

# Risking It All

By

Jennifer Schmidt

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**SUMMARY:** She was the fresh faced college student warned to stay away from his womanizing ways. He was the campus Casanova intent on living up to his bad boy reputation. But it only takes one run in for Kennedy Monroe to change her mind about Memphis Adams.

Twelve years later the duo are closer than ever, the best of friends, but one night changes everything and soon Kennedy finds herself risking it all.

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The Writer's Coffee Shop  
(Australia) PO Box 447 Cherrybrook NSW 2126 (USA) PO Box 2116 Waxahachie TX  
75168

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# Also by Jennifer Schmidt

Last Call

A Christmas Kiss

# Chapter 1

The shrill beeping of the alarm clock woke Kennedy Monroe out of her deep sleep. Keeping her eyes closed, she slid her arm out from under her pillow and felt around the night table in search of the offensive sound. Her hand connected with the little black clock, and she slid her fingers along the side until she found the switch to silence the room again.

Kennedy yawned and turned her head to the opposite side of the bed as she opened her eyes. The bed was bare. The faint scent of men's cologne lingered on the sheets; the only proof she hadn't been alone last night.

Kennedy frowned. She looked at the empty side of the bed through sleepy eyes, wondering what time her bedmate had snuck out. She usually heard him leave, or he would at least wake her with a soft kiss good-bye before taking off. She ran her hand over the cold sheets; he'd been gone for hours.

She pulled his pillow to her side, buried her face, and inhaled his scent. She smiled, closing her eyes as images of last night's activities replayed behind her lids. Her body tingled in response, and she felt a pang of disappointment he wasn't there to relieve the ache between her thighs.

Kennedy sighed and hugged the pillow closer to her body. Her cell phone came to life from the night table, ringing out the older reggae song Sweat by Inner Circle. Her smile grew as she reached for the phone and greeted the caller with a husky, "Good morning, sexy."

"Hello, beautiful." His deep voice always made her shiver. "Sleep well?"

"Mmm, very well." She flipped over onto her back.

"Was my little minx naughty last night?"

"Naughty but very, very nice," she replied, and he laughed.

"I take it Brooks made it home okay."

Kennedy grinned at the thought of the night before.

"Yes, he did."

Memphis Adams chuckled on the other end of the phone.

“Will he be joining us for breakfast this morning?”

Kennedy’s smile slipped into another frown.

“No. I don’t really know where he is,” she said. “He left this morning.”

“Hmm. Well, if you hear from him before we leave, let him know he’s welcome to join us. I’ll be there to pick you up in twenty.”

Kennedy’s smile returned. “I’m counting the minutes. I’ve missed you.”

“Missed you, too, beautiful,” he told her. “See you soon.”

Kennedy ended the call and tossed off the covers. The silly little grin never left her face as she hurried to the bathroom and turned on the shower, quickly testing the water with her hand before stripping off her black teddy and climbing under the warm spray. She tipped her head back, letting the water run down her face while she massaged a glob of shampoo through her thick, dark curls. The suds slid down her body, covering her skin with foam. She rinsed her hair quickly, grabbed her body wash, and squeezed a large amount of the coconut-scented wash onto her loofah.

When she was through, Kennedy shut off the shower, quickly dried herself, and wrapped the towel around her body. She pulled her hair into a wet ponytail and kicked the discarded teddy out of the way, not really liking the damn thing. She only wore it for Brooks, anyway.

Kennedy wiped the steam off the bathroom mirror and thought about the two men in her life and how different they were.

Everyone around campus knew who Memphis Adams was when they had attended the University of British Columbia. His face was the only one pointed out to Kennedy the first days of her freshman year. Whether it was girls warning her to stay away from the cocky, womanizing bad boy, or girls swooning over his charming smile and mischievous blue eyes, his name was on everyone’s lips. The boys wanted to be him whether they admitted it or not, and the girls wanted to screw him. Or had already.

Kennedy soon learned there were three types of women in her university: the ones who were bitter because they were the discarded women of Memphis's past, the ones who were hoping to have the chance to be bitter, discarded women, and the ones who had no interest in any way toward him. After hearing all the horror stories about the self-proclaimed Casanova,

Kennedy personally thought lesbians were the lucky ones. At least they didn't have to put up with Memphis's "if it walks, talks, and acts like a girl, then it's suitable for fucking" attitude.

