



TERI WILSON

The Bachelor's
Baby
Suprise

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Teri Wilson
The Bachelor's Baby Surprise

Серия «Wilde Hearts», книга 3
Серия «Mills & Boon True Love»

Аннотация

Evangeline is determined to focus on the future. Evangeline knows she needs to put a bad breakup behind her. And stop obsessing over her subsequent super-hot one night stand – even if he is Ryan Wilde, her new boss! But that might not be so easy when she discovers she's pregnant. And that telling Ryan would mean risking everything!

Содержание

MILLS & BOON

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

49

Okay, Evangeline Holly!

You. Can. Do. This.

Put that bad breakup behind you. And stop obsessing over the subsequent superhot one-night stand. Focus on your future. It's the first day of your new job! Just ignore the fact that your boss, Ryan Wilde, was your former one-night lover. (He's so hot!) Oh, and—surprise!—you're pregnant with Ryan's baby. And your job hinges on keeping it secret. You've got this! Right?

Having written over eighty-five novels, **TARA TAYLOR QUINN** is a *USA TODAY* bestselling author with more than seven million copies sold. She is known for delivering intense, emotional fiction. Tara is a past president of Romance Writers of America. She has won a Readers' Choice Award and is a seven-time finalist for an RWA RITA[®] Award. She has also appeared on TV across the country, including CBS Sunday Morning. She supports the National Domestic Violence Hotline. If you or someone you know might be a victim of domestic violence in the United States, please contact 1-800-799-7233.

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The Bachelor's Baby Surprise

Teri Wilson

MILLS & BOON

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For Cameron

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[Chapter One](#)

“Come quickly... I am tasting stars.”

—Dom Pérignon, at his first sip of champagne

Evangeline Holly was no stranger to guilty pleasures.

Like Audrey Hepburn, she had a fondness for a nice creamy chocolate cake. In fact, she was on a first-name basis with most everyone at Magnolia Bakery’s Bleecker Street location in Greenwich Village.

She was also currently housing not just one, but *two* special-needs Cavalier King Charles spaniels in her very tiny, very *non*-pet-friendly apartment. So yeah. She had her vices.

But she also knew where and when to draw the line. Evangeline knew her limits. And for her, those limits included

two noteworthy things she'd never once indulged in—bad wine and one-night stands.

Until now.

Her head throbbed. She dragged her eyelids open, and the first thing her gaze landed on was her pair of dogs snoring madly atop a man's Armani suit jacket that had been discarded on the bedroom floor. Beside it, a pair of trousers and a crisp white Oxford shirt rested in a heap.

Okay then.

She closed her eyes and reminded herself that there wasn't anything inherently wrong with cheap wine or casual sex. It was just that growing up on a vineyard in Upstate New York simply precluded her from experiencing the former. If she was a wine snob, she'd at least come by it honestly.

As for the latter...

Chalk that up to being involved in a devoted, monogamous relationship with the same man for most of her adult life. Also, no one actually had time for intimacy these days, did they? Evangeline had never quite believed everyone was spending as much time in bed as they cheekily hinted at.

She opened her eyes again. Early morning sunlight glinted off the pair of cuff links on her nightstand. There were *cuff links* on her nightstand. Cuff links from Tiffany & Co., but still.

She'd been wrong about everything. So. Very. Wrong.

Most notably the assumption that her relationship was in any way devoted. Or monogamous. On her end, yes. On Jeremy's,

not so much. Apparently, he'd been spending plenty of time in bed...with his sous chef. Not Evangeline.

She'd been enlightened three days ago. It was startling how much could change in three measly days. She'd lost her boyfriend. She'd lost her job. Basic truths she'd believed about her life had gone right out the window.

As had Evangeline's previous avoidance of certain weaknesses.

The pounding in her head was a testament that she'd broken her *no bad wine* rule the night before. The evidence of her first-ever one-night stand was far more tangible—from the clothes and the cuff links to the startlingly attractive man lying beside her with his eyes closed, dressed in nothing but her nicest bedsheets.

“Good morning.” He spoke without opening his eyes, as if he could sense her staring at him. His voice was delicious, low and unfamiliar. Not at all like Jeremy's.

“Um.” She swallowed. What had she been thinking? She'd brought a complete stranger back to her apartment, and here he was. Naked in her bed.

She blamed Jeremy. This was 90 percent his fault. The other ten percent of the blame fell squarely on the shoulders of the pinot grigio she could still taste in the back of her throat. *Pinot grigio*, for God's sake.

“Good morning,” she finally said, even though nothing about it seemed good.

She didn't know what to say or how to act. She wasn't even

sure where to look, although she couldn't seem to force her gaze away from the owner of the cuff links. He stretched and rolled onto his back, giving her an eyeful of taut male skin and finely sculpted abdominal muscles.

Her throat grew dry. Where on earth had she found this beautiful person? And how had she summoned up the nerve to flirt with him? Flirting must have happened at some point for him to end up here, right?

Jeremy's voice rose up from the pinot-drenched fog in her mind. *Of course I've been sleeping around. What did you expect? You're not exactly a sexual person, Evangeline. I just need more. Most people need more.*

So that's how she'd found the courage. When your boyfriend insinuated you were terrible in bed, you either curled up into a ball or went about proving him wrong. Two days in the fetal position had been more than enough.

The sound of a deeply male throat clearing dragged her back to the present.

Evangeline's gaze flitted from the stranger's trim waist to his drowsy half grin. He'd caught her ogling him. Perfect.

Her face went hot. "Look, um..."

"Ryan," he said, tucking his arms behind his head, causing the sheet to dip even lower.

Don't look. Do. Not.

She looked, and a sultry warmth washed over her, settling in the very same areas that Jeremy had called dead just three days

prior.

“Right.” She bit her lip and met his gaze again. “Ryan. I knew that.”

“I believe you.” He winked. Clearly he didn’t, even though Ryan had been the first name that came to her once she’d spotted the *RW* engraved on his cuff links. “Eve.”

