

TABLE MANNERS



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A taste for simplicity cannot last for long.

EUGENE DELACROIX

Manners maketh man.

WILLIAM OF WYKEHAM

CHAPTER ONE

You should never assume anything.

—Charles Ford, *21-st Century Etiquette*

Deidre woke up in a tangle of sheets. She checked the clock, and then let out a happy sigh.

Bliss.

The May sun streamed into her bedroom, sunlight dancing on her bare legs. There was a sound from the kitchen as the coffeemaker turned on. Moments later the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee filled the condo.

Her condo. After years of renting, Deidre McIntosh was officially a homeowner.

She gave a luxurious stretch. A quick shower would wake her up, and then she'd roll into her day. Meetings in the morning, a quick lunch, then a walk through the production floor to see how things were coming along with Sweet Deidre, her line of branded baked goods that was scheduled to launch in a few short months.

She grabbed a pillow and gave it a punch, fluffing it up to

fullness. Then she sank back against it and reached for her BlackBerry, scanning the day's headlines and checking her e-mails.

There was the typical high volume of junk mail and spam, along with meeting agendas and pending appointments. Deidre was about to close out when she noticed a text message from Kevin, sent just after midnight.

AT FRANKFURT AIRPORT, ABOUT TO BOARD – BACK IN SEATTLE
BY MID-AFTERNOON. DINNER? LOVE YOU.

Deidre quickly tapped back her response.

I LOVE YOU, TOO. MY PLACE, 7:00.

She hit SEND. He would get the message once he landed.

She took her time showering and dressing, choosing a simple but classy outfit: a pink tailored cotton wrap shirt, dark gray pinstripe slacks, black heels with a pointed toe. She'd pull the look together with an oversized braided silver mesh bracelet and her favorite pair of pearl earrings, a gift from Kevin. She took one last look in the mirror and nodded, satisfied. All that was left was to grab one of her breakfast muffins and fill her travel carafe with coffee, and she'd be good to go.

The commute was only half an hour, and traffic moved along at a clip. If the rest of her day continued like this, she'd have plenty of time to pick up something special for dinner. Lamb shanks, maybe. She made a mean osso buco, and it was one of Kevin's favorites. A fresh beet and goat cheese salad would be an easy accompaniment. They could choose a bottle

of red from her modest wine collection and she'd have her pick of desserts from work.

She hummed along with the radio as she considered the sweet possibilities before setting on a favorite: a Florentine Tart with almonds, candied cherries and orange peel, drizzled liberally in chocolate. She made a quick call and was pleased to hear that one would be put aside for her.

Perfect.

She pulled into the parking lot of Jamison Cookies and Confections. She entered the building and walked to the bank of cubicles that housed the Sweet Deidre team. Her assistant, Amber Olson, handed her a stack of messages.

"Good news," Amber said. She was a bubbly redhead fresh out of college, anxious to begin a career in food management. "We found those dried cherries you like. Organic, and they're willing to wholesale them. They cost a little more, but the company's local and can deliver them quickly. I put all the information on your desk."

"Excellent." The cherry almond shortbread cookie was the star of Sweet Deidre's starting lineup. "Can you send the information to Gary in production as well?"

"Sure. Oh, and that reporter from *Taste* magazine is waiting for you in your office."

"What?" Deidre frowned, puzzled. "But it's Monday. We're not supposed to meet until Friday."

Amber shrugged. "Well, she acted like it was today. I thought maybe you'd changed it."

"No, I didn't." Deidre scanned her calendar. She'd have to move some things around, but it wasn't the end of the world. "Let's push off the marketing meeting until right after lunch."

Can you stall the reporter for a few more minutes? Maybe give her a press packet and one of the Sweet Deidre samplers? I'm going to freshen up."

"No problem, Deidre."

In the ladies' room, Deidre checked herself in the mirror. She was having a good hair day, fortunately, even though she was overdue for some highlights and the occasional gray hair stood out among its brunette counterparts. Well, that was forty-one for you. There was no turning back the clock, and Deidre knew better than to try to fight it.

