

# CARIBBEAN CRUSH

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You've got to sing like you don't need the money  
Love like you'll never get hurt  
You've got to dance like nobody's watchin'  
It's gotta come from the heart if you want it to work.  
*-Susanna Clark and Richard Leigh*

# CHAPTER ONE

“HOTTIE AT TEN O’CLOCK,” Penny not so subtly whispered to Trish and Kami. “Oh, he’s coming to the pool. I can’t wait to see those abs. A much better view than the endless ocean.”

Her best friend, Kami, rolled her eyes, “Maybe he has a dad bod under the shirt. Besides, what about Ben? Your husband?”

“I’m married, not dead. Just because you are still in the honeymoon phase with Evan doesn’t mean I am. We can still look. Right, Trish?”

“I’m single, hun,” I laugh, eyeing the good-looking man. “He isn’t my type, though. I know men and I can tell you he’s too perfect, which means he loves himself too much.”

Penny sat up in her chair on the deck of the cruise ship and pulled her sunglasses down her nose, studying me for a moment. “Then tell me about your type. We aren’t leaving this ship without getting you some booty.”

I waved her away, “This isn’t a get-Trish-laid trip. It’s a girls’ trip to have fun. Drink, dance, enjoy the sun and sandy beaches of the Caribbean. I rarely get to relax anymore. Thank God Mr. Corbin’s new hires are finally trained enough.” I worked as an exotic dancer at a club named Envy. Kami worked there for a while when her ex left her in a mound of debt. She ended up falling in love with her boss at her day job, and he was the perfect man. All us girls who worked with Kami just loved him.

He supported her choice to work there, and again when she chose to quit to pursue her dream job. I missed her terribly, and this cruise was exactly what we all needed.

“How is the club?” Kami asked, rescuing me from our friend. Penny may not have been one of us dancers, but she weaseled her way into our hearts during our weekly lunches. Well, before us dancers had to stop them with the shortage of women. Suddenly, everyone seemed to quit and move to other things after Kami left. I was the only one in our group of soul sisters still left working as an exotic dancer at Envy.

“Yes, how is it?” Maura asked from behind me, her girlfriend, Aliah, right on her tail, holding a second tray of drinks. They also worked at Envy before leaving to start their own clothing company. Maura always had a fabulous sense of style, and their company did well because of her designs and Aliah’s sharp business mind.

I huffed, “The customers are great, but it’s just not the same without you all there. The new girls are nice enough. It’s just hard when we haven’t developed that sisterhood yet. You all just had to leave me.”

“You could always work for us,” Aliah offered, as she had many times before.

I waved her off, “Oh, hun, I love dancing. I’ll be doing it until I’m too old to. And by that time, I’ll have enough saved to retire and travel the world. Maybe I’ll find the love of my life in the French Riviera and sail away on his enormous yacht.”

“I hope he has an enormous cock to go with that boat,” Penny snorted, causing the rest of us to erupt into laughter.

The announcement stopped our laughter, came over the ship, a reminder of the stop at the port in Cozumel, stopping the depressing conversation in its tracks. Aliah and Maura handed us shots, and Maura raised her glass, “To ladies’ week and a hell of a party!”

“Cheers!” our voices rang out and our glasses clinked before we tipped them into our mouths, letting out cries of excitement afterwards.

“Oh, my God. What are these?” Penny asked, licking her lips.

“Monkey Blow Job,” Aliah smirked.

Putting her arm around Aliah, she smiled broadly, “You are now in charge of the drinks. This is the best I’ve ever had.” Straightening up, she bounced excitedly as she clapped her hands, “Who’s ready for some shopping and dancing?”

“Me!” I laughed, wanting to get off the ship and have adventures. “I just need to reapply some sunscreen. My pasty skin can’t handle the sun.”

We spent the next hour getting ready, taking turns applying sunscreen to each other, fixing makeup, and picking out the perfect outfits. We decided to leave our bikinis on, putting sundresses or sarongs over them, just in case we ended up at the beach.

The excitement flowed through us as we made our way to the gangway, taking in the island's beauty. “Make sure you have your ship pass,” Aliah reminded us, always the “mom” of the group.

“In my purse,” I replied, excitement thrumming through me. It had been ages since I’d gone on vacation and never with just the girls. Despite their joking around, I really didn’t want a relationship. I liked my freedom, and I knew there weren’t many men who would be comfortable with me dancing for a living. Kami just happened to get lucky, and Aliah and Maura danced together.

“Same,” Penny and Kami spoke at the same time. Sometimes, I swore they were twins with how in sync they were. I thanked my lucky stars I had run into Kami crying at a bar a couple of years ago and asked her to come check out Envy. Penny was with her then too, and encouraged Kami to go for

it. I wouldn't have become so close to both of them if that hadn't happened.

As an outgoing person who tells it like it is, I've helped my fair share of women to find their strength. My life wasn't sunshine and roses until I decided to make it that way. Happy, independent, and single; I'm making my own way.

# CHAPTER TWO

ONCE WE LEFT THE deep shadows of the tall ships at the dock, I gasped, “Oh, my Lord, this is beautiful. I don’t know whether to shop first or go to the beach and swim in that water.”