Eve?

No one had ever called her Eve. Always Evangeline.

She remembered hearing somewhere that *Eve* meant *living*. She tried not to think too hard about that while there was a naked man named Ryan with the body of a Greek god stretched out beside her. “Anyway, *Ryan*, what I’m trying to say is that I don’t typically do this sort of thing.”

“Yes, I know. You mentioned that last night. A couple of times, actually.” He rested a warm hand on her upper thigh and gave her a smile that seemed a bit sad around the edges. Bittersweet.

She felt oddly transparent, as if the man in her bed knew more about her than was possible after only a handful of hours together. Her thigh was suddenly awash in goose bumps.

“Good. So long as we’re clear—this was a one-night affair. A mistake, probably. I don’t expect you to ask for my number or anything.” She slid her leg out of reach, tucking it beneath the covers.

His smile faded. The dimples which had been barely visible beneath the layer of scruff on his chiseled jaw disappeared

entirely. “A mistake?”

She nodded, because of course it had been a mistake.

A man was the very last thing she needed, even for one night. Particularly *this* man, whose hands she couldn't look at without imagining them on her skin. And whose mouth made her want to linger in bed and revisit the most wicked portions of the previous evening. “Good grief, how much wine did I have last night?”

She clamped her mouth closed. God, had she actually asked that question out loud?

“Quite a bit.” Ryan's frown deepened. She couldn't stop saying his name in her head. *Ryan. Ryan. Ryan.* “Although you didn't seem drunk. Not even tipsy. Should I be apologizing right now? Something tells me I should.”

Another perk of having a vineyard in your childhood backyard—an incredibly high tolerance. For wine, at least. Even on the rare occasion when she drank enough to *feel* like she'd overindulged, it never showed.

“You have nothing to apologize for. Truly.” Memories flitted through her consciousness. The taste of him. The feel of him. The weight of him on top of her as he'd pushed himself inside.

It had been exactly what she'd wanted.

Exquisite.

A shiver coursed through her, and she leaped out of the bed to prevent herself from reaching for him again.

Ryan's gaze settled on her, and she felt it as keenly as if it were a caress. Her thoughts screamed. *Ryan. Ryan. Ryan.* She'd cried

out his name last night, hadn't she?

Oh God.

She crossed her arms, and his gaze drifted lower, lingering on her bare breasts. She was every bit as naked as he was, which made perfect sense, given the situation. She'd just been so preoccupied with *his* nakedness that she hadn't noticed her own.

"What if I *wanted* to ask for your number?" he said, making no move whatsoever to evacuate her bed.

How long was he planning on staying? Did Ryan not realize how one-night stands worked?

Ryan. Ryan. Ryan.

Evangeline had repeated the name to herself so many times now that it no longer made sense. She wondered what the *W* on the cuff links stood for, but she didn't dare ask. If she knew his full name, she might be tempted to look him up later in another moment of weakness.

Not happening.

She grabbed the quilt off the end of the bed, wrapped it around herself and shook her head. "You don't want my number."

A muscle flicked in his jaw. "I'm certain I do."

"No." She shook her head even harder. "You don't."

If he knew the first thing about her situation, he'd run for the hills. She wouldn't blame him in the slightest.

"Then I must be an idiot," he said.

Did he have to be so charming? He probably couldn't help it. It was probably part of his genetic makeup, like the abs. And the

voice. And the fathomless blue of his eyes.

Evangeline had never seen eyes quite so blue.

She averted her gaze from them.

“Honestly, you don’t need to do this. Everything’s fine. I’m fine. This was—” *Just what I needed.* She swallowed around the lump that had formed in her throat, seemingly out of nowhere “—fun.”

“Fun,” he echoed.

The word sounded oddly hollow, and Evangeline instantly wanted to take it back. She had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop herself from telling him the whole truth—that she was lost; she’d been lost for a very long time and that the real reason she never did this sort of thing was because it scared the life out of her.

Intimacy, in all its forms, involved a level of vulnerability that she couldn’t quite handle. She thought Jeremy had understood that about her. Wrong again.

“Here you go, then.” She bent to retrieve his abandoned shirt and trousers and handed them to him. When his fingertips brushed against hers, the lump in her throat doubled in size.

Leave. Please, leave.

He climbed out of the bed and started to get dressed. Thank goodness.

She glanced at the floor, where Olive and Bee were still sound asleep on top of Ryan’s suit jacket. Olive’s paws twitched. She was chasing rabbits in her sleep again.

Evangeline tugged gently on the wool Armani, trying her hardest to slip it out from beneath the sleeping dogs unnoticed. Like the old magician's tablecloth trick.

No such luck. Bee was completely deaf, therefore extremely sensitive to movement. She woke with a start, pawing at Evangeline's shins. Olive let out a squeaky dog yawn and hopped onto the bed, where she stood and stared at Ryan while he zipped up his pants.

He glanced up, spotted Olive watching him and then reached to scratch behind her ears.

"Pet her from the left side. She can't see out of her right eye, so you might startle her," Evangeline said.

He followed her advice. The little Cavalier's tail wagged furiously. Bee scrambled up onto the bed to join in the fun.

"Sweet dogs," Ryan said, and Evangeline's heart gave a little tug.

He somehow managed to look even more attractive, surrounded by adorable dogs. Because of course.

"Thank you. They technically belong to my grandfather, but he recently moved into an extended care facility, so they live here now." Why was she telling him this?

"I'm sorry to hear that." His voice went as soft as velvet, like he really meant it.

If he didn't leave soon, she'd probably offer to cook him breakfast.

"Here." She shoved his suit jacket at him. Every inch of it was

covered in dog hair.

He pretended not to notice and slid it on, anyway. And that small act of kindness was almost more than she could bear. Maybe last night hadn't been a mistake after all. Maybe the mistake was happening right now.

Maybe she shouldn't be in such a hurry to let him go.

"Goodbye, then," she said in as firm a voice as she could manage.