Not that she didn't like what she saw. After all, she was a healthy, straight, sexually active female and Memphis Adams was definitely easy on the eyes. Standing around six feet with a fairly average lean build, he kept his black hair shaggy, the front almost falling over his eyes when he flashed his irresistible grin, which charmed the pants off any woman. He sported a black leather jacket and torn jeans, all while straddling his big, bad Hayabusa motorcycle, a look he pulled off well. If the stories told by the bitter and discarded were true, he was an animal between the sheets—or against the wall, in the classrooms, in the back of some random vehicle, or even on that lucky bike.

Oh, Kennedy definitely looked, and liked what she saw. But easy on the eyes wasn't worth carrying around the resentment that seemed to follow every woman Memphis seduced. Besides, she was shy, book-smart Kennedy Monroe. She'd much rather spend her nights reading or studying than hang with his harem while he guzzled beer straight from the keg. She liked to keep her feet firmly on the ground rather than speeding down the street on the back of some motorcycle. It wasn't that she didn't know how to have fun—she was far from a prude—but Memphis was out of her league. If she were honest with herself, the guy intimidated her, not in a threatening way, but she had a feeling if she let herself get too close he would be her downfall. It was much safer to stay away and not become infatuated with the idea of Memphis Adams.

Until all that changed six months into her freshman year. She had been walking back to the dorm, her head swarming with ideas on a paper she had to write, when she smacked right into Mr. Easy-on-the-eyes himself. Kennedy's books had slipped from her grasp, landing at her feet in a big heap, as she stared up at Memphis's grinning face.

“Now you I haven’t met,” he said to her. “I thought I knew every woman there is in this school.”

“So I’ve heard,” Kennedy replied dryly.

Memphis’s grin widened. “You’ve talked about me.”

Her cheeks burned, and she dropped her eyes to her fallen books, quickly kneeling to pick them up and avoid his eyes.

But he wasn’t easily blown off. Memphis knelt down beside her, picked up one of the books, and slowly handed it to her.

“That can only mean you know I’m Memphis Adams,” he added.

“Doesn’t everyone know who you are?” She snatched the book away from him and tried to glare at him. “You’re wasting your time if you think I’m about to be the next notch on your bedpost.”

Memphis threw back his head and laughed so loud it drew curious gazes, which embarrassed Kennedy. She scooped up the rest of her books and stood, and was about to walk away when he grabbed her hand and stopped her.

A jolt shot through her hand and up her arm, and she was positive it shocked her heart and sent it pounding. She stared down at their joined hands, unable to force her eyes away, only able to feel the tingling running over her flesh.

“Wait.” He smiled at her. “I think I underestimated you.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be so quick to judge based on your past experiences of how fast a girl will jump into bed with you,” she snapped, irritated by her body’s reaction to his hand on her skin.

He raised an eyebrow and smirked as he stood.

“Why do you assume I want you to jump into my bed?” he asked, still not releasing her hand.



“Oh, please.” Kennedy smirked and snatched her hand away, hoping he hadn’t noticed how sweaty her palm had become while in his grasp. “Like I said, everyone knows who you are.”

“You make that sound like a bad thing.” He crossed his arms and gave her another pantie-drenching smile. “I wasn’t aware being me was so horrible.”

“From what I’ve heard, being you isn’t horrible.”

“Then there’s no harm in having a little dinner with me since I’m not so horrible.”

Kennedy swallowed back the “yes” that wanted to burst from her lips and shook her head, taking a small step back.

“I’m not interested in being added to your list of women. Ever,” she said.

His grin remained in place as he leaned forward and said, “You’ve just issued a challenge, Kennedy Monroe. I look forward to it.” She opened her mouth to ask him how he knew who she was, but he leaned in even closer, so his mouth was practically touching her ear, and whispered, “Just because we haven’t met doesn’t mean I don’t know who you are.”

Kennedy shivered like she had that day as she remembered their first meeting and the seductive way the words rolled off his tongue when he spoke in her ear.

