didn't know what to say to or do about Jeremy. Awkward was putting it lightly. She wished she could rewind the past forty-eight hours and start over or at least rewrite those chapters of her life.

Just as she was dozing off, she felt Jeremy's strong arms spoon her close to his body. Both nights that he had held her, she'd felt his hardness against her backside. But always the gentleman, she also felt him backing away when he would wake. This time he didn't back away, and she was glad.

This was the life. Within his arms, she felt loved. She rested her hand atop his. "I could stay here forever," she whispered.

He nuzzled her neck, softly saying, "I owe you an apology."

With the way her body warmed from the gentle grinding of his hardness, she couldn't imagine what he wanted to apologize for.

“I haven’t been myself lately.” He nibbled along her ear lobe. She had forgotten how good it felt.

“How so?” She rolled over to face him.

Gazing deep into her eyes, he said, “If I were myself, I would have told you yesterday that I’ve fallen in love with you.”

He took her bottom lip into his mouth and nibbled until she tingled. He had this nibbling thing down. The sensations going through her body had her so rattled, she couldn’t even comment on what he had said. These sensations had nothing to do with the five-year hiatus she’d had from sex. She had never experienced anything like this before and knew she would never again with anyone else. Jeremy was truly her king. This would be the first time she actually made love.

“I love you.” She pulled back. “I have since you rescued my luggage from Senior Rude.”

“That long?”

“Well, maybe not until you wanted to sample each other’s meals at the restaurant.” Her eyes traveled along his athletic torso, enjoying every ripple. Not too large or too small, just right. She pulled her still sensitive bottom lip into her mouth. “Where do we go from here?” she asked nervously.

“Shhhhhh.” He cupped her face in his hands, bent, and brushed his lips over hers.

The light yet potent bushing touched her core and left her wanting, needing more. Heart and mind racing, she slowly took his bottom lip into her mouth and suckled.

He moaned his satisfaction of her boldness, wrapped his arms around her and took control of the kiss. She opened freely and tasted every succulent inch of his mouth. Overwhelmed, she backed away to catch her breath.

He returned his oral assault to her ear, softly saying, “Do you want me to stop?” He slipped his large hand under her T-shirt and fondled her breast.

If he stopped, there *would* be a problem. A half-sighed, half-moaned “No,” was the best she could manage as he pulled the T-shirt over her head and tossed it to the side. Every kiss laid on her bare shoulder disseminated warm waves of passion throughout her body. He lowered himself and took one of her caramel peaks into his mouth licking, flicking, caressing her into full submission.

Saundra grew weak in his arms. He had melted her, and she couldn’t believe it would get any better. But better it became as his thick fingers nudged her panties to the side, then entered her. Nathan and the other man she had been with were straight missionary style with little to no foreplay. This new experience excited and worried her. What if she couldn’t pleasure him as he pleased her?

As if he sensed her trepidation, he murmured, “It’s all right, baby.” He suckled along her inner thigh as he removed her panties, causing her legs to tremble with need. “You’re hot and wet for me.” He took off his briefs and lay proudly with his hardness resting heavily against her thigh. “Feel me.”

Holding him, she wanted to do a whole lot more than touch him. Power, a throbbing power was in her hand. A throbbing that matched the throb between her legs. With her hand wrapped around him, she slowly stroked from tip to base, base to tip and repeated the motion.

“That’s it,” he groaned more than said. His fingers slipped into her and continued doing their fancy work. Just as she thought she couldn’t stand the intensity anymore, he proved her wrong.

His mouth joined his fingers in a beautiful duet of ecstasy. With every flick and lick of his tongue, sensually charged shards shot through her, sending her into a tailspin. She reached to grasp something, anything before she blew away. He held her waist down and continued his siege until her climax knocked her breath away. Once she returned to earth, he seared a trail of kisses from her panty line, along her waist, between her breasts, along her neck to her ear.

“I love it when you cry out for me.”

Dazed and heart beating dangerously fast, she said, “Teach me how to do the same for you.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close for a deep, passionate kiss. He eased his hand beneath her and spun them both over so she’d be on top.

A quick study, while stroking him with her hand, she began with her mouth on his chest. Strokes, licks, flicks, caresses, and kisses pushed him into the frenzy he’d put her in. Power, an odd sense of power flowed through her.

She lowered herself and examined him carefully. “I’m sorry, I’ve never done this before.” She touched his tip with her tongue and swirled the wetness. “Umm salty.” She licked off the rest, then peeked up and connected with the passion in his eyes. Bev had been correct. Not all heat meant fire, and this form of burning was quite good.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked. “You look strained.”