He came around the bed, and when he was an arm's length away, he lifted his hand as if to cup her face. She took a tiny backward step.

His hand fell to his side. "Goodbye, Eve."

And then he was gone.

* * *

Ryan Wilde stood outside Eve's apartment and watched as the door shut in his face.

Well, he thought, that was different.

He'd never been so summarily tossed out of a woman's bed before. Then again, he typically didn't make a habit out of bedding women he didn't actually know.

Especially lately.

Ryan's love life had been rather complicated in recent weeks, thanks to the *New York Times*. He'd been doing his best to avoid romantic entanglements altogether.

He walked down the hall, making his way to the building's front steps and pulled his cell phone from the inside pocket of his

suit jacket—which looked more like a fur coat at the moment—and rang the Bennington Hotel’s driver.

The chauffeur answered on the first ring. “Mr. Wilde, how can I help you?”

Ryan didn’t often take advantage of the more luxurious perks that came with being chief financial officer of the Bennington, but having a driver on standby was nice at a time like this. He glanced up and down the picturesque street. The sun was just coming up, bathing the neighborhood brownstones in soft winter hues of violet and blue. The snowy sidewalks were empty, save for an older man opening up the newsstand on the corner. “Are you free to come pick me up in the Village?”

He was, of course. Who needed a limo this time of day?

Ryan gave the driver his location, then pocketed his phone again. He rubbed his hands together. His breath was a visible puff of vapor in the crisp air. What the hell had he done with his coat?

He lifted his gaze to the row of windows on the third floor, trying to guess which one was Eve’s. He wished he’d left his Burberry trench up there so he’d have a legitimate excuse to see her again, but he hadn’t. He’d left it on the back of a chair at the wine bar the night before—forgotten, completely—right around the time he’d spotted Eve across the room, brandishing a butcher knife.

It had been one of the most bizarre things he’d ever seen. She’d grabbed a bottle of champagne and before he’d been able to process what he was seeing, she severed the neck of the bottle

with the knife. Sliced it clean off, just below the cork. It made a loud popping sound, and she'd stood there with a quiet smile on her face while bubbles spilled down her arm. The group of people at her table cheered. All men, he'd noticed.

She wasn't on a date, though, from what he could tell. The table was piled with note cards, as if they were some kind of study group.

Note cards. In the middle of a wine bar on Friday night.

"That was quite the party trick," Ryan had said after he'd abandoned his coat, his drink and the trio of business associates he'd been meeting with.

He'd had to talk to her. *Had to.*

For the better part of a week, he'd been avoiding every marriage-minded single woman in Manhattan. But the knife-wielding goddess had gotten under his skin instantly. He wasn't even sure why.

Yes, she was pretty. More than pretty, actually. Beautiful, with full red lips and long, spun-gold hair—the kind of hair that made him hard just thinking about what it would feel like sliding through his fingers.

But it had been more than her looks that had him spellbound from all the way across the crowded room. He'd felt an inexplicable pull deep in his chest when he looked at her. And as he came closer, there'd been something else. She'd had secrets in her eyes.

"It's not a party trick," she'd said, looking him up and down.

A scarlet flush made its way up her porcelain face. “It’s called sabering.”

She’d gone on to explain that French cavalry officers had used their swords in a similar manner to open champagne during the Napoleonic Wars. Which didn’t explain in the slightest why she was doing it in a wine bar on the Upper West Side, but Ryan hadn’t cared.

It had fascinated him. *She’d* fascinated him...

Fascinated him enough that he very purposefully neglected to mention his last name.

A car rounded the corner. Ryan turned in the direction of the sound of tires crunching on packed snow, but it wasn’t the Bennington limo. Where was the damned thing? He was freezing.

He bowed his head against the wind and walked toward the newsstand, hoping the old man could sell him some coffee.

He felt bad about the name thing, even now. Even after she’d shown him the door within minutes of waking up in her bed. It wasn’t as if he’d lied to her. He’d just left off his surname.

Call me Ryan.

Thinking about that made him wince. It made him sound like a player, when in actuality, he was anything but.

That was the big irony of his current situation. Practically overnight, and through no fault of his own, he’d developed a *reputation*. A reputation that had no basis in reality.

It had been a relief when he realized Eve had no idea who he

was.

Eve, with her butcher knife and lovely head full of history.

“Excuse me,” he said.

The man behind the newsstand looked up. “Yeah?”

“Have you got any coffee back there?”

The man nodded. “Sure do. Extra hot.”

“Perfect.” Ryan opened his wallet and removed a few bills.

As he handed the old man the money, his gaze snagged on a magazine.

Gotham. But the title didn't matter. It was the image on the magazine's cover that gave him pause.

A man's face.

His face.

If Evangeline Holly hadn't known who he was last night, she would now.

Chapter Two

Six weeks later

Ryan was late.

In the three years since he'd been named CFO of the Bennington, he'd been the first member of the executive staff to arrive for work every morning. He was notorious for it.

Sometimes the chief executive officer purposely tried to get there first, just to get under Ryan's skin. But Ryan had a sixth sense when it came to predicting moves like that, probably because Zander Wilde wasn't just the CEO. He was also Ryan's cousin. The two men had known each other a lifetime. Ryan

knew Zander like a brother.

Consequently, he wasn't the least bit shocked to find Zander waiting for him when he strode into his office five minutes later than his usual arrival time. Annoyed, yes. Shocked, not so much.

"Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in." Zander was reclining in Ryan's chair with his feet resting on the smooth mahogany surface of his desk, ankles crossed. He folded the newspaper in his hands and shot Ryan a triumphant grin. "Looks like I got here first."

Ryan set his briefcase down and lowered himself into one of his office guest chairs. "Pleased with yourself?"

Zander's smile widened. "I am, actually."

"Enjoy your victory." Ryan lifted a brow. "Especially since it was three years in the making."

Zander shrugged. "I'll take it. A win is a win."

"If you say so, but would it kill you to get your feet off my desk?" He glared at his cousin's wing tips.