“Shopping,” Maura sing-songed. “I want to be inspired for my summer line next year. These islands always have the best clothes and prettiest patterns.”

“Always working,” I mock-muttered, teasing her. I wanted her new line to be as fantastic as all the rest. She’d always had an artistic mind, and I loved that about her. More than once, she’d gotten me out of a pickle with my outfits or makeup at the club. “The shops are calling me too. I’ve got money to burn,” I smiled as I patted my wristlet wallet.

We took a cab to the shopping center, where rows of buildings lined the street. Vendors underneath tents were set up across the street in what seemed to be a park. The vibrant colors of clothing and sparkling jewelry caught my attention, and I made a beeline for it. I knew my girls would be right behind me.

“Oh, this is perfect!” Penny exclaimed, and I turned to see her holding up a bracelet made of shells. “Nothing says island life more than shell jewelry.”

“True,” Kami replied. “I absolutely adore these sarongs. The colors are so beautiful and vibrant. Maura, come look.”

The rest of us dropped whatever we were looking at and joined Kami. Maura, and all her talents, picked us each out a color to complement our skin and hair. Going further, she did some voodoo magic and wrapped them into different styles.

Stepping back, she admired her work, "I really am a genius."

The stall owner was so thrilled with our purchases, she offered to take a picture of all of us. Covered in swaths of cloth, we smiled at the camera and posed in every way imaginable. These were the memories we wanted to make, and I ended up wiping a tear of joy when I flipped through what the stall owner captured.

"You girls are the best," I laughed as I tried to push my silly emotions down. "How about lunch and a little rest on the beach?"

The others agreed, and we grabbed food from vendors on the beach. It was delicious, and soon we ended up in the refreshing turquoise waters. After a lot of splashing each other and laughter, we just floated and people watched.

"If I had known there would be so many hotties, I would have asked Ben for a separation," Penny sighed.

"You would not," Kami splashed her. "Ben is your hottie. None of these men hold a candle to him."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Penny waved her away. "Fine. I'll just look for Trish. She needs a man."

"I do not need a man," I argued. "I'm happy with my B.O.B. because he doesn't talk back and always hits the right spots."

"You just need to find a woman," Aliah suggested with a wink. "We can actually find the G-spot."

A deep voice came from behind me, making us all jump, "Finding a man who knows where it is might be more elusive than the spot itself." His voice dipped, "I know exactly how to find it and make you gush."

I turned to see tall, dark, and gorgeous, with water dripping down his chest, beaming at us. My gaze followed those drops

of water for a beat too long, and I found the heat rising not only between my legs, but in my cheeks as well.

Not one to be shy, I met his eyes, and he winked at me before giving a little wave and swimming off. Penny placed her hand on my arm, laughing, "Oh. My. God. You have to tap that, Trish. Please, let me live vicariously through you."

Watching his powerful strokes through the water, I seriously considered it. "A one-night stand wouldn't be such a bad idea. We are here overnight, after all." I shook myself from my thoughts, "No, we are here for celebration. I can get dick anytime. We should probably go back to the ship and get ready for the dancing tonight."

"Old ladies need naps," Kami giggled. We were only in our early thirties, but she was almost right. I certainly couldn't keep up with partying like I could in my twenties.

"Alright, let's go take our old lady naps. But only if you promise to stop trying to set me up." I crossed my arms and forced myself to not look at the man who was now on the white sand.

As we walked back, Penny flung her arm over my shoulder, "You know, just because we're on a trip together doesn't mean you have to spend every moment with us. Maura and Aliah are getting it on in their room. There's no reason for you to pass up a hottie if the opportunity arises."

"Agreed," Kami said. Blushing, she added, "You know, I broke the rules big time on my last day at Envy. None of us would ever judge you for doing whatever your heart desires. If you want someone, go for it. No pressure to do it purposely, but if it happens, don't fight it because of us."

"I know," I groaned. "Thank you for being the best friends a girl could have. I promise if I find someone worthy of my time, I'll take it." I looked at Kami and grinned, "You may have broken the rules, but that beautiful ring was worth it." Evan proposed to her on her last night of working, something I helped him set up. They took the celebration a little too far,

but none of us girls cared. The owners would have because it was illegal. Envy isn't a brothel and prided itself in how the girls upheld their values. But a proposal from someone as perfect as Evan. Well, that deserved a little rule breaking.

# CHAPTER THREE

AFTER TAKING A NAP and making sure we were well hydrated, Maura supervised our getting ready for dancing. We looked nothing less than perfection. “I miss those toned thighs and ass,” Kami slapped my behind playfully. “I love my job, but the desk isn’t great for the booty.”

“Girl, I know you are not saying you’re out of shape,” I playfully scolded her. “I bet Evan gives you all the workouts you need.”

“True. The man is insatiable. And I still can’t get enough of him,” she winked before she smiled so wide, I could see every single one of her pearly white teeth. “I stopped my birth control.”

“You did?” I squealed, pulling her into a big hug. “I’m so excited for you! Ladies, we need to celebrate this. We’re going to be aunties!”