She expected him to live up to his challenge and make a pest of himself, but he didn’t. She thought he would conveniently end up wherever she was, trying to flatter his way into her bed, but Kennedy only saw him around campus, watching her but never making a move to approach her. And damn it, even though she had acted cold toward him, she liked the attention he gave her.

A month after her collision with Memphis in front of the dorm, Kennedy had been enjoying an afternoon of no class, strolling along Vancouver’s waterfront, when she spied him photographing the ocean.

She stopped and watched him as he took careful aim with his lens and snapped off a round of pictures. For the past month her thoughts had been

consumed with this man, and here he was, on the same waterfront as she was. He paused, lowering the camera to observe a couple strolling along the beach, and then called out to them. Kennedy assumed he asked if he could photograph them because when they started walking again he pointed the lens in their direction.

She stood there for a while, watching as he interacted with people, snapping pictures of random individuals or structures. She tilted her head, smiling as he bent to retrieve a little boy's Frisbee and tossed it back to him. Seeing him out there, he looked like a completely different person than the one everyone described to her. She didn't know him very well—or at all, really—but she could tell he was happy in that moment. Memphis was doing something he loved.

She figured the leather jacket, ripped jeans, and motorcycle created the facade he used to keep people from knowing the real Memphis Adams. He only used it to pick up chicks and have a good time, but out there, staring at the water, was the real Memphis.

He didn't have his armor on out there. The leather was replaced with a gray wife-beater that clung nicely to his upper body and black board shorts hung where his ripped jeans usually rode low on his hips. He was barefoot, and she imagined how warm the sand must have felt on his feet.

It was that Memphis Adams she decided in that moment she wanted to get to know.

So she approached him. When he saw her, he smiled and slowly lifted his camera, silently asking permission to shoot her. She shrugged, as if to say, "what the hell," and nodded.

"I didn't think of you as the artistic type," she told him.

"Maybe you shouldn't judge people by what others say about them," he replied.

Kennedy smiled sheepishly and looked down at the sand, kicking it with the toe of her sandal.

"I'm not going to have sex with you, Kennedy," he declared out of the blue.

She looked up, surprised and disappointed by his statement.

“Why not?” she asked, and blushed at the way the question sounded.

Memphis chuckled before saying, “I’ve been watching you, and I think you’re too special for that.” She resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the line, and he continued, “There’s something about you that makes me want to know you. I want to be your friend, Kennedy, and if I fuck you, I wouldn’t be.”

Kennedy stared at him, stunned, as the slight wind whipped her hair around her face.

Be friends with the campus Casanova? Was that even possible? Did he have any female friends? Did he even know how to be friends with a woman? And how could she be certain this wasn’t some reverse- psychology ploy to get her between the sheets?

She searched his face, looking for something that would trigger her sixth sense and twist her stomach in the way it did when she knew she was about to do something she would regret.

But she felt none of that.

The only thing her sixth sense was telling her was, for whatever reason, she could trust Memphis. She wanted to trust him and know who he really was. Wasn’t that the reason she had approached him, after all?

Finally, she nodded.

“I’d like that. To be your friend,” she added and he smiled.

They had been inseparable from that day forward. Rumors started that they were dating, and the legions of Memphis’s discarded and hopefuls—as Kennedy liked to refer to the women—wanted to know how she tamed the wild playboy. Despite denying there was anything going on besides friendship, her fellow dorm mates couldn’t wait to run back to her when they spotted Memphis with other women, smirking when they tattled on his activities as if to say, “I told you so.”

Kennedy laughed at how petty they were to try and destroy what they believed was a monogamous relationship. Memphis was true to his word and never tried to make a move on her. And buried deep down, Kennedy was more than a little disappointed. But what she gained by being friends with him was much more than what any crush she had on her best friend could have given her. She knew things about Memphis that no one else knew. He trusted her in ways he never trusted anyone. That was worth more than a roll in the hay with her number one forbidden desire.

In return, Memphis taught her things about herself. He showed her it was okay to lose control every once in a while, that flying down a dirt path to a secluded hideaway on the back of a motorcycle was actually fun. He made her open her eyes and see that she didn't have to pick the safe career her parents wanted her to have; it was okay to choose something she really wanted to do and not something they wanted her to do.

Memphis Adams turned out to be the yin to her yang. They were opposites who completed one another.