Zander rolled his eyes before planting his feet on the floor and sitting up straight. "I need to talk to you about something. But first, what's wrong? You're not dying or terminally ill, are you? You're never late."

"It's 7:35 a.m.," Ryan said flatly.

Zander's only response was a blank stare.

"I'm not dying. I was just..." He cleared his throat. "Delayed."

"Delayed?" Zander smirked. "I get it now. This is a bachelor-specific problem."

He cast a pointed glance at the framed magazine cover hanging above the desk. Gotham Names Ryan Wilde New York's Hottest Bachelor of the Year, the headline screamed.

Six weeks had passed since Ryan had learned about his "coronation," as Zander liked to put it. His feelings about the matter had remained unchanged since that snowy morning at the newsstand in the West Village. Namely, he loathed it.

He especially loathed seeing the magazine cover on the wall of his office every day, but it was preferable to having it on display in the Bennington lobby, where Zander had originally hung it. Ryan suspected it had been a joke and his cousin had never intended to leave it there, but he wasn't taking any chances. The terms of their compromise dictated that the framed piece made its home on the wall above Ryan's desk.

Oh joy.

"Let me guess." Zander narrowed his gaze. "You were out late last night fighting women off with a stick."

Hardly.

Ryan hadn't indulged in female company for weeks. Six weeks, in fact. Although his recent abstinence wasn't altogether related to the *Gotham* feature article.

He couldn't seem to get Evangeline Holly out of his head. A couple of times, he'd even gone so far as to visit her building in the Village. He'd lingered on the front steps for a few minutes, thinking about their night together.

It had been good.

Better than good.

It had been spectacular, damn it. The best sex of his life, which was reason enough to let it go and move on. That kind of magic only came along once. Any attempt to recreate it would have been in vain.

Maybe not, though. Maybe the night hadn't been magical at all. Maybe *she'd* been the magic.

He'd considered this both times he'd nearly knocked on her door. Then he'd remembered how eager she'd been to get rid of him on the morning after, and he'd come to his senses. The woman had refused to give him her phone number. That seemed like a pretty solid indication that she would've been less than thrilled to find him knocking on her door.

"I watched the Rangers game and then went to bed," he said. Then for added emphasis, "Alone."

"So what gives? Why are you late?" Zander frowned. "Wait. Don't tell me the groupies are back."

Ryan wanted to correct him. The groupies weren't technically back, because they'd never gone away. They'd been hanging around the Bennington for nearly two months—since the day the *New York Times* had decided to throw a wrench in his otherwise peaceful life.

He should have seen it coming. The Bennington had been the subject of a wildly popular series of columns in the *Times*' Weddings page. A reporter for the Vows column had speculated that the hotel was cursed after several weddings in

the Bennington ballroom had ended like a scene from *Runaway Bride*.

But that was ancient history.

Should have been, anyway. Ryan had negotiated a cease-fire with the reporter. In exchange for exclusive coverage of Zander's recent nuptials, the reporter declared the curse over and done with. But Ryan hadn't anticipated that the last line of her column would imply he was on the lookout for a bride himself.

It had been brief—just a single sentence. But that handful of words had been enough. Women had been throwing themselves at him in a steady stream—morning, noon and night. His photo on the cover of *Gotham* had only made things worse.

Ryan sighed. "There are half a dozen of them waiting for me in the lobby. I had to go around the block and come in through the service entrance in the back."

"You *had* to?" Zander let out a snort. "Here's an idea. Call me crazy, but why don't you go to the lobby right now, talk to the lovely ladies and ask one of them out on a date?"

He couldn't be serious. "Absolutely not."

Those women knew nothing about him, other than the fact that he was single. And rich. It didn't take a genius to know why they wanted to marry him, a total stranger.

No, thank you. He'd nearly been married once already, and once was enough. Never again.

Zander rolled his eyes. "You realize almost every man in New York would trade places with you in a heartbeat right now, don't

you?”

“Is that so?” Ryan crossed his arms. “You wouldn’t.”

“Of course I wouldn’t. I’m a happily married newlywed.”

Precisely.

Ryan was thrilled for Zander. He really was. But that didn’t mean he was going to pick a woman at random from the marriage-minded crowd in the lobby. This wasn’t an episode of *The Bachelor*. This was his life.

“Good for you. I prefer my dalliances more temporary. Short-term and strings-free. Can we talk about something else now?” *Anything* else. “You said you needed to speak to me. I trust it’s about something other than my personal life.”

“It is.” Zander picked up his discarded newspaper, spread it open and slid it across the desk toward Ryan. “Have you seen this?”

He glanced down. The *New York Times*. Not his favorite media outlet of late, for obvious reasons.

At least it wasn’t open to the Weddings page.

“The food section?” Surely he hadn’t merited a mention in one of the cuisine columns. “No, I haven’t.”

“The restaurant column contains an interesting tidbit. Right here.” Zander indicated a paragraph halfway down the page.

Ryan scanned it.

Carlo Bocci was spotted checking into the Plaza last night, fueling rumors that he’s in town for his annual month-long restaurant tour on behalf of the *Michelin Guide*. This time last

year, Mr. Bocci visited a total of thirty-five New York eateries, ultimately bestowing the coveted Michelin star on fewer than ten. Only one of those restaurants, The White Swan, was awarded three Michelin stars, the highest possible ranking. The White Swan was recently named America's finest restaurant by *Food & Wine* magazine.

He looked up. "Let me guess. We're upset that he's staying at the Plaza instead of the Bennington."

"No. It doesn't matter where he stays. What matters is..."

Ryan finished for him. "The Michelin stars."

"Precisely." Zander's mouth hitched into a half grin. "Do you have any idea what a three-star Michelin ranking for Bennington 8 would mean?"

Bennington 8, the hotel's premiere fine dining restaurant, was located in the rooftop atrium. With its sweeping views of Manhattan, it already performed remarkably well as far as bookings went. But three Michelin stars would keep their reservations calendar full six months out.

It would mean money.

A lot of money.

An *obscene* amount of money.