She smoothed her blouse and touched up her lipstick, then ran through the short list of talking points in her head as she headed toward her office.

High quality—all natural ingredients—sourced locally when possible—the latest addition to the JCC family of products . . .

The reporter was waiting patiently in one of the chairs next to Deidre's desk, her notebook resting in her lap. She stood up promptly and offered her hand when Deidre walked in.

"Hi! I'm Rosemary Goodwin."

"Rosemary Goodwin?" Deidre shook her hand. "I thought I was meeting with Rebecca Ellison. And weren't we supposed to meet on Friday?"

"Huh? Oh, there were some last-minute editorial changes." Rosemary pulled out a small digital camera. "Do you mind if I get a quick picture?"

"Sure, but—"

"Say cheese!" The flash went off. Rosemary glanced at the display, a pleased look on her face, and quickly tucked the camera back into her bag. "Wow, perfect—we don't even need another take. You're incredibly photogenic, Deidre. But you probably already know that, having been on TV and all."

“Well, I—”

She placed a handheld recorder on Deidre’s desk. “Can we tape this? I find it’s easier for me to have my notes transcribed later.” She glanced at Deidre, then jotted something down in her notebook.

Uneasy, Deidre moved the piles of paper that crowded her desk to one side. “Can I offer you some coffee or bottled water?”

“Oh, I’m fine.” Rosemary beamed brightly at Deidre. “Now, this must be a *very* exciting time for you, with the new cookie line and all!”

Deidre nodded, her confidence returning. “Absolutely. Everyone at Jamison Cookies and Confections is excited about the upcoming launch of Sweet Deidre. As you may know, JCC prides itself on being a local leader in baked goods and confectionary retailing. Sweet Deidre represents an opportunity for the company to move into the gourmet specialty foods market . . .”

“Yes, yes, I got that all from the press packet.” Rosemary held up a glossy white folder with the Sweet Deidre logo embossed on the cover, then shoved it into her bag. She leaned eagerly toward Deidre. “But what about *you*, Deidre? This must be *such* a huge change from where you were less than a year ago!”

Deidre paused, uncertain of where this was going. “Well, it’s true that we moved very quickly once we decided to create the Sweet Deidre line . . .”

“I mean, first there was the unexpected cancellation of your show, *Live Simple with Deidre McIntosh*, and then being evicted from your apartment. In fact . . .” Rosemary looked down at her notepad and tapped her pen. “You were broke, weren’t you?”

Deidre squirmed. “Um, I’m not sure . . .”

“I have a quote here from Theodore Shepard of Open Investments. I believe that’s your cousin’s brokerage firm, where you were a client? He says that you had no idea about the state of your financial affairs, and that your idea of making a capital investment was to go on eBay and bid on a pair of gently used Manolos.” Rosemary looked up. “Is that true?”

Deidre grit her teeth. This wasn’t an interview about her new line of baked goods. This was an interview about her and the disastrous year she’d had last year. “Did you say you were from *Taste* magazine?”

Rosemary’s smile didn’t waver. “I didn’t say, actually.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a business card. “Rosemary Goodwin, *The Seattle Scoop*. Can you comment on your relationship with millionaire Kevin Johnson?”

Deidre snatched the card and stood up. “No. I’m sorry, but this interview is over. I’d appreciate it if you’d leave now.”

Rosemary gave Deidre a sympathetic smile. “Deidre, think of this as an opportunity to tell your side of the story. You’re a hero to women everywhere. You pulled yourself up by your bootstraps, landed the most eligible bachelor in Seattle, produced a comeback documentary series, *and* signed a deal for a line of branded cookies under your own name. I mean, it’s quite incredible, if you think about it!” Rosemary blinked innocently.

Deidre didn’t say anything, but went to the door of her office and held it open.

“Fine.” Rosemary put her things into an oversized messenger bag and hefted it onto her shoulder. “I’ll also be writing something on my blog about you and Kevin, in case you want to leave a comment. We could even arrange a live chat with our readers, if you’re interested.”

"I'm not," Deidre said flatly.

"Well, maybe Kevin would . . ."