Hugs and a few teary eyes went around the room, all of us excited for our sister by bond to get all the things she wanted in life. I felt a little pang of loneliness creep into my mind and I did my best to brush it away. It stayed. So, I did what I do best and ignored it, preferring to live my life to the fullest.

It wasn't like I wanted kids. Sometimes, I just wanted to have someone to come home to. Someone I knew I could always count on when things were tough, to laugh with, and to just be with them. Maybe I would open up and try to date like my friends always tried to get me to do.

With my sparkly wristlet in my hand, we made our way down the gangplank and followed the sound of music to our destination. The sun was just a sliver on the ocean in the distance, looking like it dipped itself into the water. It was such a beautiful sight, and the temperature cooler but still comfortable enough that I didn't feel chilled in my little emerald green dress that set off my auburn hair.

The outdoor dance floor was beautiful, torches, string lights, and lanterns giving off a tropical vibe, especially when paired with the straw hut topped bar area. Music played from large speakers, but it wasn't as loud as the clubs in America. We could still easily speak to each other without having to shout in each other's ears. I couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was, but it made me want to stay and never go back home.

"I'm going to retire here," I announced, feeling a little silly afterwards. I just told them the day before I'd be going to the French Riviera.

Aliah agreed, "This is perfect. I'd be happy to move here and run the business. I never realized how much I love tropical islands. This is way better than Chicago. I'll go get the drinks." She gave Maura a kiss on the cheek before sauntering to the bar. We laughed as every man turned their heads to watch her walk by.

"Let's go dance," Penny grabbed Kami's arm and dragged her away without warning.

Kami had only a second to grasp my arm and pull me with her, which she succeeded at. Maura just followed behind, knowing Aliah would find her stunning girlfriend anywhere.

I lost myself in the music, dancing like no one was watching and enjoying being free with my girls. Men tried to get in on

our dancing and we shut them down fast. Until a very familiar voice spoke in my ear when I was grinding on Penny.

“May I have the pleasure of a dance with you,” the man was polite, unlike all the others and I paused, everything seeming to stop as I looked at him.

“Yes! Yes, she would,” Penny answered for me, giving me a little push into him.

My cheeks burned as our bodies met and his hand pressed against my waist. “I’d prefer if you answer for yourself, though I’ll be very disappointed if you say no.”

“Yes,” I managed to whisper as I placed a hand on his shoulder and swayed to the beat of the music.

The man didn’t disappoint in his skills, leading me in a seductive dance that had heat rising to every part of my body, my skin sensitive to every movement. I didn’t even notice when the song changed and stayed dancing with him.

He twirled me and brought me back to him, dipping me at the end. I’d never swooned in all my life until this moment. Pulling me back to his chest, his deep timbre vibrated through my chest as he spoke, “I must know your name.”

“Trish,” I breathed out, my voice husky and filled with a need I no longer wanted to fight.

“Trish,” he let the name roll off his tongue, the slight accent making it sound so much better. “My name is Henri, and it’s such a pleasure to meet you.”

“On-ri?” I asked, my brow furrowing as I tried to say it right, the pronunciation foreign to me.

He chuckled, “Close. It’s spelled H-E-N-R-I. Henri.”

“Oh, like Henry, but you don’t pronounce the H.”

“Yes, I believe so. I find most Americans can’t pronounce my name correctly, but it just rolls off your lips.” His compliment sounded so sincere and refreshing to hear one not about my body, despite the sexual innuendo I took it for.

“Where are you from? Your accent is so slight, I can’t place it.”

“Originally, I’m from Cannes, which is where I live now. I spent many years in England and America for school and work. I’ve only been back to my home country for less than a year,” he explained as he took a drink from Aliah and handed it to me.

“You too, whatever your name is,” Aliah told him as sweetly as her personality would allow.

“Henri,” he gave her his name and politely thanked her, insisting the next drinks be on him.

“I’m not going to turn down free drinks,” she laughed as she turned to go back to the girls.

“Maybe I should get back to my friends,” I hesitantly said as I lost myself in his blue eyes. I wanted to talk to Henri more. Something about him gave me butterflies, and I liked the feeling.

“Nope,” Aliah’s voice made me jump. I didn’t realize the girls moved so close to us. “You just have a good time like we told you to earlier.”

Grinning at her, I took Henri’s hand as he led me off the dance floor and to an open table. We chatted about our lives and he described the French Riviera in such detail; I felt as if I were there.

“It’s funny,” I said, feeling stars in my eyes like one of those silly cartoon characters. “I’ve always wanted to retire and live there. You make it sound more magical than I imagined it to be.”

“I can think of only one view more beautiful than my homeland. My view right now, looking at you.”

Those butterflies turned into gymnasts, rolling and springing inside of my stomach at his words. I’d never been one to be shy, but this man, he took my words away. I laughed as I tried to wave him off, “You are such a charmer. I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“No,” he replied seriously. “I will not lie. I’ve dated many beautiful women in my life, but you. Well, no one has ever

grabbed my attention like you. When I saw you in the water, I swore you were a siren calling to me with your laughter.”

After all the years of being single and dating here and there, I’d had my fair share of men who tried to be charming. Henri seemed like one of them, despite the way I felt pulled to him for no reason I could explain. I’d have to keep my guard up with this one. I suppose it didn’t matter since we’d be leaving in the morning.