The Bennington could use that kind of income since the runaway bride curse had put a serious dent in their cash flow. They were bouncing back, but not fast enough.

Ryan frowned and smoothed down his tie. "Three stars? Do you really think that's doable?"

They didn't even know if Bennington 8 was on Carlo Bocci's review list. The list was secret. Ryan suspected he booked his reservations under an assumed name and showed up when least expected, as most restaurant reviewers did.

Zander shook his head. "No, not the way we stand at the moment. Which is why you and I will be in interviews all afternoon today and tomorrow. As long as it takes."

"You want to hire a new chef? I'm not sure that's a wise idea." The chef they had was one of the best in the city. They'd never get anyone else of his caliber on such short notice, much less someone better.

"Agreed. Patrick is as good as we're going to get. As far as food is concerned, we're golden. But that's only half the battle, isn't it?"

Ryan glanced back down at the newspaper and his gaze zeroed in on three italicized words—*Food & Wine* magazine.

"Wine," Ryan said, nodding slowly. "You want to hire a sommelier."

"A wine director—someone with impeccable credentials. Without a good somm, we haven't got a chance. Have we got room in the budget to hire someone?"

"I'll make room." He'd be staring at spreadsheets all day, trying to make it work. But that was fine. Numbers were Ryan's specialty. There were no gray areas with numerical figures, only black and white.

Just the way Ryan liked it.

Zander stood, folded the copy of the *Times* and tucked it under his arm. “Great. I’ve already put out some feelers. I’ll start lining up interviews. Clear your calendar.”

“Done.” Ryan rounded the desk and reclaimed his seat.

Zander lingered in the doorway. “Let’s hope we find someone immediately. This could be tough, but surely there’s an out-of-work somm somewhere in the city who’s also charismatic enough to impress Bocci.”

Ryan’s thoughts flitted back to six weeks ago. To a little wine bar in the Village. To Evangeline Holly, her butcher knife and the way her lips had tasted of warm grapes, fresh from the vine.

He pushed the memory away.

Zander was asking the impossible, but Ryan was grateful for the challenge. He needed to get his focus back. He needed to forget about the numerous women who wanted to marry him. He especially needed to forget about the one who *didn’t*.

He shot Zander a look of grim determination. “If the right person is out there, trust me, we’ll find ’em.”

* * *

Evangeline was getting desperate.

If she was being honest with herself—truly, *brutally* honest—she’d passed the point of desperation a few days ago.

Six weeks was a long time to go without a paycheck, especially when she was already contributing more than she could afford to her grandfather’s care.

Maybe she’d been impulsive.

So she and Jeremy had broken up. So he'd been sleeping with his sous chef. Did that really mean Evangeline couldn't stay on at the restaurant?

Of course that's what it means. Are you insane? Don't even think about crawling back.

She lifted her chin and marched through the revolving doors of the Bennington Hotel.

She had to get this job. If she didn't, crawling back to Jeremy was exactly what she'd be forced to do by day's end.

"Can I help you?" The woman behind the reception desk gazed impassively at her.

"Yes, I'm here for an interview. I have an appointment at four o'clock." Evangeline forced a smile and tightened her grip on her Everlane tote bag—a leftover luxury from her previous life.

It was startling how much things could change in a month and a half. She'd thought she'd had everything figured out. She'd been happy.

At least she'd thought she had been happy. Now she wasn't so sure.

You were happy. You were perfectly content with Jeremy. Stop thinking about that night.

She swallowed. The one-night stand was still messing with her head, six weeks after the fact. Which was all the proof she needed that one-night stands were *not* her thing. Lesson learned.

In the days since she'd woken up to the sight of those unfamiliar cuff links on her bedside table and the outrageously

handsome man in her bed, she'd questioned nearly everything about her past relationship and life in general.

How was it possible to feel such an intense connection with someone she'd only just met? She'd gone to bed with the man, and she hadn't even known his last name.

She knew it now, though. Wilde. Ryan Wilde. It was kind of hard not to notice his name and face on every newsstand in Manhattan. *Gotham* magazine had named him New York's hottest bachelor or something ridiculous like that.

Of course. No wonder she'd been so charmed by him. There hadn't actually been anything special about their night together. He was just really, really good at sex. He probably couldn't even help it. It was an occupational hazard of being the city's biggest playboy.

Out of all the men in Manhattan, she'd fallen into bed with *him*. She was so mortified that she hadn't even bought the magazine with his face on the cover. She wanted to forget that night had ever happened.

Unfortunately, she couldn't. It was too damned memorable.

She blushed every time she thought about it, and she'd spent far too long trying to figure out why she'd never felt so passionate in bed with Jeremy.

So maybe she hadn't been as happy with him as she'd thought. Clearly she'd been wrong about things. *A lot* of things.

But she'd at least been on the verge of having her dream job handed to her on a silver platter. And now...

Now here she was, applying for a position she was in no way qualified for. Her only hope was that the Bennington Hotel was every bit as desperate as she was.

“Have a seat, Miss Holly. The general manager will be with you in just a moment.” The woman behind the reception desk motioned toward one of the lobby’s plush velvet sofas, situated beneath a glittering crystal chandelier.

“Thank you.” Evangeline flashed another smile and headed across the marble floor.

She could do this. The hotel was, in fact, desperate. At least that’s what Colin, one of the study partners in her wine group, had told her when he called to tell her about the job opening. They needed a sommelier, and they needed one fast.

Surely all the best somms in Manhattan were already employed. Evangeline hoped so. If she had to compete for this job against even one sommelier with actual credentials, she was toast.

“Hello,” she said to the three other women sitting in the waiting area. Her competition, she assumed.

Odd.

Most sommeliers were men, particularly the ones who held wine director titles. At the highest certified level—master sommelier—men claimed 85 percent of the spots.

All three women swiveled their gazes in Evangeline’s direction, but none of them returned the greeting. The one closest to her—a glossy brunette wearing a blouse that seemed far too

low-cut to be considered professional—looked her up and down and finally spoke.