"He's not either." Deidre kept her eyes on Rosemary as she gestured to her assistant. "Amber, please help the reporter from *The Seattle Scoop* find her way out of the building."

"You have my card," Rosemary called over her shoulder as she was escorted down the hallway. "Call me!"

"Deidre, I'm *so* sorry!" Amber was wringing her hands and looked close to tears. "I just assumed she was your Friday interview. She made it seem like you were expecting her."

"That's okay." Deidre was still put out by Rosemary's visit. Technically Rosemary hadn't lied, though she had lied by omission to let them think that she was someone she wasn't. "In the future let's just ask for a business card up front. That should clear things up right away."

Amber nodded, sniffing. "Okay."

Deidre gave the young woman a reassuring pat on the arm and watched her leave, still distraught. Deidre felt guilty. Unfortunately this wasn't the first time they'd had a run-in with the tabloid media. The buzz had barely died down after the unexpected cancellation of Deidre's lifestyle and cooking show, *Live Simple with Deidre McIntosh*, and now the press was clamoring over the news that Deidre and Kevin Johnson were a couple.

In this case, it was less about her and more about him. Kevin came from old Seattle money and had a successful venture capital firm. Throw in the fact that he was tall, handsome, single, *and* a genuinely nice guy—well, even Deidre wasn't so sure she could blame them for wanting to get the inside story.

But she did feel bad that it was starting to affect her staff and their productivity at Sweet Deidre. Rosemary's visit had cost them an hour, and the media kits averaged ten dollars apiece. Plus, a perfectly good cookie sampler had gone to waste. Deidre grimaced at the thought of Rosemary driving back to her offices at *The Seattle Scoop*, munching on a Sweet Deidre cookie.

Amber buzzed her. "Deidre, I have Manuela on the line. She wants to meet with you. Are you available?"

"Sure. Tell her I'll be up in ten minutes."

"Actually, she's on her way down and says she'll be here in less than five."

Great. Deidre looked at her disheveled desk. She liked things neat and orderly, but lately that just didn't seem possible. There was always something going on, something that needed attention or revision. She'd come up with a brilliant color-coded system, something she'd borrowed from one of her old *Live Simple* episodes, and it had worked for all of two days before the piles starting creeping up on her desk again.

"Knock knock!" Manuela stood in Deidre's doorframe, beaming. Manuela Jamison was a portly woman whose love for food and sweets was evidenced not only by the company she ran but also by her large and generous frame. Despite weighing in at more than two hundred pounds, Manuela wasn't someone Deidre considered overweight. She was just a big personality in more ways than one.

"Hi, Manuela. Come on in."

"Deidre, honey." Manuela approached Deidre with her arms outstretched and planted a maternal kiss on either cheek. "I just have to say, again, that I am so positively *thrilled* you came on board. You know that, right?"

Deidre wasn't an employee—technically she had a contract with JCC that paid her a consulting fee and royalty off the sales of Sweet Deidre—but she knew what Manuela meant. She nodded.

Manuela sat down on the couch in Deidre's office. "I see a real future for you and JCC. Not just with Sweet Deidre, but with other products, too. The custom cupcake line? Brilliant. You have so many good ideas, and you're just so wonderfully creative, I still can't believe you're under our roof!"

"Thank you, Manuela."

Manuela continued to gush. "And you're *such* a hard worker. *Committed*. I like that about you, Deidre. I told Frank yesterday, 'That girl has an enviable work ethic. She's a keeper!'" Frank was Manuela's husband and COO of Jamison Cookies and Confections.

Deidre blushed. "That's very kind of you to say."

"I just *know* Sweet Deidre will be a huge success; I'm not worried in the least. Which is why I know you won't be fazed by what I'm about to tell you."

Deidre felt the smile fall from her face. "What do you mean? Tell me what?"

"Well, it appears that those qualitative focus groups out in Pasadena and Bakersfield didn't care much for the Sweet Deidre line of cookies and baked goods we sent them. Didn't care much for them at all." Manuela turned her head and called, "Elliot! You can bring them in!"

