



KERRY EVELYN

Love
ON THE FLY



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Dedication

To my parents, Judy Marshall and Vic Robitaille

From Day One you've encouraged me in everything I wanted to do, so long as it made me happy, and you gently guided me toward closing the doors on things that weren't working. You allowed me to find my own way in my own time, supporting me on my life's journey, even when my path was one you didn't think was right for me or took me far away. Thanks for being my number one fans. I was blessed to be born to the perfect mother and father for me. Your love and support pushed me to be the person I am today, and for that I am forever grateful.

*He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.*

Isaiah 40: 39-41

Chapter 1

Caroline Owens made a beeline to the nearest bench. Her angry toes made it clear she'd chosen the wrong shoes this morning for her twelve-minute speed-walk from the Prudential Tower to where she currently sat at the end of Newbury Street.

She kicked off her pumps and stretched her toes wide. In her current state, the fresh pedicure and shiny crimson toenails were the only things that made her happy.

The brisk walk and fresh air had done nothing to help her sort out her frustrations about her boss's latest nonsensical mandate. The only person who could talk her down from this cliff—and actually help her—was JC Crane, but he hadn't answered his phone. He was probably “chillaxin”—one of his favorite words—at his family's resort, enjoying the beautiful September afternoon while most people were stuck in the nine to five Monday mania.

Being unable to reach JC added to her anxiety. She supposed she could have waited until tonight and asked his brother, Easton, her current roommate, to call on her behalf, but that wasn't her way. When there was a problem, she solved it.

The Boston Common was crowded with somber people who'd taken the day off. *Patriot Day*. Her direct boss at Patriot Consulting and Design wasn't from the Northeast and highly discouraged requests put in by the members of the team who wanted to attend a memorial service or stay home. *Some “patriot.”* Caroline shook her head in frustration. It had been sixteen years, he said, and they had a deadline coming up. For him, September 11 was just another workday. For Caroline, it was personal, like it was for anyone else who'd lost someone when the towers fell.

Blinking back tears, she turned her head to the sky. Bianca would have been proud of her. Her childhood babysitter had been a big part of why she'd pursued an education and career in interior design.

All those hours, many spent with Bianca, decorating the rooms of her dollhouse and creating pieces from whatever materials she could find, had caught her father's attention when he began flipping houses. She'd loved helping him stage the properties for sale. She was "Daddy's little girl," and any time spent with him was limited and cherished after her parents' divorce. She often thought her sister, Lanie, gave him a bad rap. He was a creative at heart, focused on his work—what was wrong with that? Lanie could have been more understanding. She was a workaholic as well, more regimented than a free spirit. Sure, Dad had been gone a lot, but he always came home with gifts and tales of adventure or happy endings for the people he'd helped.

Caroline initially had applied for a junior-designer position with her new firm, but the first-round interviewers had been wowed by the portfolio she'd compiled working for pro baseball player and local hero Andre Arellano. They'd counted the eight years she spent as a teen helping her father flip and resell homes as work experience in the field. She had been over the moon when she landed the renovation project to convert a row of historic brownstones into a luxury hotel. Though the project was temporary, it would open opportunities for advancement within the company.

If only Bianca had been here to see what she and her team were doing with the renovated boutique hotel. Caroline's team was responsible for the interior of One Newbury, and she'd never taken so much pleasure in stripping and flipping, as her dad referred to it. So far, she'd rocked every deadline and solved every issue that had come her way. The subcontractors were on time and on schedule, and upper management was happy. Her team didn't mesh as well as they

could, but they got the job done. Caroline wondered if she'd had more experience, if she would have been able to manage them better. As co-manager of the project, she worked nights, weekends, and holidays. She often went in after her team finished to ensure everything was perfect. And most of it was.

Except her co-manager.

Caroline smirked, thinking of how JC Crane and her co-lead, Logan Stone, couldn't be more different. In some ways, Logan was a male version of her, which was probably why they'd gotten along so well at first. Every callback, he was there, waiting and interviewing. She was so confident she'd be hired over him, despite his having five more years of professional experience, that she'd accepted his dinner invitation after the final interview. She pressed her lips together as she remembered feeling bad about potentially edging him out. He'd seemed nice enough. Classically handsome, well-dressed, smart, and well-connected. She'd agreed to one dinner and a night on the town, never dreaming they'd end up working together, and then she'd ghosted him. She wasn't interested in a relationship.