“Interesting, but I doubt you’re his type.” She sniffed and crossed one tawny leg over the other.

“I beg your pardon,” Evangeline said.

His *type*?

Whose type?

And what kind of pervy work environment was this?

The brunette shrugged. “Just a hunch. There are a lot of us. It’s going to take more than a tasteful pencil skirt and a red lip to stand out.”

Evangeline blinked and fought the urge to flee.

Don’t let her get to you. You know wine. She’s probably trying to psych you out.

It was working. She was desperate, but not desperate enough to use her cleavage to make an impression.

What am I doing here?

She should have known this opportunity was too good to be true.

She stood, ready to bolt, but someone called her name before she could take a step.

“Miss Holly?” A man in a dark suit extended his hand. “I’m Elliot Ross, the general manager. We spoke on the phone earlier this morning.”

She shook his hand, relief coursing through her when he kept his gaze firmly focused on her eyes. Not her pencil skirt. “Pleased

to meet you.”

The other women were no longer paying her any attention whatsoever. Things were getting weirder by the minute.

“The CEO and CFO are conducting the interviews upstairs in the restaurant. If you’ll come with me, we’ll get things underway.” Elliot Ross waved her toward the shiny gold elevator doors.

Evangeline followed.

Once inside the elevator, he pushed the button marked Rooftop. “We appreciate your willingness to come on such short notice. The CEO is keen to fill this position as soon as possible.”

Thank goodness. “I’m available to start right away.”

“Excellent. You’re the last of the candidates to be interviewed this afternoon, and I’m afraid I neglected to include your name on the list. Do you have a résumé?”

She’d hoped to avoid having to talk about her qualifications. A pipe dream, obviously. Couldn’t she just talk about wine? She was good at that, regardless of what her résumé indicated.

“Here.” She handed him a copy of her qualifications, minimal as they were.

Shake it off. This job is perfect for you.

Then the elevator doors swung open, and Evangeline realized she had something much more important to worry about than her lack of experience. Correction: *someone*.

Someone who’d been naked in her bed the last time she’d seen him, unless spotting his face on all those magazine covers

counted.

Someone named Ryan Wilde.

Chapter Three

What was happening?

What was Ryan Wilde, her one-night stand, doing at her job interview—the most important job interview she’d ever had?

“Miss Holly, thank you for coming.” Another man—the only man in the room she *hadn’t* slept with—had spoken. She’d nearly forgotten he was there. Every bit of awareness in her body was focused squarely on Ryan. “I’m Zander Wilde, CEO of the Bennington.”

“It’s lovely to meet you,” she said.

At least that’s what she thought she said. She wasn’t sure what words were actually coming out of her mouth.

Zander cleared his throat, and Evangeline realized she wasn’t even looking at him. He was talking to her, and she was staring right past him, fixated on Ryan.

She couldn’t seem to tear her gaze away from Ryan’s chiseled face. He seemed even more handsome than she remembered. How was that possible? She swallowed—hard—and tried to figure out what was different about him.

He was a bit cleaner cut, for one thing. The dark scruff that had lined his jaw the last time she’d seen him was gone. Naturally. He’d probably woken up in his own bed, in his own apartment, where he’d shaved with his own razor.

He was also wearing glasses, which unfortunately failed to

lessen the effect of his dreamy blue eyes. In fact, they looked even bluer behind the square cut black frames. Forget-me-not blue.

Zander cleared his throat again, louder this time. “Do you two know each other?”

“No,” she blurted.

Ryan simultaneously said, “Yes, we do.”

Zander glanced back and forth between them. “Which is it? Yes or no?”

She’d just told a bald-faced lie. The interview was off to a stellar start.

“Actually...” She took a deep breath and tried to figure out a way to change her answer that wouldn’t make her sound like a crazy person.

“Actually, it seems I’m mistaken,” Ryan said smoothly. “We don’t know one another. Forgive me... Miss Holly, is it?”

He offered her his hand, and she had no choice but to take it.

“Yes, that’s correct.” Her voice sounded breathier than it should have, and she couldn’t make herself let go of his hand.

It was warm. Familiar. And when she looked down at the place where his fingertips brushed against her skin, all she could think about was the pad of his thumb dragging softly, slowly against the swell of her bottom lip.

Let go! Let go of his hand.

She dropped it like a hot potato and turned to face Zander. “I’m assuming the wine director reports to you since you’re the CEO.”

Ryan couldn't be her boss. No way.

Not that she'd gotten the job yet. Her chances were slim to none. Colin had mentioned they'd interviewed a master sommelier. Less than two hundred people in the world held that title. And presumably none of them had had sex with Ryan Wilde.

Zander's gaze narrowed. "Technically, the position reports to the CEO. But the wine director will work closely with the CFO, particularly with regard to the wine budget. So I suppose a certain amount of compatibility is important."

"Compatibility." Evangeline's gaze flitted toward Ryan, and he sent her a nearly imperceptible wink. She wanted to die. "Right."

"Shall we proceed?" Zander motioned toward a table in the center of the room.

"Absolutely." She did her best to ignore the way her knees went wobbly as she crossed the vast space and took a seat.

So it had come to this?

After a six-week-long job search, her only choices were working for the man who'd dumped her or drawing up wine budgets with her one-night stand?

Lovely.

Also ironic, considering she'd so recently been accused of being an ice queen.

But she was getting ahead of herself, wasn't she? She hadn't been offered the job at Bennington 8 yet, and at the rate things

were going, she wouldn't be.

She lifted her chin, met Zander's gaze across the table and decided to pretend Ryan wasn't even there. "The atmosphere here is stunning."

"Thank you," Zander said and glanced up at the glass dome ceiling overhead.

Snow fell softly against the atrium, and the twinkling lights of Manhattan glittered against the darkening sky. The interior of the restaurant was the epitome of cool winter elegance, with crisp white linens and pale blue velvet chairs. Evangeline felt like she was sitting inside a snow globe—trapped inside a perfect world, immune to the swirling chaos outside.