I decided to live a little and spend a night with him, knowing it would never go any further. “Henri, do you have a room on the island?” I questioned, my voice husky with the sudden need to be with him.

# CHAPTER FOUR

THE NIGHT WITH HENRI was magical. He did know how to find the elusive G-spot. Many times over. I woke up with a smile, enjoying his body pressed against mine and his arm wrapped protectively around my waist. I looked at my watch and sighed, knowing I needed to get back to the ship before it left. They waited for no one.

With a heavy sigh, I tried to slip from his arms, but he only held on tighter. “Stay with me, Trish.”

“I have to go back to the ship. It will leave without me.”

His powerful arms pulled me from my spot, flipping me over onto his chest. I knew I had morning breath, but he kissed me anyway, slow and sweet, and I felt as if my heart would burst. “Promise me you will call me,” the desperation in his voice melted me even more.

“I promise. You know, it will be a while before I retire. You’ll find yourself a wonderful woman before that happens,” I tried to be realistic despite my emotions wanting it to be more than just a dream.

“I won’t, Trish. I will come to America to see you. Watch you in that club and take you back to my hotel. Maybe I’ll just

move to Chicago.” His words were teasing, yet I yearned for it to be true.

“You know you don’t have to make promises to me. I enjoyed our night together, Henri. So much and I don’t want to leave. But I also came here knowing we live in two different worlds. I will never forget this one night we had together. Thank you for making me feel special.”

His grip loosened and his face became downfallen, as if I’d hurt him with my words. Guilt gnawed at me, but I had to go and couldn’t think about what could have been. I also didn’t want to imagine it as nothing special because it was special to me. Whatever his intentions, I wanted my memories to remain beautiful.

Kissing each of his cheeks, I slipped from his grasp and put on my dress from the night before. I’d have to do the walk of shame back to the ship, but I felt no shame. He watched me as I dressed and I tried not to look at him, instead choosing to send Kami a text telling her I’d be on my way soon and wouldn’t miss the ship.

“Trish, I see you don’t think I’m serious and I understand why you feel that way. Just let me try to prove to you I’m a man of my word. I don’t know why I feel such a bond with you. It’s never happened to me before. I didn’t believe in love at first sight until I saw you yesterday. Then, getting to know you made it so much more real.”

I didn’t know what to say. I knew men and could read their intentions. I didn’t doubt Henri’s sincerity; I doubted the follow through. Life would get in the way and we’d both find it hard to keep up a long-distance relationship. Maybe we would end up friends, but nothing more. I wouldn’t stop his fantasy now, though, not after the night we shared. “I promise I’ll stay in touch with you,” I leaned down and kissed him one last time before leaving.

My legs didn’t want to move, and I trudged through the hotel, down to the lobby as if I were walking in quicksand.

Walking through the door was the hardest thing for me to do because it made the special night over for real. Holding my phone in one hand and my wallet loosely in the other, I checked my watch and then pushed the door open, stepping out into the blinding sun and crowd of tourists.

“Trish,” I heard Henri’s deep timber calling from above. I stopped in my tracks and looked to see him leaning out his window waving at me. I laughed when he blew me a kiss and shouted, “Call me, my beautiful siren.”

“I will,” I called back, not caring about the grumbling people who had to walk around me. My moment of romance was about to end and I wanted to bask in it for a moment longer. And I basked until someone rudely bumped into me hard, sending me sprawling on the ground.

“Trish,” I heard Henri’s panicked voice. “I’m coming.”

I picked myself back up and hissed at the scrape on my knee. The only thing I was grateful for was that I hadn’t left my panties in the room as I planned. It was bad enough that everyone around me got a free show. Short dresses are not good when being knocked down.

As I surveyed the damage, Henri came to my side, dressed in only a pair of shorts slung low on his hips. “Are you alright?” he asked, looking me over and checking for damage. “Oh, you have a large scrape, but it isn’t bleeding much. Come, let me help you clean up.”

I shook my head, “I have to get back to the ship. It’s leaving soon. I can’t miss it.”

“Then I’ll walk with you.” He held out his arm, and I took it, slipping my own in the crook of his elbow. That’s when I realized my wallet wasn’t in my hand anymore.

# CHAPTER FIVE

“OH, NO!” I PANICKED as I looked all around the sidewalk. “It has everything. My boarding pass, my passport, my money and cards. What am I going to do?”

“We’ll figure it out, Trish. It’s not anywhere here.” Henri ran his finger through his dark hair, “The man who bumped into you was running. I thought he was just a jogger, but maybe he’s a thief. We have to go to the authorities.”

“I can’t miss my ship. I’ll be stuck here with nothing,” I argued, walking fast toward the docks, tugging Henri with me. “I have to at least try to get onboard.”

“Okay. We will try. Maybe when you tell them what happened, they will contact the authorities and hold the ship.”

I doubted it, but it was worth a try. Time was running out, and we jogged, my feet killing me in the high heels meant for a night of fun, not a run through a town. I wished I had my stripper heels, which were comfortable and made for a lot of activity. I laughed when Henri mentioned how amazed he was at my ability to run in heels.