Even after university they never strayed too far apart. They still lived in Vancouver, blocks from each other, only apart when Memphis was away on a work assignment. He was still the carefree spirit he'd been in college, not wanting to be tied down to one person for too long.

But because of him she was different. Kennedy didn't settle for less than what she wanted now. She went after it and refused to give up until she got it. There was no second-guessing if what she was doing with her career was really the smartest decision for her to make. She still carried with her the lesson he had taught her long ago about being who she wanted to be, not who people expected her to be.

He had been a part of her life for almost twelve years, and she couldn't picture a life without him in it.

Kennedy sighed, snapping herself back to the present as she pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and grabbed a hoodie to throw on over top of that to keep the chill away. She took her phone off the nightstand, brushing her fingers along the bottom of the picture frame that held the photo of her and the other man in her life.

Ian Brooks was the opposite of Memphis in so many ways. Brooks, as he was known by all his friends, was the head neurosurgeon at Vancouver General Hospital. Both men were hardworking and passionate about what they did, but Brooks played it safe. He was focused on his career and had made it his life since he entered med school. At forty-two he was thirteen years older than Kennedy and one of the most respected doctors in his field.

They had met two years ago when Memphis had been brought into the ER after skidding out of control on his motorcycle while driving too fast in the rain. Thankfully, he hadn't been badly hurt, a few minor scrapes and bruises and a concussion.

It had been the most terrifying moment of Kennedy's life—receiving the call the night Memphis had been in the motorcycle accident. He had put her down as his emergency contact person years ago, but until that night Kennedy never thought she would ever need the title. Memphis was invincible, or at least he was to her.

She had rushed to the hospital that night not knowing any details of his condition until she arrived and found him charming the nurses with his charisma. Very typical of him.

Suddenly the knowledge that Memphis, not only her best friend but the only person in her life she ever completely trusted and needed, could have been seriously injured hit her hard.

And that had been when she fainted.

When she had come to, she was in lying in a hospital bed. She had sat up too quickly and the blood had drained from her head and she'd grown dizzy again, but two strong hands had steadied her before she fell back onto the bed.

“Whoa, there,” said the tender masculine voice. “You need to take it a little slower.”

She looked up, startled that the voice didn't belong to Memphis like she had expected.

The man was dressed in a white coat with the name Dr. Brooks scrawled in black lettering over the breast. She slowly raised her eyes back to his and swallowed, nodding slowly. What she was nodding to she couldn't remember, but she felt like it was the right thing to do, like he was expecting some kind of reaction from her.

Dr. Brooks smiled back at her and explained that he had been walking by the nurses' station when she fainted.

"You've given your boyfriend quite the scare," he said, checking her pupils with a penlight. "If we hadn't threatened the use of restraints on him when he wouldn't stay in bed, I'm sure he'd be in here now." He grinned, letting her know he was teasing about the restraints.

"He's not my boyfriend," she replied. "We're friends." And then she remembered why she was in the hospital in the first place. "Is he okay?" she asked, suddenly feeling frantic.

Dr. Brooks pulled away from examining her and nodded.

"He's fine. Little bumped and bruised, probably will be sore for the next few days, but he'll be fine. He's very lucky," he added.

"Fucking motorcycle," she mumbled, and blushed at her use of foul language in front of the attractive doctor.

He laughed and Kennedy smiled at the sound. She peeked at him from the corner of her eye, trying to check him out discreetly. She guessed he was a little shorter than Memphis, maybe five-ten or so. He kept his chestnut-brown hair short and had green eyes. She noticed a small scar above his top lip and wondered how he got it. And glancing at the way he filled out his white coat, she could tell he probably worked out. She quickly peeked at the chart he was writing on and saw he was left-handed with a bare ring finger.

Dr. Brooks dropped the pen into the pocket of his jacket and handed the chart to the nurse.

"I would have to agree with you, Kennedy."

Her nipples hardened at the way his husky voice said her name and her blush deepened. She wrapped her arms around herself, hoping he would think she had a chill and not notice how her body reacted to him.

“You’re free to go see your . . . friend,” he told her. “Hopefully, we won’t have to run into each other again under these circumstances,” he added with a charming smile, and left.