She took a deep breath and gave the snow globe a good, hard shake. "But your wine list is weak at best."

Ryan let out a quiet laugh, reminding her that he was still there, sitting beside her. She allowed herself a quick glance at him.

He arched a brow.

She kept her expression as neutral as possible and redirected her gaze at Zander.

A muscle flicked in his jaw. "Interesting. The other candidates didn't seem to think so."

"Are you sure? Or were they simply trying to flatter you?" She smiled sweetly at him. "I won't do that."

"Clearly," he muttered.

"But that means you can trust me to give you my honest opinion. And my opinion of your current list is that it's not good

enough.” She swallowed. If she didn’t get the job, she’d at least make an impression.

Impressions were important. Being a sommelier was about more than choosing wine. It was about service. A good sommelier made drinking a glass of wine a memorable experience. There was an art to talking about wine and presenting a bottle—to opening it and pouring its contents.

People often overlooked that part of the job, and it was Evangeline’s biggest strength.

“How would you change the list?” Zander said.

She was ready for this. Bennington 8’s wine list was listed on its website, and she’d committed it to memory.

“For starters, I’d eliminate the pinot grigio. There are far better light-bodied whites.” She studiously avoided Ryan’s gaze, since it was apparently his wine of choice.

Then she told herself she was being ridiculous. He probably didn’t even remember ordering multiple bottles of it all those weeks ago.

He laughed—with just a little too much force—and when she ventured a glance in his direction, the smirk on his face told her that his memory of their night together was just as intact as hers was.

Her face went hot, and she looked away.

“What else?” Zander asked, leaning forward in his chair. “Do enlighten us.”

“I’d cut your California wines by two-thirds. You’ve only got

three old-world wines on your list. That's unacceptable."

"How so?" Ryan said.

"Wine is about history. The Roman army didn't march on water. Roman soldiers marched on wine. A good old-world wine lets you experience the past as you drink it. You can taste everything—the earth, the rivers, the sunshine of centuries. There's nothing quite so beautiful."

Ryan and Zander exchanged a look that Evangeline wasn't sure how to interpret. She was either nailing it, or she sounded delusional. There was no hiding the fact that she was a wine nerd of the highest order.

"I'm sure most of your customers walk in here asking for wines from Napa Valley and Sonoma, California, or the Finger Lakes region upstate because that's what they're familiar with." She shrugged. "They don't know what they're missing. That's why you need a wine expert."

Zander glanced down at the sheet of paper on the table in front of him. "But I'm looking at your résumé, and there's no mention of a sommelier certificate of any sort."

Here we go.

This was where each and every one of her other interviews had gone south. Way south.

"I'm self-taught. My family owns a vineyard upstate." *Not anymore, remember?* She blinked and corrected herself. "Owned."

Ryan's gaze narrowed ever so slightly, and she felt nearly as

exposed as she'd been the last time they'd stood in the same room together.

She took a deep breath. "I'm studying for the certification exam, though. I should be prepared to take it when it's offered next April."

Zander frowned. "That's several months from now."

"Yes, I know." She smiled, but neither of the men met her gaze. Not even Ryan.

She needed to do something. Fast.

"Let me open a bottle for you," she blurted. "Please."

Zander glanced at his watch, which was pretty much the universal sign that time was up. The interview was over. "I don't think—"

Ryan cut him off. "Let her do it."

Evangeline felt like kissing him all of a sudden. Not that the thought hadn't already crossed her mind. This time, though, she had to physically stop herself from popping out of her chair and kissing him smack on the lips.

"Excellent. Why don't you point me in the direction of your wine cooler, and I'll select a bottle?" She stood before Zander could argue.

His gaze swiveled back and forth between her and Ryan again, just like when they'd given opposite answers to his question about whether they knew one another.

He knows. It was probably written all over her face. *News flash: I slept with your cousin.*

Was there a woman in Manhattan whom Ryan Wilde *hadn't* slept with? That was the real question.

“Very well.” Zander waved a hand, and the hotel’s general manager appeared out of nowhere. “Show Miss Holly to the wine cooler, please. And bring her a corkscrew.”

She smiled. “Oh, I won’t need a corkscrew.”

* * *

Ryan watched as Evangeline studied the wines lined up on their sides in the cooler on the far side of the restaurant. He knew he shouldn’t stare, but he couldn’t quite help it.

After weeks of resisting the temptation to see her again, she’d fallen right into his lap. Metaphorically speaking, obviously. She clearly had no actual interest in his lap—or any of his other body parts. She didn’t even want to admit they knew each other.

Maybe because they didn’t. They’d shared one night together. What did he really know about her? Nothing. He’d learned more about her in the last half hour than he’d known when he took her to bed, a realization that didn’t sit well for some reason. Especially the part about the pinot grigio.

“What’s going on?” Zander muttered under his breath, dragging Ryan’s attention away from the lush curve of Evangeline’s hips as she bent to retrieve a bottle of red. “And don’t evade the question, because something is most definitely going on here. It’s written all over your face.”

Ryan loved Zander like a brother, but he wasn’t about to tell him the truth.

For starters, he didn't kiss and tell. What had happened between him and Evangeline was personal. She'd made it more than clear that she didn't want Zander to know they'd spent the night together, and Ryan wasn't about to out her as a liar in the middle of a job interview.

Because as uncomfortable as working together might be, she was perfect for the job.

"She's the one," he said. "Come on, can't you see it?"

Zander's eyes narrowed. "No, actually. I can't. We have at least half a dozen more qualified applicants. I'm not sure Carlo Bocci is going to be impressed by a self-proclaimed wine expert with romantic notions about tasting history in a glass of Burgundy."

"She knows her stuff. Admit it." She was smart. Ryan loved that about her. He could have sat there and listened to her talk about wine all night.

And then he would have gone home alone, obviously. Because he sure as hell couldn't go to bed with her again if she was going to work at the Bennington.