“You don’t spend days on end in high platform heels without getting good at it.”

My phone buzzed, and it was a string of texts from Kami asking where I was.

The ship is leaving soon.

I'm trying to get them to wait, but they are refusing.  
The gangplank is going up. Where are you?  
Damn it, Trish! Answer me!

I didn't have time to answer back and realized the messages had been delayed when I reached the dock, only to find my ship sailing away. "Shit!" I collapsed onto the wood planks and screamed to whoever was up in the clouds, listening to my meltdown.

Henri's warm hand touched my shoulder, but he stayed silent as my tears fell to the planks, creating small puddles. "I have nothing but my phone. No money, ID, or anything. I don't even have a charger for my phone. What the hell am I supposed to do?"

"I'm here, Trish. I'll help you figure it out. Why don't we get you to my hotel and see who we can talk to and get this fixed?"

Every ounce of my pride became damaged by his words, embarrassment filling me. I snapped at him, "I don't need a man to save me."

He didn't seem shaken by my outburst, speaking gently, "I'm not saving you. I'm offering my help, as anyone would do for someone in distress."

"Oh, God. I'm so sorry, Henry. I didn't mean it like that. I'm just..." I trailed off, not knowing what to say.

"You're upset. Think nothing of it," he shrugged before giving me a friendly smile and offering his hand to me.

Wiping my tears with the back of my hand, I let him help me up. I could feel my mascara clumping on my cheeks, seeing it on my hand. "I must look like a train wreck. This is so embarrassing." Letting out a humorless laugh, I continued, "I bet you're sorry you picked me up last night. I'm not so beautiful anymore."

Cupping my cheek, he turned serious, "You are still my beautiful siren. But, that being said, we'll grab a toothbrush from the desk. You can shower and I'll get you some clean

clothes while you do. I only offer this because it will help you keep it together while you work on figuring out what to do.”

“I do have terrible morning breath,” I smiled despite myself. This man was something special, and I wondered if the fates had a hand in our meeting. Maybe this all happened for a reason.

As fast as the thought came, I pushed it away. I would still leave soon. I had no clue how to make it happen, but I would figure it out.

# CHAPTER SIX

THE SHOWER DID WONDERS for me, especially after seeing myself in the mirror. My makeup ran down my red, puffy face. It was no wonder everyone stared at me on the way back to Henri's hotel. The nice woman at the front desk looked at me with sympathy as she handed me a toothbrush in a little wrapper. I told her what happened, and she promised to get me the numbers I needed to get everything straightened out. She also called the local police to come and take a report on my stolen wallet, and Henri told them we would go down to the station after I cleaned up.

When I stepped out to the room with a towel wrapped around me, Henri was nowhere to be found. A simple sundress and some panties were on the bed, along with a pair of flat sandals. I vowed to pay him back for everything he bought for me and looked for the tags, but they were cut off already.

Picking up the soft material, I slipped it on, checking my phone for any messages. Kami messaged me back, telling me Aliah was on it, working on finding out how to get me back home.

Penny made me laugh with her text, This is the universe telling you to keep banging the hot French man. I remembered how she'd pushed Kami toward Evan, who was her boss at the time, and how well that worked out. A moment of hope

wiggled its way into my brain and I shoved it away. He still doesn't know what I do for a living and I really don't know him. Hell, he could easily be just another pompous jerk underneath all the charm.

The door opens and I hear Henri suck in a breath, "Wow. You are absolutely breathtaking."

I look at my feet, my hair still wet from the shower, "You're so sweet, but I think it's this dress. It's so pretty. Thank you, Henri. Thank you for everything."

"It's not the dress," he says as he takes a step closer to me. Lifting my chin with his finger, he makes me look into his eyes, "I have to be good at knowing people in my business and I can see you have a big heart. You're intelligent and funny, and you make me laugh more than I have in years. Your beauty on the inside is just as much as your perfect porcelain skin and red hair. You honor me by letting me be a part of your adventure."

I let out a sigh, one of those long rushes of breath that sounds like a swoon. Before I can respond, he leans down and gently kisses my lips. The softness and tenderness make my knees weak, and I forget all my troubles, getting lost in this perfect moment. Henri doesn't use his tongue, but the way he moves his lips sends tingles straight to my belly and I can't get enough.

The perfect ending of sucking lightly on my bottom lip and I'm done for. My heart grows in size, pounding in my chest as we stare at each other for a long time, the silence comfortable between us. As if we were meant to be.

He breaks it first, "I picked up a charger for you. I'm sure your battery is getting low, and I have no doubt you'll need it. I also spoke to the hotel manager. He informed me the consulate here on the island does not do passports. You'll have to travel to Cancun in order to get one. But you need a few things first."

"Oh?"

“Yes, some form of identification, which will be difficult with your wallet being stolen and the rest of your things aboard the ship you missed. You’ll have to call to find out what exactly you’ll need before I make the travel arrangements.”

“Thank you, but I can’t...” my words are cut off by the room’s telephone ringing.

He speaks briefly to the person on the other end before hanging up. “The police are here to take the report. We can go downstairs and meet them. The manager has offered his office for us to speak privately.”

