

## Chapter One

“You expect me to eat that?”

Gerrod sneered at the green smoothie his daughter-in-law, Nyla, had just concocted in her oversized blender. He’d held his tongue when she’d added kale leaves and non-fat Greek yogurt, but he drew the line at flaxseed powder and quinoa. His long legs hung from a tall barstool at the kitchen counter where he watched her add the final ingredient...bean sprouts!

Her full lips dipped into a sarcastic frown. “I expect nothing less from you than the same cantankerous attitude you give me every morning. I don’t care if you eat it or not. But when Doctor Price calls and asks me if you’ve been following his instructions, I have no intention of lying.”

There was nothing Gerrod hated worse than rabbit food. He grew up in St. Lucia, a tropical paradise known for its fresh fruits and spicy meats. He was used to dining on savory, local specialties like callaloo soup, curried chicken, and pepperpot stew. In his home town, any fool bearing green smoothies would be drawn and quartered.

“What happened to the johnnycakes and accra?” he demanded.

His mouth watered, thinking of the fried fish made from salted cod mixed with island spices, a Caribbean breakfast staple.

“They’re back in St. Lucia, where you left your gratitude.”

He folded his arms across his chest. How could she say he had no gratitude? He was grateful to be alive. Grateful to be staying in his son’s palatial mansion in Los Angeles. He would never however, be grateful for liquid food. “I’m a grown man with a voracious appetite. If I’m gonna drink my breakfast, it had better be a beer.”

Nyla shrugged. “There’s a case of Red Stripe in the fridge.”

That wasn’t the answer he wanted to hear. “How the devil am I supposed to survive on this healthy crap?”

“It’s called a meal replacement smoothie. And if you ask me, you could use some of this ‘healthy crap.’ A man your age can’t gorge on greasy foods every day.”

“I didn’t ask you. Your opinion is just that—yours.”

“Well, you can always cook your own meals.”

He scoffed. “You know I don’t cook. That’s women’s work.”

Nyla’s head whipped around, her dark curls swinging across her shoulders. When she leveled her chocolate gaze at him, he knew she meant business. “Listen, old man—”

“Good morning,” a cheery voice boomed from the kitchen doorway. “How are my two favorite people?”

Lucas Stone moved with the grace of a panther, strutting into the room, wearing jeans and a fitted t-shirt that showcased his athletic physique. Gerrod’s son was a miniature version of him, with gray eyes and handsome features. Those superstar looks had secured his place as one of Hollywood’s highest-paid action heroes. In his movies, Lucas handled any problem with ease. Too bad he couldn’t do the same at home.

Nyla groused. “I’m doing fine. I don’t know about him.” She jerked a thumb in Gerrod’s direction.

Gerrod grumbled. “I’m your father. I’m supposed to be your favorite, but *her*...”

“Okay, you guys.” Lucas flashed his million-dollar smile. “No fighting. Remember, you’re supposed to be getting along. We’re one big happy family now.”

Gerrod had done his best to comply with his son’s wishes. Nyla didn’t make it easy. She was bossy and opinionated. She refused to cut him any slack. She didn’t wilt beneath his hard glare. Didn’t blink when he stared her down. The woman was too feisty for her own good. When Lucas brought her home to St. Lucia over a year ago, Gerrod didn’t think it would last. His son was known for dating statuesque starlets with more boobs than brains. The full-figured Nyla was not his usual type. But Lucas had shocked everyone by falling in love with her.

“I need to get dressed,” Nyla told Lucas. “I made the protein smoothie Doctor Price ordered. Maybe you can get your father to drink it.”

“Thanks, baby.”

Gerrod watched as the pair shared a tender kiss. Lucas stroked Nyla’s cheek with obvious affection. Then, she sashayed from the kitchen, but not before squinting with irritation in Gerrod’s direction. He scowled at her in return.

Despite the fact that they didn’t get along, Nyla made his son happy. You’d have to be blind not to see the two were enamored with each other. Gerrod had never felt that

kind of love for any woman, not even Lucas' mother. Females were toys to be played with. Trophies to collect. Stories to boast about. He'd been married four times, but he'd never taken commitment seriously.

"Dad, I thought you were going to work on getting along with Nyla," Lucas said, cutting into his thoughts. "You told me you liked her spunk."