His chest grew tight at the thought. "She's a storyteller. Customers will eat that up, Bocci included."

Zander lifted a brow. "Again, why do I get the feeling there's more going on here than a simple job interview?"

Ryan didn't bother responding, but he couldn't manage to tear his gaze from Evangeline, even as Zander glared at him.

"I knew it," Zander muttered. "You're attracted to her."

"Enough," Ryan said through gritted teeth.

She was walking back toward them, cradling a bottle of Bordeaux in her hands as gently as if it were a baby.

“Just wait,” he said. “Wait and see what she does with this bottle.”

In actuality, Ryan wasn't sure what was about to happen. He just knew that if she didn't need a corkscrew, something interesting was sure to go down, possibly involving a butcher knife. Or maybe a hammer. He wouldn't have been surprised if she'd opened the bottle with a karate chop to its slender glass neck. Anything was possible.

“Gentlemen.” She smiled and set the Bordeaux on the table. Then she swiveled her gaze back toward Elliot. “I'll need three glasses, a decanter and a small ice bucket filled with cold water.”

“Of course.” He gave her a little bow and disappeared to do her bidding.

She didn't even work there yet, and the staff was already treating her like she ran the place. Ryan couldn't help but smile. Even Zander was beginning to look intrigued.

Evangeline started removing items from her tote bag, one by one. First up was an old-fashioned shaving brush—the kind barbers used in the sort of establishments that had a striped pole as part of the decor. The next thing out of her bag was a small copper pot of red wax.

Just as Ryan was feeling a stab of disappointment that nothing resembling a weapon had made an appearance, she pulled out a long metal contraption with wooden handles and two arms that

formed a ring where they touched.

He had no idea what he was looking at. The apparatus had sort of a medieval torture device vibe, which he supposed he shouldn't rule out as a possibility.

Beside him, Zander tilted his head. "Um..."

"Port tongs," Evangeline said. "They were invented in the eighteenth century, but these are a tad newer."

"Naturally." Ryan bit back a grin.

But it was the last item she plunked down on the table that was clearly her trump card.

It wasn't a butcher knife.

It was worse.

"Is that what I think it is?" Zander asked.

"An upright blowtorch?" She nodded. "Yes."

A look of intense alarm crossed Zander's face but before he could object, she fired it up. It made a whooshing sound, and a steady blue flame, tipped in orange, shot six or so inches into the air.

Here we go.

Elliot returned, carrying the requested items, and stopped a safe three feet away from the table. Evangeline thanked him, smiling brightly.

She's enjoying this, Ryan thought.

So was he—probably more than he should have been.

Once the items were arranged to her satisfaction, she presented the bottle of wine and described it, identifying the

vintage, the vineyard and the specific area of France where it came from—the Médoc region on the Left Bank. She told them to expect a deep red liquid, with fruit scents and notes of cassis, black cherry and licorice.

Ryan had always been partial to white wine, but he had a feeling that was about to change.

Finished with her brief monologue, Evangeline set the bottle back down, picked up the port tongs and held them over the open flame until the ring burned bright red. Ryan was suddenly consciously aware of his own heartbeat and a heady combination of awe and dread pumping through his veins, as if he were on the verge of being branded.

What was happening to him? Did Zander feel it, too—this strange, sublime effect she had?

He couldn't tell, and he wasn't willing to take his eyes off her long enough to venture a glance in his cousin's direction. But he doubted it, because what he was experiencing felt an awful lot like desire.

He swallowed.

Maybe Zander was right. Maybe they'd be better off going with someone else, because having Evangeline around on a daily basis was sure to be complicated.

But that was absurd, wasn't it? He was a grown man. He could resist temptation.

Light glinted against the wine bottle in the center of the table, flashing a glimpse of the dark liquid it contained. Shimmering

garnet red. Then Evangeline removed the tongs from the flame and slipped the ring over the bottle's narrow neck.

She pressed the ring in place and then loosened the tongs, rotating the ring slightly and pressing again. Satisfied, she removed the tongs altogether, placed them in a shallow pan of water and then dipped the shaving brush into the ice bucket. The bottle made a cracking sound, like ice under pressure, as Evangeline ran the brush over the spot where she'd heated the glass.

Instinct told Ryan what was coming next, but he was still thoroughly impressed when she wrapped a cloth napkin around her hand to take hold of the top of the bottle and it snapped off cleanly in her grasp.

“Voilà,” she said quietly. Her bottom lip slipped between her teeth as her gaze collided with his.

Temptation.

Most definitely.

“Impressive.” Zander arched a brow. “What exactly did we just witness?”

“It's called tonging,” she explained as she held the little pot of red wax over the blowtorch's flame. “Traditionally, this method is reserved for opening vintage port. Aged properly, port sits for twenty, sometimes fifty years. The cork can disintegrate and crumble if you open it with a corkscrew.”

She tipped the copper pot in a swirling motion until the wax ran smooth. “No one wants bits of cork in a wine they've waited

half a century to drink. Tonging allows you to bypass the cork altogether.”

Zander nodded. “Clever.”

Evangeline dipped the severed top in the melted liquid and then did the same to the sharp edge of the bottle’s remaining portion after she poured the wine into the decanter.

Crimson wax dripped down the bottle, and Ryan was struck by the fact that she’d managed to create a dramatic table decoration in addition to putting on a show.

She poured three glasses from the decanter and handed two of them to Zander and Ryan. “This is Bordeaux, not port, obviously. The method can be used to open any kind of bottle. It’s rather fun, don’t you think?”

Ryan sipped his wine. It was good, but try as he might, he couldn’t taste cassis, black cherry and licorice. Instead, his senses swirled with the memory of their night together. He tasted Evangeline’s lips, chilled from the winter air, rich with longing. He tasted her porcelain skin, sweet like vanilla.

He tasted trouble.

So very much trouble.

Zander stared into his glass. “I think—”

For the second time in the span of a half hour, Ryan cut him off. He was sure to hear about it later, but by then it would be too late. “Evangeline Holly, you’re hired.”

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