“That’s very kind of him,” I say, unsure why a manager of a hotel would be so helpful. Maybe the people here were just nice, unlike those in Chicago. They wouldn’t stop for a person getting beaten in the street, let alone offer a private area for a simple police report.

“He also offered a second room for you to stay in until this can all be sorted. I told him I’d leave it up to you. You’re more than welcome to stay here with me.” Henri kept his voice even, completely leaving the decision up to me.

I couldn’t stay with him, could I?

# CHAPTER SEVEN

TWO DAYS OF CALLING and trying to figure out what I needed to get my passport so I could go home. They offered an emergency twenty-four-hour temporary one just so I could fly home. Mr. Corbin at Envy was able to send me a copy of my driver's license and wired me money to pay for my extra travel expenses. I couldn't believe how helpful the hotel staff were with letting me use their fax machine and making sure I had everything I needed.

I wanted so much to stay with Henri in his room, but I couldn't. It was just too fast. Once I received the money, I tried to pay him back for what he'd bought, but he refused. "Trish, I have the money to spend. Let me try to spoil you," he insisted, and I gave in.

It was strange for me to be spoiled by a man outside of the club. I always worked hard for my money. Something about Henri was different, though, and I found myself unable to turn him down. Quite the opposite, really. I enjoyed his attention and gifts.

Every moment I wasn't hunting down information on how to get home, we spent it together. We spent a lot of time on the

beach and even went to swim with the dolphins. Everything felt so right with Henri, the way he made me laugh and feel like I was the only woman in the room. I basked in his attention and each time it got closer to me going home; the reality made my chest squeeze painfully.

“I need to call and make arrangements for the ferry and bus ride to Cancun for tomorrow,” I mentioned as we laid in the beach chairs. “I almost don’t want to go home.”

His eyes twinkled as he grinned at me, “I have the travel arrangements all taken care of.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, even though inside I was thankful he’d done it. “What happened to letting me do this with you just being here for support?”

“My beautiful siren, I let you do everything. This is something for us to enjoy together. If you insist on going home, let me give you something special to remember me by. I want to make sure you don’t forget me.”

“Hun, I don’t think I could if I tried. These few days have been amazing. If I didn’t have to get all my stolen things taken care of and have to work, I’d never go back.”

“We could make shell jewelry and sell it on the beach,” he chuckled as he put down his book and stretched his arms. All those rippling muscles made my thighs clench.

Trying to pull myself away from the view, he gave me the perfect opening to broach the subject I dreaded. If everything went well, I’d leave tomorrow. I had my own room and could get myself to the consulate if it went horribly wrong.

“What is it you do for a living,” I blurted out, the only way I could finally talk about it.

“I own a few businesses in Cannes. One I inherited from my father when he retired. The others I’ve purchased over the past few years.” He shifted in his seat, seemingly uncomfortable with sharing. “What do you do?”

“Maybe this is over sharing. We don’t have to know everything about each other right now.” I completely chickened out, unlike my normal self.

“Are you a spy?” he teased.

I bit my lip, knowing I needed to just get it out in the open. Blowing out a breath, I rushed out. “I’m a dancer. An exotic dancer and I’m not ashamed of my work. I’m proud of the exclusive club I dance at. I just...” my voice trailed off.

“You just thought I’d treat you differently if I knew,” he finished for me, echoing my thoughts.

I nodded and looked at him, seeing him beaming at me. He sat up and my stomach sank, thinking he would, in fact, treat me as I thought he would. Change into a one like all the rest who thought I was a commodity.

Instead, he laughed. A full, loud belly laugh that had a few eyes darting our way. He caught his breath and must have seen the horror on my face, because he sobered up quickly. “Oh, my siren, do you know how I knew why you would think that way?”

“No,” I admitted, hoping he wasn’t about to crush my heart.

“I didn’t want to tell you what businesses I own, because one of them is a club with exotic dancers. Most women find out and run. They think I’m sleeping with all the dancers despite me not being attracted to one of them and having enough sense not to cross that line. But you, you know what it’s like to be in that environment and know I wouldn’t ever touch them.”

My jaw dropped, something I didn’t expect in the least. I didn’t know what to say, and suddenly the emotional turmoil I’d been going through for the past few days spilled over. And dammit all, they came out in tears. I sniffled, “How did we end up meeting? This has to be a dream.”

I felt his hand surround mine, and his deep voice whispered, “No, Trish, this is fate. I, too, feel like I’m in a dream. I would never have guessed the funny, intelligent woman who

stole my heart on vacation would be more than perfect for me.”

As if everything we'd held back until our confessions suddenly burst through the dam, neither of us could wait any longer. We stood at the same time and he scooped up our belongings, leading me back to the hotel.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

THROWING THE DOOR OPEN, he dropped our things on the floor, reaching for me as I fell into his arms. His mouth crashed against mine, stars exploding behind my lids as our passion sparked to life. My body hummed in anticipation as we pawed at each other's clothes. I'd never been happier to be dressed in a bikini than I was at that moment.

Naked, our hands and lips desperately touched one another in whatever spot we could reach. Hunger filled me, the burning need to feel him inside of me while I craved to feel every part of him connected to me.