But Caroline had had to swallow a humble pill. According to her boss, they'd both been perfect for the job. So they *both* got it, at the expense of eliminating two minor positions on the team in their areas of expertise. They could work smarter, not harder, since her design skills and his business experience would more than make up for a minor role in each of those areas. It had saved the company tens of thousands of dollars before they even got started.

On the first day of work, she'd had to explain to Logan why she hadn't called him back. He was nice and blah-blah-blah, but she wasn't looking for a relationship right now. It was her, not him, yadda-yadda.

She hadn't anticipated Logan's level of interest, and he continued to ask her out. Caroline kept it light—drinks over work discussions were fine, but she regretted not being straight with him because she was afraid to hurt his feelings.

The tension had started to affect their team, and she couldn't help feeling that was due to her inexperience in leadership. Even the boss had noticed something was off. No one at work knew about that one date, but the office atmosphere was overflowing with nuances and shifty looks. At least once a month, he asked her out. She tried to keep their conversation light and smile a lot, but he took it as encouragement. He seemed clueless to her cues, but she didn't want to hurt his feelings by telling him straight out she wasn't interested, would never be interested. There was no spark, and she'd dumped guys for less.

To regroup the team, their boss had suggested taking a long weekend retreat to the resort in Maine where Caroline's sister got married. They'd all seen the wedding pictures on social media. Since they were under budget, thanks to Caroline, why not take some of it and invest it back into the company's future up-and-comers? The request was approved by upper management.

The next thing she knew, she was planning bonding experiences and motivational content for a long weekend with the people she already spent almost every waking moment with. She liked her team, but she needed time to recharge, without people.

The one part she'd been looking forward to was driving up alone a day early to set it all up and go over the details with JC and the rest of the Cliff Walk staff. Although he'd gotten under her skin at times, JC hadn't meant any harm by his teasing, and the more she thought about him, the more she wanted to get to know him better.

But that was not to be, as this morning, after she went over her task list for the arrival of the team Friday afternoon, Logan suggested he drive up with her to help. The boss thought it was a great idea, and the next thing she knew, instead of a glorious twenty-four hours alone, she was saddled with the man who wouldn't give up his chase.

But, small problems, really, when one put into perspective what real problems were. Not far away from where she stood at the corner of Boylston and Arlington, crowds gathered at the Garden of Remembrance, a 9/11 memorial. The twinge of guilt intensified as she watched them. She'd only been seven when 9/11 happened, and she hadn't known what it meant until she was older, except that her favorite babysitter had died when a building collapsed, which had caused her first panic attack. Her "meltdowns," as her mother referred to them, further intensified around the time her parents' relationship began to fall apart.

From what she'd seen, love led to loss, instability, and a vulnerability she wanted no part of. Trusting someone unconditionally with everything you had either led to heartache or betrayal. Love was the ultimate risk in a game she didn't want to play.

Caroline had bawled her eyes out when Bianca left to live in New York City with her new husband. She'd felt the same grief when her parents announced their plan to divorce. She didn't have the time or the desire to ruminate on those events anymore. Or the scars they'd created. Or the fact that the thought of falling in love with someone scared her to the point of not trying. Or that not falling in love would lead to a long, lonely life, not much different than the one she was living now.

Not today.

Her stomach growled. She was pushing the boundaries of her extended lunch break, and she still needed to eat. She could've emailed that she'd gone to check on the project site, less

than a block away from where she was now, but she hadn't. One Newbury Street was on the other side of the crowd, and she wasn't feeling people-y at the moment. She straightened her skirt and dug in her tote bag for tissues to wipe the sweat from her forehead. It had to be pushing eighty degrees, and she wished she'd worn her blond hair up.

She purchased a hot dog from the Mr. Frosty truck and headed toward the steps leading down to the subway at Arlington. The "T" was much quicker—and cooler—than walking back to the Prudential. She stopped to buy a red, white, and blue ribbon from a street vendor. Once on the train, she pinned the ribbon over her heart. By this time next Monday, the retreat would be over. She pulled out her phone and swiped to open her timer app.

She'd count the minutes.

Ten thousand eighty to go.