"That was last year, before you two got married. When I told you to go after her, I had no idea she was so headstrong."

Lucas poured some of the slimy green mixture into a tall glass. Gerrod opened the Sub-Zero fridge and scouted for anything that remotely resembled a creature with four legs. He smiled when he found a pack of bacon. At least this kitchen reminded him of his home in St. Lucia, where Lucas had arranged for a state-of-the-art kitchen to be built. But it wasn't for him. It was for Gerrod's mother, Rae, Lucas' grandmother. A woman he adored as much as Lucas' fans adored him.

"Nyla means well, Dad. You know she's just doing what the doctor said and looking out for you."

"She's the Food Gestapo. I think she likes seeing me suffer while she eats waffles drowned in syrup."

"You're not suffering. You're surviving. And if Nyla is hard on you in that respect, she has my full support. She's my right and left arm. You know I love her."

Yeah, he knew. He'd lost out on Lucas' love years ago. He was happy his son even bothered to speak to him after the appalling fight they'd had. They'd only just repaired their relationship after not speaking for seven years. Gerrod's mild heart attack last month scared both of them. Hell, it wasn't even a full-blown attack. Acute angina. But Lucas demanded Gerrod stay with him so he could keep an eye on him. That damn doctor didn't help any by prescribing drinks that tasted like mud.

"Son, when I moved here to LA I thought we'd be able to make up for lost time and spend some quality time together. But with your filming schedule, I end up spending more of my days with Nyla."

"Then make the most of it. Be her friend."

"How?" Gerrod tossed the pack of bacon onto the marble countertop. "She won't even cook for me."

Lucas chuckled. "You're right about that. Nyla is busy. Between her freelance work and helping me run our charitable foundation, she barely has time for herself. And she doesn't like cooking."

"What kind of woman doesn't like cooking?"

"The kind who has a career. Not everyone is like Grandma Rae."

Nobody was like Rae. That woman always had something delicious simmering in a pot. "Well, can we at least hire a cook?"

"I already have a nutritionist."

"Not the same. Any occupation with the word nutrition in it is suspect to me."

"Fine. I'll have my agent, Marty, set up something. He can probably get someone here in a day or two."

"Great. I'll start making a list of menu items."

Lucas wagged a finger in his direction. "Whatever the cook makes needs to be on the approved foods list. No fried greasy stuff."

Gerrod's excitement turned sour. "Why do I feel like I'm the child and you're the parent? So what? I had a few heart pains. Lighten up. I'm fifty-two years old. I don't need to be treated like a rebellious teenager you've grounded for a month."

Lucas ran a palm through his dark cropped curls before nodding. "I have an idea. Nyla's got a local shoot today. Why don't you go with her? There will be lots of good-looking fillies there."

"Fillies?" Gerrod rolled his eyes. "Boy, you need to work on your game. I think the last man to use that expression was my great-granddaddy."

Lucas laughed. "All joking aside, why don't you hang with Nyla today?"

There was a time when he'd have loved nothing more than to surround himself with nubile young beauties. But since his wife, Desiree, left over a year ago, he didn't have the same enthusiasm for chasing tail. It was nobody's fault but his own. He was what women referred to as a dog. He couldn't be faithful to save his life. He started off with the best of intentions, but he always ended up...bored. He knew things wouldn't have been any different with Desiree. It was probably for the best that she'd split the day after the wedding. The annulment had saved them both the cost of a divorce.

For years, his son had followed in his footsteps. Then Lucas met Nyla. What the two of them had was special. After seeing that kind of love and dedication, he'd gotten

scared of relationships. He knew he could never live up to the standard of Lucas and Nyla, so why even try? Now, he was pretty much ruined as far as women were concerned. For the past six months, he'd even abstained from sex; not willing to face his shortcomings and the probability of another failure. The only relationship he planned to focus on was the one with his son. He had a second chance to do right by his boy and he wasn't going to waste it.

"I'd rather hang with you," he told Lucas. "Maybe I can watch you in action."

"Sorry, Dad. It's a closed set. The details of this film are confidential. All the actors had to sign non-disclosure agreements. I can't even discuss it with Nyla."

Gerrod scoffed. "That must be killing you."

"Dad..." Lucas' deep voice held a warning tone.