It seemed he felt the same, his voice pleading, "My beautiful siren, what have you done to me? I want to take my time with you, but I can't. I need you."

"Take me, Henri," my voice was husky as I tugged him toward the bed. "I need you too."

He scooped me up in his arms, carried me to the bed, and laid me down ever so gently. Hovering over me for a moment, he devoured me with his eyes, "You are so tantalizingly beautiful."

Henri's mouth descended upon mine, not giving me a chance to answer. He slowly pushed into me, linking us in a way I'd never felt before. He wasn't slow or forgiving in showing his need for me, but neither was I, pushing up to meet his every thrust. We swallowed each other's moans as our lust turned to something akin to love, my heart wanting to burst as climbed the cliff together and careened off the side.

It hit me like a tsunami, and I cried out his name as I floated in the clouds, basking in the sunshine that was Henri. His body still, we stared at each other, silence saying everything our words couldn't say.

He was so tender with me, something I hadn't experienced before, it filled me with hope that maybe we were fated to be together. I wouldn't do anything silly like to leave my job and run off to another country with him, but I would give him a chance. A long-distance relationship could work, especially since I didn't really date anymore, anyway.

"Alright. I'll call you when I leave," I blurted out my thoughts.

"You weren't going to?" he sounded genuinely taken aback by my admission.

"I wasn't sure. Honestly, I didn't think this would be anything special. I figured it was a vacation fling, and we'd forget about each other as soon as I left."

"Well, since you're being honest, so will I. I figured you would eventually find out about my business and lose my number. Or worse, you'd only care about my wealth."

"Henri, I'm a woman with high tastes, but I buy those things for myself. If all I wanted was a rich man, I could've had several with all the men who propose to me every single night at the club," I laughed at the absurdity. I also knew he didn't know until this afternoon what I did for a living. We were relatively strangers with only knowing each other for a couple of days, something I pointed out.

“Yes, we are strangers,” he agreed. “I don’t want to be, though. I think we have a chance to find out if we are as compatible as it seems. If you’re agreeable, I’d love to start with video chats and maybe come and visit you. I’d stay in a hotel, of course.” There was no way I could say no to his sensibilities and appreciated how much thought he put into my comfort.

“I think my friends would hang me up by the toes if I didn’t agree. But seriously, I’d be stupid to not try,” I agreed, my worries floating away, knowing I’d still be in control and taking things slow. I could do slow.

“Good. Now that’s all settled, let me take you out to dinner.” His stomach grumbled loudly, punctuating how many calories we burned.

“No.” My face stern, I insisted, “I’ll take you out to dinner. You’ve already spoiled me too much.” I loved the way the corners of his mouth ticked up as he held back a smile and simply nodded his reluctant agreement.

# CHAPTER NINE

HENRI RENTED A YACHT. A forking yacht! With a captain and everything. He told me he missed his boat back home and wanted to ride comfortably to Cancun. It would be stressful enough going to the consulate and getting my temporary passport, the thought of spending so much time on a ferry and a bus was too much for him.

“Oh, so that’s the secret you’ve been keeping from me,” I winked. “You’re really a pampered prince.”

“I am,” he was unapologetic and just so damn sexy in his casual white shirt and khaki shorts.

“My friends will not believe this. I told them I wanted to sail the French Riviera on a yacht.” The strangeness of the conversation now a close reality was unnerving to say the least.

“That’s funny. I told my friends I would find a mermaid on my trip. Guess we both got what we wanted.” How he managed to make me blush constantly, I had no clue.

Our conversations turned to our lives and what they were like. Despite the wealth, Henri’s life seemed lonely. Mine was

too if I thought about it. We both enjoyed the life in clubs, his also as swanky as Envy from the sound of it.

He asked me how he could improve things for the women who worked for him and appreciated my ideas, though he already did a pretty good job. I told him the story of Corrina, the owner's wife, and how her input as a previous dancer made it a wonderful place to work.

With the wind in my hair, the blue ocean stretched out in front of us, and the best company I could ask for, I lost the nervousness I felt at going to the American Embassy. There was no doubt Henri was a man I could fall in love with easily.

Once we arrived at the port, Henri helped me off and we caught a cab to the embassy. After walking me to the front gate, he kissed me goodbye and went to a café down the street to wait. I felt myself missing his presence and almost didn't cross into the American land of the building. I didn't want our time together to end.

I wouldn't be one of those flighty women who jetted off with a wealthy stranger only to find out they had some terrible hidden secret. It wasn't me to make rash decisions and this time wouldn't be any different, no matter what my heart wanted.

When I finally received my temporary passport hours later, tears stung my eyes. I lost the spring in my step as I walked to the café. My flight would leave from Cancun in just a few hours, sooner than I expected. We'd known ahead of time I'd have to leave from there and planned to stay in a hotel together for what would be my last night in Mexico. Of course, that was before I knew he'd rented a yacht, and that's where my meager belongings sat waiting for me.

He stood as I approached, a crease appearing between his brows as he took me in. The sadness washed over me and I couldn't hide it. "What's wrong, my beautiful siren? Did they not get you the passport?"

“They did. But the only flight within the time period is in three hours,” I choked out the words and then bit my lip to keep myself from crying. “I thought we’d have more time.”