Kennedy still got butterflies when she thought of that night and meeting the handsome Dr. Brooks. Two days later flowers had arrived at her apartment with an invitation to dinner the next night. When she first found out, she had been a little surprised and unsettled by the age difference, but Brooks had way of putting her at ease in a way that only Memphis had ever managed, and she quickly forgot about the age gap.

Brooks wined and dined her when his schedule allowed it. Every moment he wasn’t at the hospital he was calling her to make plans of some kind: a picnic in the park, a weekend sailing, a day touring museums. The beginning of their relationship had been fun and exciting. But it wasn’t just the places Brooks took her or the expensive gifts he bought her that made her fall fast and hard for him. It was the little things.

Kennedy smiled as she remembered one night four months into their relationship when she called him in tears, panicked and terrified because she had spotted a mouse in her kitchen. Usually it was Memphis she would call but he was away on an assignment and she was terrified to spend the night alone with the rodent hiding somewhere in her apartment. She felt foolish and knew it was such a girlie thing to get upset over, but Brooks arrived—mouse traps in hand—and went about setting them up. From her perch on the couch she listened as he called out where he was placing them so she wouldn’t accidentally trigger one with her toes.

The next morning she was cooking breakfast when she felt something scurry over her bare foot and looked down just in time to see the little white fur ball hurry across the floor. Her scream probably woke the neighbors, and Brooks came bounding into the kitchen, half-dressed and half-asleep with her umbrella poised as a sword ready to defend her honor against the intruder he assumed was after her.

Seeing him standing in his boxers, hair standing on end, eyes wide from fear of the unknown with that damn purple umbrella struck her as funny, and she burst into hysterics, doubling over as the laughter rocked her body and made it almost impossible to breathe.

That was the moment she fell in love with him.

They had been together for two years, and while everything was pretty good for the most part, they'd definitely had their share of bumps along the way.

One bump in particular she was sure she would never be able to fix.

Kennedy frowned as she looked at the picture of her and Brooks and then shifted her eyes to the other framed photo of her and Memphis. The men in her life didn't care much for each other. They were always polite to one another and didn't make it difficult for her, but she knew how they each felt.

Memphis thought Brooks was too old for her and worried his career would always come before her in the long run. Brooks was unnerved by the fact she had a male best friend, mainly because he figured Memphis harbored secret sexual feelings toward her.

Kennedy had laughed when Brooks had told her that, explaining the day on the beach where they cemented their friendship and that there had never been anything sexual between them. He grumbled that it sounded like a clever plan of reverse psychology, but dropped the subject, choosing to believe her since it had been twelve years and nothing had happened between them.

She wished both men would learn to accept the other, but as long as they weren't trying to make her choose between the two of them she could deal with their misgivings toward each other. They both knew how important they were to her, and the last thing she wanted was a tug-of-war over her affection.

Pushing those thoughts aside, Kennedy practically skipped to the living room, the smile from earlier back on her face when she thought about seeing her best friend again. Memphis had been gone almost a week, and the odd phone call and random text weren't enough to keep her from missing him.

Kennedy glanced quickly at the clock; Memphis would be buzzing up at any second. She was about to grab her purse and go downstairs to meet him when



she smelled freshly made coffee. She poked her head into the kitchen to find a full pot and a folded piece of paper next to a mug on the counter.

Didn't want to wake you. Had to head to the hospital early. See you tonight, hopefully in something like that little black number you wore last night.

-B

Kennedy stared at the words, feeling both annoyed and disappointed. He expected her to be at home ready and willing to do whatever he pleased, and he couldn't take two minutes to wake her before taking off for work. Especially when he had just gotten back from a conference the night before and they hadn't spoken more than five words to each other. They had been too busy doing other things.

Kennedy crumpled the note and tossed it in the trash just as her intercom buzzed. She hurried to the door where the intercom was and pressed the button, mumbling, "I'm coming," into the speaker.

"Hurry your ass, woman. I'm hungry," Memphis replied, his voice light and teasing.

Kennedy smiled. The annoyance and disappointment Brooks made her feel quickly disappeared when she heard her best friend's voice.

She grabbed her bag and hurried out the door and to the elevator, drumming her fingers impatiently against her hip as she waited for the doors to open and take her down. As soon as the lift stopped on the main floor, Kennedy slid past the doors before they were fully opened and rushed outside.