JC Crane wrapped his hand around the ladder's uppermost rung to steady himself. He tightened the screw securing the top section of the green plastic slide to the wooden platform. The set was an end-of-summer steal and integral to his plan to make the Cliff Walk Resort a more attractive destination for younger families. This latest project would be completed well ahead of the Cliff Walk's pumpkin-patch event. He loved to make people smile, he loved pouring into his family's legacy, and he loved helping people realize that life was meant to be lived.

He had an endless list of ideas that would make the guests remember their stay and want to come back, including offering air tours from Bar Harbor. He had a meeting next week with his mentor, the Honorable H.R. Hughey, to discuss logistics. The judge let JC take his plane up anytime he wasn't using it himself. Lately, the plane had spent more time in the hangar, or at the dock, than in the air, as the judge's health was declining.

JC's thoughts veered his attention toward the sea. Out in the cove, Crane's Light, the lighthouse his brother, Easton, had spent the spring refurbishing into a luxury suite, was booked up until the end of November, when it would close for the winter—or the first snowfall, whichever happened first.

At the bottom of his ladder, his phone sang the instrumental version of “Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes” for the third time in the last five minutes, interrupting his progress on the new addition to the playground. . Each of his closest friends and family members had their own tune, and this wasn't one of them. This particular melody was reserved for other callers, but it piqued his curiosity that someone would be so persistent.

Maybe he should answer it.

He set his screwdriver on the platform and climbed down. When he reached the bottom, he wiped his hands on his jeans and adjusted his visor over his crop of too-long sandy hair. He really should get a haircut. Or buy a new visor. His Cliff Walk Resort visor was hardly holding together after wearing it during his year of mission work in Haiti and a summer of working outside at the resort.

It was September now, but the second-summer day was the kind that enticed tourists to come back to coastal Maine year after year. JC's family's resort was off the main road in Crane's Cove, with vistas high enough to look out over the cliff and straight to the ocean. Access to the private beach this side of Piney Point afforded the guests a level of privacy that competing accommodations lacked. There was endless untapped potential here. Though he'd completed several projects over the three months he'd been home, the longer he stayed, the longer his list of ideas grew.

JC picked up his phone and swiped to view the missed calls. The 978 area code told him the caller was from northern Massachusetts. He knew all of the New England area codes by heart after answering the phones at the resort since he was a preteen. Who could it be?

When the song played for a fourth time, he answered the call. “Hello. This is JC.”

“Hi, JC. It’s Caroline Owens. I’m so sorry to call you on your personal line, but your mother said—” She paused, breathless. “I’m kind of in a jam, and she said I needed to speak with you personally since you were handling my office’s corporate retreat, and she wanted to know why didn’t I have your number already.”

Caroline Owens. JC’s heart thumped a little faster at the sound of her voice. A flush crept up his neck, and he was glad no one was around to notice it. His mother gave her his personal number for a resort issue? Unusual, but considering the caller, it made sense. His mom was right—he *should* have her number, now that his brother was her roommate while he was at vet school in Boston. Caroline lived outside the city, and her location was a short commute for Easton.

He’d meant to ask her for it, but from every interaction they’d had and from what he’d learned asking about her, she ran hot and cold. He wasn’t ever sure which Caroline he’d get when he talked with her. The generous friend who offered his brother a place to live when he was accepted to vet school? The snappy pub patron who told JC only her friends and family called her Cara and he shouldn’t? The gorgeous, graceful maid of honor who smiled when she accepted his invitation to dance at her sister’s wedding? Or the businesslike workaholic who was hyperorganized and took the guesswork out of the event he and his sister, Molly, were setting up for her?

If she had a problem, any problem, he'd fix it. "Hey, sweet Caroline. It's good to hear from—"

"I've lost track of how many times I've asked you not to call me that. I hate that song. You know that. Can you help me or not?"

Straight to business. He grinned. "Um . . . sure. What's the problem?" Same icy tone as the last few times he'd called her that. He loved that she had both a soft side and a harder side. She was sweet under her tough exterior, as witnessed by the gentleness she showed to the flower girl at her sister Lanie's wedding. Lanie and her husband, Matt, were friends with several resort staff members and had invited them to all the wedding festivities.