His face fell, “We should have checked the flight schedule. I wouldn’t have come today had I known.”

“It’s not fair,” I whined, and he wrapped his arms around me, making shushing sounds as he stroked my hair. He held me tight against his chest as if he didn’t want to let me go, either. I melted into him, inhaling the scent of saltwater clinging to him and his familiar musk. “I’m stealing your shirt,” I mumbled into his chest.

“I’m stealing your panties,” he tried to respond with lightness in his voice, but it didn’t work. The sadness poured out of him. Clearing his throat, he said stiffly, “We need to get your things and get you checked in at the airport. There isn’t much time, and I’m sure it’s packed this time of the year.”

As much as I didn’t want to, I knew he was right. I didn’t know what the penalty would be for me not leaving within twenty-four hours, but the woman at the embassy made it clear I was to be on a plane before my time was up. So, I reluctantly peeled myself from his embrace, took his hand, and followed him out to the street where he hailed a cab.

My head rested on his shoulder the entire time, aside from when he stepped out to grab my bags from the yacht. The heaviness in the air was palatable, and I felt as if an elephant sat on my chest. It was silly to feel this sad when I’d only known him for a short time. But time was something there never was enough of.

He walked as far as he could go, which was to the security line leading to the gates. Asking the woman behind me to hold my place, he pulled me to the side and brushed his lips against mine, so featherlight, if I weren’t so hypersensitive with him, I wouldn’t have felt it.

Leaning his forehead against mine, he pleaded, “Please, call me, Trish. As soon as you land. I need to know you’re safe.”

“I will,” I promised, wrapping my hands around his neck and feeling his soft, dark hair for the last time.

His eyes darted over to the line, “We have to be fast. They are moving quickly. I want you to know you’re a special woman and I pray you don’t block me from calling you. Meeting you is fate, and I hope I get to keep you.”

Before I could answer, his lips pressed against mine again, this time his kiss was needy and desperate. Our tongues danced, and those sparks flew behind my eyes again. I had no idea how I would go back to Chicago and be able to live again without him there.

“I will call you. I meant what I said about giving this a chance. A real chance. I don’t know how it will turn out. The only thing I know is the way I feel about you is like nothing I’ve ever felt before.” I gave him one last searing kiss before stepping back into my place in line. My eyes never left his as I waited for my turn to go through the security check.

As soon as I stepped through the scanner, my heart sank and I fought the urge to run back to him. No matter how much he soaked my panties with that kiss, I had to leave, otherwise we wouldn’t have a chance to see where our relationship took us. I held up my hand and waved before stepping through to the other side, going back to my miserably lonely life.

# CHAPTER TEN

## *1 YEAR LATER*

“The pictures don’t do this place justice,” I gushed as Henri gave me a tour of his home. After talking to him for so long without being able to touch him, my nerves were shot. On top of it, I had jet lag. That still didn’t stop me from gaping at the tastefully decorated large home.

He enveloped me in his warmth, his powerful arms clinging to my waist, his hard chest against my back. “I’ve missed you so much, Trish.” The way he said my name in his slight accent gave me shivers almost as much as his lips on my neck.

We stood there for a long time, enjoying the view of the dark blue water of the Bay of Cannes, along with just being able to touch each other after so long of being apart. “I’ve missed you too, Henri. This is like a dream.”

“If it is a dream, I never want to wake up,” his whisper in my ear tickled, making me giggle. “I much prefer being in the heat rather than the freezing cold of winter.”

“At least we had fun in the snow,” I teased, recalling the snowball fight I started during his Christmas visit.

“You’re lucky I love you. I swear I had frostbite,” he pouted. “But my beautiful siren warmed me up, so it was worth it.”

I rolled my eyes, “Such a baby. I would never let you get frostbite. Snow is just cold.” I leaned my head back into his

chest, feeling dreamy, “As beautiful as the first snow is when it blankets the city in white, I won’t miss the cold at all. I will miss my friends, though.”

“Don’t worry, Trish. We have plenty of room in our home for guests. They’re welcome anytime.”

“Our home,” I sighed. It sounded so foreign, and I still tried to wrap my mind around the fact that this was my home now.

“Yes, *our* home. This was just a house until you arrived. You make it a home for me, Trish.” He truly was as romantic as he seemed when I met him in Cozumel. “I’d love to show you our bedroom. I think it needs a woman’s touch.”

“I think it needs you touching a woman. On the bed.” I squealed as he scooped me up and carried me to where I assumed our bedroom awaited us. My lips touched his neck, tasting the salt of his skin as I inhaled his musky scent.

The decision to leave everything I knew behind wasn’t an easy one. At this moment, though, I knew I made the right choice. Henri, the man I was fated to be with, and our happily ever after had just begun.

If you haven’t grabbed your copy yet, read more about Kami and Evan in , available on Amazon.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M Calder is a romance author who loves to write about strong women who overcome obstacles and always end up with a man who compliments them. And sometimes just a whole lot of spice with the stories in her head or unexpected twists and turns. There's always a book for everyone in her extensive collection of stories.

She writes reverse harem and menage books under the name of Melody Calder, and women's fiction under M.A. Calder.

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