Two strong arms scooped her up and twirled her in a circle the second she was outside, making her laugh.

"Damn, I missed you, woman!" Memphis said as he set her down, a huge smile on his face.

"I missed you, too." She held onto his hands and stepped back, looking him over as if she hadn't seen him in years. "Looks like someone got some sun."

"It's hard not to get some sun in the Caribbean." He chuckled.

She tugged his hand and pulled him toward his Harley—the Hayabusa had been retired years ago. “Come on. I want to hear all about your trip.”

Kennedy wrapped her arms around his waist as the motorcycle roared to life and they shot out of the parking lot into the busy street. She closed her eyes when they zipped past cars, still slightly nervous about riding on the bike even after all this time, but especially since Memphis had his accident. Thankfully he knew how she felt and never pushed the limits too far when she rode shotgun.

She rested her head against his back and smiled, enjoying the feeling of him wrapped in her arms. Kennedy could feel the muscles in his back bunching, twisting this way and that as he maneuvered the machine through the city streets. She hugged him tighter, snuggling as close as she could get against his back.

As dangerous as she feared the bike was, she had to admit it was also the most exhilarating thing she’d ever experienced. It thrilled her to be straddling so much power, to feel the engine’s vibrations against the inside of her thighs. Who didn’t want to be on the back of a Harley? Riding a big, bad bike and hanging onto a big, bad boy? This was something she could only share with Memphis. There was no one else she trusted enough not to turn her into roadkill.

Well, maybe Brooks. But he wouldn’t be caught dead going over the speed limit, never mind driving a motorcycle.

Kennedy chuckled to herself thinking how vanilla Brooks was compared to Memphis. Maybe that was part of the reason Brooks wasn’t comfortable with her and Memphis’s friendship. Perhaps it had very little to do with jealousy but more to do with him feeling he didn’t measure up to her badass best friend.

Before Kennedy could ponder that further, Memphis made a sharp turn and pulled up next to their favorite diner.

He grinned at Kennedy as he pulled off his helmet and tucked it under his arm.

“Nothing like that first morning rush, huh?”

Kennedy carefully untangled her hair from the helmet, wincing as the strands got caught and ripped from her scalp.

“We really have to get me a different helmet.” She rubbed her sore head.

“And ditch ol’ red?” He patted the faded red helmet. “That would be like losing a friend.”

“I don’t like friends who pull my hair,” she replied, hopping off the bike.

Memphis smiled mischievously and reached up to give one of her black locks a gentle tug.

“A little hair pulling can be fun,” he murmured.

Kennedy rolled her eyes and swatted his hand away. Memphis laughed and grabbed her hand, sliding his fingers in between hers so they were palm to palm. He didn’t let her hand go until they were seated at the table across from each other.

To anyone else the gesture would seem intimate and give the impression there was more to them than platonic friendship. But Memphis grabbing for her hand was normal and natural; it had been since a few months after their friendship had formed. Out of nowhere one day he took her hand while strolling through the park, and she knew without him having to explain that it wasn’t meant to be anything for her to overthink. He wasn’t declaring some hidden desire for her or the urge to up their friendship a notch; he was just holding her hand. Nothing more.

“So how was it?” Kennedy asked after their orders had been taken.

“It was great.” Memphis beamed and leaned back against the booth. “I think they might be the best shots I’ve taken yet.”

“Really? Better than Alaska? I loved those pictures.”

Memphis was a freelance photographer. He mostly did work for Hot Spots, a travel magazine, capturing the beauty of places all over the world, enticing those to book their next vacation wherever he had just been.

Kennedy was envious of all the places he had been able to visit. Memphis's passport got more action than a half-price call girl. But of all the places he had been, Alaska was the one she envied the most.

Living in a city where it rained most of the year and snow was a rarity, she loved looking at the pictures Memphis had taken during one of his trips there. He had a gift of bringing the life out in photos, making you feel as if you were right there experiencing it with him.

When Kennedy saw the winter wonderland in Memphis's photographs, she started saving every extra penny she could to make that her first vacation destination. She didn't care where she went or what she did; she just wanted to be there.

"Okay, Alaska was the best I've taken, but these come damn close," he said. He propped his elbows on the table and leaned closer to her. "Speaking of Alaska, I've got some news."