Manuela's assistant entered Deidre's office, pushing a hand truck. He was skinny with erratically cut black hair, a recent University of Washington journalism graduate who had the moody grunge persona down. He deposited four large boxes by her desk and then left.

“Fortunately, I convinced the company to provide us with *all* of the original documentation and evaluation forms. I find it’s so much more useful than a neat summary, don’t you? By going through each one you’ll be able to get a real feel for what our customers want.” Manuela was nodding fervently, agreeing with herself.

Deidre had been staring at the boxes and now turned to stare at Manuela. “Each one?”

Manuela stood up to leave. “I remember you told me you were a fast reader. Didn’t you once finish seven books in three days?”

“Actually it was three books in seven—”

“I am envious, I can tell you that!” Manuela shook her head in wonderment. “But that skill will certainly come in handy for you now. Just take a look, digest the information, and let me know what the new lineup of Sweet Deidre products will be.”

“The new lineup?” Deidre felt her chest tighten. It was May, and the Sweet Deidre cookies were supposed to be rolling off the production line in September. “Manuela, with all due respect, it’ll take me a while to go through all these boxes and process the information. Then I need to meet with the Sweet Deidre team and come up with some new recipes. We’ll need to test them, tweak the formulation if necessary. I’ll need a couple of months, at least.”

“A couple of months? Oh, Deidre!” Manuela laughed. “I’ll need something by *Friday*.” She gave Deidre a friendly wave and was gone.

Deidre lowered herself into her chair in stunned disbelief. Manuela’s original timetable had been aggressive—nine months from conception to the shelf. Even if Deidre worked

twelve-hour days and late into the night, there still wouldn't be enough time to get it all done.

Five days. Suddenly feeling weary, Deidre pressed the intercom button on her desk.

"Yes, Deidre?"

"Amber, clear my calendar for the rest of the week. I'll also need you to reserve the test kitchen for Wednesday and Thursday. And I'm sorry, but it looks like the entire Sweet Deidre team will be working overtime until further notice. Can you let everyone know?"

"I'll send out a memo right away. Oh, and they're sending over the Florentine Tart you ordered from the JCC retail store."

Kevin. Deidre had completely forgotten that he would be flying in tonight.

"Great," Deidre said, thinking quickly. "And can you find someone to move these boxes out to my car? I'll be working from home for the rest of the day. Thanks, Amber."

Friday, indeed.

So it wasn't a home-cooked meal, exactly. Okay, so it wasn't a home-cooked meal at all, but Deidre had done what she could under the circumstances, and the Jade Palace did make one amazing orange chicken.

It was just shy of 7:00 p.m. when she heard the tinny sound of her doorbell.

"It's open!" Deidre called out, feeling her heart give an excited little jump. She got up from the dining room table and hurried to meet Kevin, a smile already on her face.

Her front door opened and then he was there, right in front of her. A second later she was in his arms, covering his face with kisses.

He responded by kissing her back, a long, deep, lingering kiss that told her he'd missed her, too. Deidre inhaled the scent of him—one part Burberry, one part airport—then laced his fingers with hers, pulling him into the apartment, closing the door behind him.

He was casually dressed in a lightweight sweater and slacks—his typical travel clothes—and he sported a hint of stubble. With brown hair and brown eyes, Kevin Johnson was classically handsome. He had the height and the presence of someone who was comfortable in his own skin. Part of it was pedigree—Kevin knew how to carry himself, and did so with an air of confidence, not arrogance: a trait Deidre found immensely appealing and even sexy.

“I missed you,” she told him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“I can tell,” he replied with a smile. He nipped an earlobe. “Nice earrings, by the way.”

“Thanks. Some guy gave them to me.”

“That guy has good taste.” They grinned at each other until Kevin looked over her shoulder. He looked back at her, his eyebrows raised. “Doing a little paperwork?”

“Very funny.” Deidre didn't turn around. She knew her once-immaculate condo was now a complete mess. She'd opened up each of the boxes and her living room was now littered with paper. Piles were stacked on the floor, on the couch, on the coffee table, on the dining room table, anywhere Deidre could find a free space. “The focus groups had issues with

the Sweet Deidre line. Manuela wants me to figure out what went wrong and then come up with a new line. I've been reading evaluations and transcripts all afternoon."