“No, baby,” he caressed her back, “continue exploring. It feels good.”

She suckled along his shaft, then took him into her mouth. She’d seen this done, but actually doing it sent a rush through her. In, out, deeper, umm she could do this all day. Before long, she figured out how to stroke him with her hand and work her mouth and tongue at the same time.

His fingers weaved through the curls in her hair to her scalp and massaged. “I don’t want you to stop, but I need for you to stop.” He pulled her up by the arms and flipped them over so he’d be on top.

Having such a large man over her didn’t intimidate her in the least, especially since that man was her king. He reached over to the dresser and grabbed a condom. He must have placed them there after his shower, because she hadn’t noticed them before. He opened the packet and protected them both, then positioned himself between her legs.

A little nervous—a lot nervous—she studied every inch of his handsome face. This was the man she wanted to share her life with; the one who had restored her trust. “I am truly in love with you.”

Lowering himself, he kissed her gently, then penetrated oh so shallow and waited. A tight fit. She couldn’t remember telling him how long it had been since her last sexual contact. She prayed she hadn’t told him when she’d been intoxicated. Either way, she was grateful he was taking it slow. As she became more accustomed to his body, he kept his strokes shallow.

“How is that?” he asked, his voice strained.

“Deeper,” she breathed and gyrated beneath him. Each stroke probed deeper and deeper, pushing her closer and closer to the edge.

Climax threatening to overtake her, she drew in one of her legs, changing her angle. “Jeremy,” she panted. “Umm this umm.” Implosion shouldn’t feel so good.

He trapped her knee under his arm and continued pumping. Her body sheathed him perfectly. Caressing, pulling, now tightening with each stroke. His gaze locked onto hers. She gripped his arms in hopes of not flying away as she cried out. Their climaxes ran together, merging, binding their souls together.

They needed to shower, but neither wanted to move. Jeremy brushed his lips over Sandra's. "You're my heart. I love you so much, that if you wanted to leave, I'd let you go."

She lay atop him and rested her head on his chest. "I'm not going anywhere. I plan to stay trapped in paradise with you forever."

EPILOGUE

The next day, Cayman Islands, Grand Cayman

As the shuttle boat that carried them from the Destiny to the pier readied to dock, Sandra found herself a tad bit disappointed.

Jeremy drew her hand to his heart. "Is something wrong?"

She looked over the throngs of people exiting the boat, rushing to the shops that lined the shore. "I just..." She sighed. "In a way, I expected to see Miranda."

Chuckling, he stood and pulled her along. "That makes two of us. She is out of her mind."

They followed the line of people onto shore, then strolled hand in hand along the boulevard. The shops and street vendors weren't quite ready for customers yet, so they found a shady spot to sit and people watched.

"There they are!"

Sandra and Jeremy looked down the boulevard and saw Miranda flailing her arms and running toward them.

"It's them! I found them!" Not too far behind were Marcus, the Wright family and some people Sandra didn't know.

A deep belly-laugh erupted from Jeremy as he stood. "That's my parents. She actually did it!" He drew Sandra into his arms. "I pray you want to marry me as much as I want to marry you, because I don't think we have much choice in the matter," he joked.

"I'd love nothing more."

He bent and kissed her.

Miranda stopped short of the couple. “Save that for the honeymoon.” She grabbed Sandra by the hand and pulled her into her embrace. “I’m so happy for you.” She released her. “We have a ceremony to get ready for.”

“Can I at least introduce my fiancée to my parents?” Jeremy asked.

“Yeah, Miranda, he hasn’t met Mom and Dad,” she got out just as the rest of the family arrived.

“Two minutes, then we have to go. We’re on a tight schedule here. The wedding starts at eleven.”

“But we don’t have proper licensing or anything. I don’t know how to get married in another country.”

Disappointment clouded Miranda’s face. “Who do you think you’re dealing with here? I’ve had this planed for months. Everything has been taken care of.”

“Of course you have.”

After proper introductions to the family members, the couple was whisked away to begin their happily ever after.

THE END

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This is my second story with physical abuse as a backdrop. If you know someone or are someone in an abusive relationship, you may not have any idea what to do or where to go. Here is a good place to start: <http://www.domesticviolence.org/>

My other title that has domestic violence as a backdrop is *Whisper Something Sweet* and won the 2008 Emma Award for Best Steamy Romance of the year. Visit my website <http://deatrikingbey.com> for information on my releases and lots of good stuff.