Kennedy raised an eyebrow.

"What kind of news?"

The waitress chose that moment to bring their coffee, leaning closer to Memphis than necessary and making sure her surgically enhanced breasts were eye level when she poured the hot beverage.

Kennedy watched her drop a napkin into Memphis's lap before moving onto the next table, not even giving Kennedy a second glance over her actions—as if it were unimaginable that a guy like Memphis would be involved with her romantically.

Memphis picked the napkin up and flipped it over, chuckling at whatever it said before bunching it into a ball and tossing it onto the table.

"Another fan?" Kennedy asked dryly. "What would Vivian say?"

"Veronica. Vivian was last month," Memphis corrected with a teasing tone. "And we're through."

“Wow. That lasted almost two weeks. That has to be a record for you.” She picked up her coffee cup and took a swallow, burning her tongue and throat in the process.

“Another twenty-four hours and it would have broken the record,” he replied, grinning at her bitchy remark.

Kennedy set down the cup.

“What news?” she asked again to get back on topic. She wasn’t in the mood to discuss Memphis’s concubines.

“A job offer for a resort opening up there,” he told her, the napkin and eager waitress forgotten. “They want publicity, something that will draw in the tourists from the larger cities.”

“If you tell me you’re moving to Alaska I’ll drown you in your coffee,” Kennedy threatened.

Memphis chuckled.

“No. I’m not moving to Alaska, but I am going to be up there for at least a week getting the shots I need and a feel for the place. They’ve offered to put me up for as long as I need.”

“Wow. That’s great, Memphis.”

Her heart sank that he was able to go back to her dream place. She always hoped that when she was finally able to afford a real vacation, Memphis would join her there. Brooks wasn’t interested in vacationing anywhere that wasn’t directly across from Vancouver General.

“What’s the resort?” she asked, trying to show interest instead of jealousy at his good fortune.

“Spruce Falls.” He grinned at her slyly. “That’s not the best part.”

“What’s the best part?” Kennedy asked with pout.

“I offered them a deal. I’ll lower my fee some if they throw in a package deal for two.”

Kennedy stared at him blankly, not fully comprehending what he was saying.

“Kennedy, I want you to come with me,” he told her.

“To Alaska?” she asked.

“Yes, to Alaska.” He laughed. “You’ve wanted to go forever and this is your chance. It’s practically free, Kennedy. All you need is spending money; everything else is taken care of through the resort.”

“You’re taking a cut in your paycheck so I can go with you?” He nodded. “Oh my God, Memphis, you can’t do that!”

“I already did. All you have to do is say yes.”

“There’s no way I can accept that! You’ve probably given up a fortune.”

Memphis scoffed at her exaggeration and shook his head.

“Consider it a late birthday/early Christmas present,” he told her.

“I can’t go, Memphis,” she said stubbornly. “I can’t let you blow your fee like that.”

“Kennedy, I want you to come with me.” He grabbed her hand and gave it a soft squeeze. “It’s really only a small chunk of change I’m passing up. Please?” he pleaded, pouting and giving her puppy dog eyes.

“Argh. Don’t do that,” she groaned, covering her eyes with her free hand. She had never been able to resist his puppy dog eyes. She peeked at him through her fingers and sighed. “Can I think about it?”

“Sure.” He grinned. “But you know you’re going to say yes. We leave in two weeks.”

Kennedy smirked. Even though she was beyond ecstatic that she was able to go with him if she wanted to, she felt incredibly guilty that he was giving up part of his paycheck in order for it to happen. The fact that he was willing to do it without so much as blinking an eye made the soft spot she had for him in her heart that much softer.

“So?” he asked once their food had been placed in front of them.

“So?” Kennedy mimicked as she covered her home fries in ketchup.

“Do you have a date yet?”

She smiled coyly and asked, “For what?” before she popped a piece of potato in her mouth.

He scowled at her.

“Don’t play dumb with me. When’s your show?”

Kennedy chewed slowly, trying to remain calm when her insides were jumping with excitement.

It had been a long, hard road to get to where she was today, professionally. Kennedy had gone to university with the intent of majoring in criminology, just like her father had. Her parents had convinced her it would be a good career choice, even though she had very little interest in the area. She had no desire to be a parole officer or private investigator like her father had been before he retired two years ago. But they were paying for her tuition, and she figured she owed it to them to at least give what they wanted a try.