JC had learned quickly that Caroline disliked the song she was named after, and though he was initially intimidated, he began to enjoy razzing her about it. The way her eyes flashed and her cheeks flamed washed over him like warm maple syrup on a stack of his mom's homemade pancakes. He couldn't help it, and he was a glutton for punishment. Her reactions made his heart do a weird flippy thing.

"This weekend is incredibly important. I can't have *any* distractions. We're at the halfway mark in the project, and I need to stand out if I want a promotion to be the sole lead on the next one. My whole reason for this call . . . My co-worker, Logan Stone, will be arriving with me Thursday night. My boss suggested we drive together." She sighed. "JC, there is no one I want to avoid right now more than this man. I don't have enough meds left to last the five hours in the car with him, never mind share a hallway for a long weekend. If his room isn't available Thursday, give him mine, and I'll find a motel in Bar Harbor if I have to."

JC waited. It seemed like she had more to say. Her voice, despite its notes of frustration, had a melodic quality to it that was pleasing to his ears. Intriguing how she could alternate effective and businesslike with soft and warm.

Caroline blew an exasperated breath into the phone but spoke in an apologetic tone. “I need you to find me a room away from my co-workers. Far away. Is there a small cabin available? I know there wasn’t last time I called, but maybe one has opened up?”

Her frustration was palpable through the phone. Why did she want to be away from her team? “Not that I’m aware of, but you never know. People cancel all the time.”

“Darn.” She sighed. “Okay, well, please let me know the second something within our lodging budget becomes available. It’s such a small team, and we’re only one of many doing similar projects, and none have to do this team-building bull. I’m surprised they even approved it.”

“Maybe they see the potential talent in your group and want to cultivate it. Anything else I can help you with?”

“Keep Logan Stone busy and as far away from me as possible?”

“Man.” JC straightened up. “What’d he do to get on your bad side?”

“I’d rather not discuss it.” Her clipped tone slammed that door. “Hold for just a sec. The connection here is terrible.”

JC abandoned his project and walked down Cliff Walk Lane, past the tennis courts, toward the main lodge. He waved to Frieda, the resort manager, as she passed him in a golf cart. He could definitely help Caroline, and he was surprised by how much he wanted to. “You know, one of the third-floor suites is open—”

“Not in the budget.”

“Let me check something really quick and then hear me out.” He reached the reception desk and motioned for his mother to allow him access to the computer. Carol Crane stepped away with a sly smile. He shot her a quizzical look as he pulled up the reservation for Patriot Consulting and Design. “Yep, it’s open from Thursday through Monday. I’ll give you the family discount.” He cast a curious glance at his mother. She shrugged.

“Your family discount? Just because your brother’s my roommate now—wait, that huge suite my family stayed in for Lanie’s wedding? No. That’s got three bedrooms. I don’t want any common space with any of my co-workers, even the ones I like. I need—”

“Hey, hey, relax.” JC felt her anxiety. He’d seen flashes of it in her ocean-blue eyes when she thought no one was watching. “It’s all yours. Just yours. I’ll move Mr. Stone to the room we had for you, and you can have the suite all to yourself.”

“All to myself? Really? But won’t the resort lose—”

“What we’ll *gain* is a satisfied, loyal guest who will tell all her friends and co-workers how accommodating we are here at the Cliff Walk, and that little discount will more than make up for itself once we start doing more team retreats. You’re our guinea pigs. We need five-star reviews and recommendations. But besides that, it also allows us to show our gratitude to a Good Samaritan who invited some guy she hardly knew to rent her extra room while he attends vet school.”

During one of Caroline’s planning calls to the resort, she let it slip that her roommate was moving out suddenly. JC had asked her where her apartment was, and finding it was only a twenty-minute drive to Easton’s DVM program, he suggested she rent the room to his older brother. Caroline’s immediate offer to help someone she barely knew affirmed her generosity and heart for others.

“Wow. Well, okay then. Thank you.” The panic and anxiety decreased with each word she spoke, ending in calm gratitude.

A flutter of pleasure strummed beneath his ribs. “I’ll see you Thursday?”

“See you Thursday.” Her professional tone was back, but she sounded tired somehow. It seemed strange to him that he felt a tug of something more than sympathy. Hopefully, she’d be able to rest once she arrived.

JC added her number to his list of contacts. The next time she called, the first notes of “Sweet Caroline” would let him know it was her.