"Wow, I'm sorry." Kevin rubbed her back. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. And no. Mostly no." She went into the kitchen and emerged with a platter of Sweet Deidre cookies. She picked up a creamy molasses sandwich cookie and offered it to him. "I know you've tried this a million times, but try it again and tell me: Does this seem like an overpriced Oreo?" She kept her voice even, masking the irritation she felt.

Kevin obligingly took a bite and chewed, thoughtful. "No," he said. "Although now that you mention it . . ."

Deidre stared at him. "What do you mean, now that I mention it? The cookie wafers are hazelnut, not chocolate, and the filling is molasses, not vanilla cream!"

"Right." Kevin polished off his cookie. "That's what I meant. It must be the coffee they served on the airplane. Lousy stuff; completely ruined my palate."

"What about this one?" She handed him another cookie. "Several people said it was too exotic. Too exotic! Since when did white chocolate and macadamia nuts become exotic?"

"Er . . ."

She ranted through two more—the spiced sugar coins ("too seasonal") and Meyer lemon bars ("been done before")—before holding up the Sweet Deidre signature cookie.

The cherry almond shortbread cookie.

"They loved this," she said simply. "Someone even called it *sublime*. But guess what?"

"What?" Kevin hazarded.

"They thought the price point was too high. They loved it,

but said it wasn't worth it. Not worth it!" She was about to toss the cookie back on the plate but thought better of it and took a bite instead.

It really *was* sublime. Mollified, she felt her shoulders start to relax.

Kevin helped himself to another cookie. "Deidre, these cookies are amazing. But when you bring a product to market, it's a different ball game. You need to anticipate what's happening with your customer. It's about them, what they need, what their experience is with your product. Think back to when you would develop a show for *Live Simple*. You chose topics that you thought your viewers would be interested in and would benefit from, right?"

Deidre nodded.

"This isn't any different. If anything, it's more difficult because they're making a decision solely by looking at a box sitting on a shelf. It's not a multisensory experience like TV, where they can hear you and see you. You don't have that same kind of influence over a package of cookies. People are comparing it to all the others on the shelf and then weighing cookies over other forms of snacks or treats. If it wasn't on their shopping list, then they may be thinking about their budget. What are they willing to give up in order to buy a package of Sweet Deidre cookies?"

Discouraged, Deidre let out a heavy sigh. "And here I was, all worked up at the thought of having to come up with a handful of new recipes. Instead, now I have to try to anticipate the American consumer's eating and buying habits. No problem."

Kevin offered an encouraging smile. "That's what you have focus groups for. Even food manufacturers who have a long

history in the industry haven't figured it out. You don't want to find out that there's a problem *after* the cookies have hit the shelves, so consider this a good thing."

Deidre knew he was probably right, but that didn't mean she had to like it. "Manuela's giving me until Friday to come up with something."

"*This* Friday?" Kevin barked a laugh. "Are you kidding?"

She gave a sigh. "It's impossible, isn't it?"

He shook his head. "Ambitious, yes. Impossible, no. And if anyone can do it, it's you." He gave her a kiss.

"I'm not so sure about that, but I'll certainly try." *As if I have a choice.*

Deidre took a deep breath. "Well, now that it is absolutely clear that I have so much more to do than I originally thought, we'll need to eat quickly so I can get back to work." She gave his hand a tug and led him down the hallway toward the bedroom.

Kevin followed her, perplexed. "Isn't the dining room that way?" He pointed behind them.

"Yes, but it looks like a hurricane hit it and there isn't any place for us to sit." Deidre pushed open the door to her bedroom. Michael Bublé crooned in the background. The lights were off and candles were lit, giving the room a cozy, sensual glow. A picnic blanket was laid out on the ground with containers of Chinese takeout and a bottle of wine.

"Interesting," Kevin said. He gave a mischievous grin when he took in the plate of fortune cookies that sat invitingly in the middle of the bed.

"Dinner first," Deidre said, returning his mischievous grin with one of her own. "And then dessert."