Her real passion was art. Drawing, sculpturing, painting . . . she loved everything about it. Being an artist wasn’t a “safe” career; it wasn’t a career at all in their eyes. It was a hobby, one she could continue in her spare time while she studied to have the career they planned for her. Who wanted to be a starving artist when they could be paid to dig into someone’s personal life?

She did, that’s who. But she bit her tongue and went along with what Hope and David Monroe wished. Until she met Memphis and everything changed.

He had been the one to convince her to do what she dreamed to do. He made her see art was her life no matter who was paying for her schooling.

Needless to say, her parents were not at all happy with her decision and threatened to cut her off financially. It was a ploy that in the past would have made her cave, but not now. Not with Memphis by her side believing in her and encouraging her to go after what she wanted.

In the end, her parents did cut her off, but only for a few months. Her

mother started feeling guilty and convinced her father to have a change of heart and finish paying for her schooling.

Things were still rocky between them, especially during the lean years when it looked like they had been right and she was wasting her time painting and waiting tables. But finally her big break came three years ago when she walked into work one day hauling one of her new paintings. Her boss had taken a liking to her and had told her she could hang one of her pieces in the restaurant to gain interest.

It just so happened as she was passing by a table with the painting in her hands that it caught the eye of a man eating lunch.

He stopped her instantly, asking if she was the artist, and introduced himself as Ryder Hennessy, an art collector and owner of Strokes of Passion, a local gallery.

Kennedy was awestruck when he asked her to bring that piece along with three or four others to his office the next day. After seeing the small collection of paintings, he asked if she would be interested in showing in his gallery. He wanted to sell her paintings for her, get her work out there to his clients, and see what they thought of her.

Did he really expect her to say no? She jumped at the chance, and the sales of her work had gone better than either of them had expected. Three years later, he was giving Kennedy her very own show. It was going to be a small show to start with, but this opportunity to have only her art on display was huge.

She had been working countless hours to make the deadline. Ryder had told her almost a year ago to be prepared for this day, but even with all that time it never seemed like enough. She had some paintings in storage that she wanted to use and Ryder agreed, but he wanted new things from her, too. Because he had given her a heads-up a year in advance, he expected at least a dozen new pieces to add to the ones they were pulling out of storage.

Kennedy thought there was no way in hell she would be able to pull that off.

But she had. And in just a few days she would have her very own show. “Kennedy?” Memphis said, shaking her arm to get her attention. “Sorry.



What?"

"I asked about the show date," he repeated.

"Oh. It's next week." She smiled excitedly at him. "You will be there, right?"

"Do you even have to ask?"

No, she didn't. She knew he would be the first one to walk through the doors on showing night.

"Are your parents going to be there?" he asked, making Kennedy laugh.

"Are you kidding? Do you think they'd miss the chance to give me the 'you're going to be thirty, it's about time you got your act together and made something of yourself' speech?" Kennedy rolled her eyes. "Yes, they're coming."

Memphis narrowed his eyes, and she knew what he was going to ask next. "Is Brooks coming?"

Kennedy dropped her gaze to her plate. The hesitation was enough to make Memphis shake his head and curse under his breath.

"He said he wants to be there and he'd try his hardest to be," she mumbled.

It still stung that he couldn't commit himself to be there for her for one night.

"Fucking asshole," Memphis said.

"He's busy. He has a demanding career," Kennedy said, trying to defend him for the zillionth time.

"Hey, I'm the one who globe-trots and I'm still going to be there." Kennedy gave him a small smile.

"That's because you're home right now."

"No." Memphis gave her a stern look. "Even if I had been halfway around the world, I would still make it home for this. I will always come home for you. You come first."

As Kennedy watched him flag down their waitress to pay the check, she suddenly felt the annoyance from earlier creep back into her.

Here was Memphis telling her he would always be there for her and make time no matter where in the world he was, and yet Brooks—her own boyfriend and the man who claimed to love her more than anyone— couldn't take one shift off to be by her side on the most important night of her life.

For the first time in two years Kennedy wondered if Brooks was really the man she wanted to be with.