"Okay. Okay. I'll ask her, but she'll probably say no."

"Thanks." Lucas sipped the smoothie. "Mmm. This is good. You should try it."

Gerrod watched as Lucas swallowed the green sludge and then made a hasty exit. His son was a phenomenal actor, but that performance still couldn't convince Gerrod to drink that crap. The smoothie was the least of his problems. He had one month left before he went back to St. Lucia. His time here would be unbearable if he didn't 'make nice' with his daughter-in-law. He had to do this for his son. He owed Lucas. If the key to making him happy was getting along with Nyla, he'd damn well do it.

He snapped his fingers. He had the perfect idea. Why hadn't he thought of it sooner? Oh, yeah. This was gonna be good. He smiled to himself as he left the kitchen to go find Nyla and give her the news.

## Chapter Two

Swan Peterson scribbled her signature in bold, purple ink at the bottom of a consent form. This was the third document she signed in the past thirty minutes. “I need one more signature,” the intern, Shanelle, advised. “Right here by the x.”

“If I had a dime for each time I signed my name,” Swan started.

“You’d be a gazillionaire,” Shanelle finished. “You should be used to this by now.”

“I am. It’s the purple pen that threw me for a loop.”

Shanelle grinned, revealing braces with purple rubber bands. “It’s my signature color.”

“So I noticed.”

Swan’s gaze flitted over the college sophomore’s eclectic outfit. Flower lavender shorts. Plum colored knee-high boots. Violet tank top. The girl looked like the lovechild of The Artist Formerly Known as Prince. Even the tips of her blonde hair were dyed purple. Swan didn’t care. All that mattered was the girl did her job well.

On loan from the Los Angeles Film School, Shanelle was part of an intern partnership program with Swan’s production company, Swansong Studios. Normally, Swan’s best friend and production assistant, Eryka, handled the interns, but the poor woman got picked for jury duty. Swan was all for people performing their civic duty. She just wished the City could have chosen someone who wasn’t critical to her day-to-day operations.

Without Eryka here to dish out the staff assignments, Swan agreed to let Shanelle shadow her for the day. Too bad it was one of the most hectic days in this week’s schedule. Swansong was conducting an exposé for Eloisa’s Equines, an adoption center for horses. Today’s photo shoot would highlight the abused and abandoned former racehorses Eloisa and her employees took in to avoid having them slaughtered or shipped to other countries for food. The shoot was already behind schedule, which was never good for shoots on location.

Swan frowned as she looked up at the drab sky. She wasn’t a photographer, but she knew the natural lighting had to be just right or the shot would be ruined.

The delay couldn't be helped. Her ex-husband, Tomás, had chosen this morning to call and pick a fight about their daughter, Jade. It was never easy talking to the self-made billionaire. During their marriage, Swan was never good enough. Never smart enough. Never skinny enough. Never the kind of wife he thought she should be. It didn't help that since the birth of their daughter, Jade, only a year into their marriage, she'd suffered post-partum depression, mood swings, and excessive weight gain. After that, he practically ignored her, doing everything from neglecting her in the bedroom to making life-changing decisions without consulting her.

Ten years ago, she'd left the marriage with only two things; her maiden name and her sanity. Tomás even took her child. Nine years old at the time, Jade had chosen to stay with him. Now that she was a freshman in college, he called Swan damn near every time something went wrong with the girl.

Swan cleared the remnants of the morning's upsetting conversation from her mind. She didn't have time for Tomás' drama today. More importantly, she didn't have to take any of his shit anymore. By starting her own successful production company, she'd proved everything that arrogant beast had said about her was wrong.

She consulted the checklist attached to her clipboard. She never went anywhere without her checklist. "Is everyone in place?" she asked Shanelle.

"Yes. Eloisa and her staff are finally ready. We're going to start at the stables and move to the corrals. I heard she's even hired a model to dress in western garb to give the shoot an air of authenticity. She wants your final stamp of approval on the guy."

"Damn, that's one more thing I need to add to my checklist."

"I already did it for you. Look at the bottom of the page."

Swan nodded, impressed. "Who is this model? Where is he?"

"I think it's that dude over there."

Swan followed the direction in which Shanelle's finger pointed, to a man standing alone near one of the horse trailers. Her heart stuttered in her chest. "Is that him?"

"I guess so. Pretty hot, huh?"

"Damn hot!"

Swan's gaze raked across the handsome man from head to toe. She took in everything at once. Dark, curly hair peppered with grey at his temples. Full, sensuous lips. Neatly trimmed goatee. Broad shoulders that dipped into firm-looking biceps.

Hands pushed casually into the pockets of his dark slacks. Wearing loafers and a dress shirt, he looked out of place here amongst the rugged country backdrop.

At that moment, his ash gray eyes locked with hers. The way he looked at her made her feel...wanted. Wicked. Nasty. A cloud of desire mushroomed in the pit of her stomach. It had been a long time since she'd felt a lasting spark of attraction for a man. Sure, she'd had plenty of opportunities to engage in whatever type of relationship she wanted. But most of the men who ran in her circles were famous, wealthy, and filled with a sense of entitlement. In other words, they were pompous assholes. Been there. Done that. Had the divorce decree to prove it.

This guy seemed different.

She let out a huff, ashamed of her reaction. This was not the time to drool over some nameless model. She had a job to do. Time was money. If she didn't start this shoot in the next five minutes, there might not be a shoot.

Swan approached the man. Up close, he was even more handsome. She pushed her personal feelings aside and put on her CEO hat. She had to handle this with the same professionalism as she attacked everything else. It was her duty to make sure every element of this shoot was flawless, including the actors.

"You're perfect," she said to him. "All we need to do is get you out of those clothes and into something more...suitable."

His full lips eased into a smirk. "I've said that to plenty of women, but never had it said to me."

When the smirk blossomed into a full-blown smile, the needle on his sex-o-meter jumped ten notches. She couldn't help but smile back. The man was gorgeous with a capital G. She didn't know where Eloisa found him, but the woman had excellent taste.

Swan squeezed his biceps. "I can tell you work out. What gym do you go to?"

"No gym. This is all natural, from my time spent outdoors."

"It shows in your complexion, sun-kissed, bronze skin. And those eyes—dreamy." She reached up and caught his chin, turning his face left, and then right. He was so tall she practically had to stand on tiptoe. "You have amazing bone structure."

He gently nudged her hand away. "Listen, hon. You need to at least buy me dinner if you insist on fondling me."



She laughed. "You've got the attitude, but you need to work on your accent. You sound like a Caribbean native. You need to sound more western. You have an honest face, though. You'll work."

"Work for what?"

"Didn't your agent tell you?"

"I don't have an agent."

"You're not repped with anyone? You won't last long in this town without representation." She dragged her eyes from his toned physique to consult her checklist. "Did anyone explain the part about the chaps and cowboy hat you're supposed to wear?"

His rebellious snort of amusement sent shivers of excitement down her spine. "No one's been crazy enough to suggest that to my face."

She glanced at his feet. "Did you bring your own boots? I don't think we have any on the premises. What are you? A size ten?"

"Twelve," he answered, as though insulted.

She flushed. "Of course, you are." She recalled the old adage about a man's shoe size determining the size of his dick. In his case, she hoped it was true. Otherwise, it would be such a waste of a man. A slow-burning ember of lust smoldered between her legs. Their gazes locked once more, and she didn't have to wonder if he could read her thoughts. The look he gave confirmed it.

She mentally reprimanded herself. Why was she having salacious musings about a man she'd known all of thirty seconds? She wasn't sex-starved. Her last tryst had been a few weeks ago. It had served one purpose; to scratch an itch. Hell, she was a healthy, forty-five year old woman who could get her freak on anytime she wanted. So, what was it about this guy?

"Hey, Swan!" a voice called, "Are we ready to shoot? I'm wasting daylight."

She turned to find Nyla, her best photographer, standing a few feet away. A young man with a mop of red hair slicked behind his ears lingered beside her. Sporting dusty jeans and a plaid shirt, and clutching a straw cowboy hat between his fingers, he looked like something out of an ad for *FarmersOnly.com*.

"This is Alvin," Nyla informed her. "The model Eloisa hired."

Swan's confused gaze flew from Alvin to Nyla. "Wait a minute. If this is the model, then who's this?" She glanced at the gray-eyed stranger with the delicious Caribbean accent.

Nyla smiled. "That's Gerrod, my father-in-law and my new assistant."