

OCTAVIA GIRL

Vol. 1

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Octavia Girl

Volume I

By Stephanie Van Orman

Introduction

Sardius was alone in the interview room as bright lights shone in his eyes and voices rang out from behind the blinding rays. No one was there. The voices from the panel of interviewers rang through a speaker system. He couldn't see them, but there were cameras pointed at him like guns.

If he thought they really were guns, he'd perform much better. He always did better when he thought it was a live-or-die situation.

The reality of the speaker and camera placement meant that the interviewers could see him while he couldn't see them. That made him uneasy. He didn't look good, but he had to believe that none of the other candidates looked much better than he did. Besides, the job did not require him to be at his best visually.

The first grating automated voice began. "Sardius, have you been informed of the committee's decision regarding the deceased diplomat, Arvantis?"

Sardius made his face impassive, even with the lights shining in his eyes. "I haven't heard."

"You were cleared of all suspicion," the voice informed him.

Sardius tried to make his exhale shallow so that he didn't look too relieved. If he had been blamed for what happened to Arvantis, he would have broken every camera and light in the room. It wouldn't have been out of rage exactly, but more like popping balloons early at a birthday party that isn't for you... on your birthday. He had such high hopes for the program and being blamed, even partially, for Arvantis' death was the last thing he needed. If he got kicked out... he hated to think of it.

He paused before meekly asking, "If this meeting isn't about Arvantis, does that mean Jenna Fairchild has been brought in?"

"Not exactly," another voice piped up.

Sardius recognized that voice as belonging to the chair of the Octavian Council. His name was Favel and his voice wasn't automated like the others were.

"I was just thinking," Favel said, even though he gave no face for Sardius to see. "That you have studied Jenna more than anyone else on our side. You requested to be her personal assistant before you were assigned to Arvantis. The AAMC is still having a horrific time bringing her in and I was wondering if their tactics are off. Do you have any insights on her recruitment? After all, you were famous for convincing half a solar system to change allegiances."

Sardius beamed. He shouldn't have. He didn't mean to, but he did have his private ambitions and Favel was leading him toward his favorite one. "Well," Sardius began, attempting to sound casual, even if it was a little late. "She'd probably be more willing to go to outer space if there was someone special to escort her."

"Of course!" Favel exclaimed in his odd parrot-like voice.

Sardius was pleased with himself and Favel's reaction had been just what he hoped.

Favel went on. "Of course, she's reluctant to come into outer space! She doesn't know anyone here. Should we send a welcoming committee or a clutch of..."

"Slow down," Sardius interrupted. "Don't send a clutch of anything. She doesn't need a welcoming committee. She needs one person she trusts, admires, and loves to guide her. In short, she needs a—"

"Mate!" Favel shouted, interrupting Sardius.

"Jenna doesn't have a mate?" an automated voice cracked.

"Isn't she an adult? I thought she was an adult?" another voice asked.

"She *is* an adult," Favel said with as much authority as his nasal voice would allow.

"Why doesn't she have a mate?"

"I have a mate."

"You have six mates."

"I've had twelve."

Sardius refrained from laughing at the committee members' outbursts. His suggestion was being accepted. He just needed to carry it through to the end. All he wanted was to be taken to Earth to escort Jenna to Octavia Prime. He'd go all the way to Earth for her. Sure, he'd have to make a few *adjustments* if he was going to go to a place like Earth. He currently looked like a soot stain, but for Jenna Fairchild... he was willing to do just about anything.

Besides, romancing Jenna would be a breeze. Those idiots the AAMC had been sending to pick her up were too stupid to be understood. That was why they couldn't get her aboard a pod.

Now, if Sardius was the one to go get her... he knew exactly what to say to her that would make her fall in love with a perfect stranger and also make her willing to join him in outer space.

"We should run her information through the universal matching algorithm," Favel announced.

Wait! No! If she was run through that system, Sardius had no chance of being chosen as the perfect man for her.

The other committee members were voicing their agreement.

Sardius had to stop their scheming immediately. "Wait. Boys, aren't you jumping the gun? If you think about it, getting a candidate from the universal matching pool is hardly an intelligent way to go about this."

"Hardly intelligent? They use 850,000 different character markers to test compatibility," a faceless committee member pointed out.

Sardius paused in his tracks, momentarily quieted by such sound reasoning. However, he was nothing if not full of crap. "Yeah, I realize that *sounds* good, but I think you already have a perfect candidate for the job."

"Who?"

"Look, Sardius," Favel interjected. "If we had a decent man among our ranks to send on this side of the universe, I think the AAMC already would have sent him. They've already sent over two hundred candidates to try to recruit her. They must not have seen that pursuing this from a romantic angle, though underhanded, may be the only way to secure her cooperation."

Sardius tried to speak up, but Favel talked over him.

His parrot voice pounded into Sardius' ears like a bird squawking at twice the regular volume. "The universal matching algorithm will provide us with hundreds of thousands of candidates. Maybe millions. There's no need for us to take a chance on something that *might* work when we only need to get her up in the air. Thank you for your cooperation and your suggestion. The equipment you had when you worked for Arvantis will work just fine for Jenna."

All the time Favel had been speaking, Sardius had been saying the same thing over and over though the committee chair wasn't listening and Sardius wasn't even sure if he had his volume on. Favel might not have heard a word Sardius said.

If Favel had been listening, he would have heard Sardius say over and over, "No! Don't send someone else. Send me! Send me! Send me!"

The automated voices cut along with Favel's birdlike voice. It was quiet in the room, except for Sardius' howls.

"Send me," he said hopelessly one last time.

No one answered. The communication lines had been cut.

Sardius exhaled heavily before he knocked over his chair. "Gah!"

Chapter One

Catastrophe has Perfect Eyes

"Have you seen a golden retriever off his leash?"

Jenna smiled. Not to brag or anything, but men loved her. They were always stopping her and asking her for the time, for the bus schedule, for recommendations for the best restaurants, or literally any question they could think of to engage her in conversation.

She had been sitting on a bench in the park for under three minutes, enjoying a tea and a bagel, when a reasonably attractive man approached her and asked her if she had seen the golden retriever.

She cast her gray eyes up at him and her cheeks went round and rosy. "I'm sorry. I haven't."

He looked around him for the dog, distraught written all over his face. "You don't suppose," he said, looking helpless and confused, "that you might be able to spare a few minutes to help me look for him?"

Jenna's face changed. The smile was gone and instead, her face twitched in the spot just below her eye in sharp irritation. Then she warped her mouth into a deeply unimpressed frown and said, "No. I couldn't."

The man turned to her with agony and pleading in his eyes. "He hasn't been missing for very long. He might just be past those trees." The man pointed.

Jenna snorted. "Then go look for him just past those trees."

He looked at her as though she was the reason he couldn't find his dog, if only she'd be merciful and walk with him a few steps.

"Do you have a picture of the dog?" she asked, patience fleeing from her voice as she started gulping her too-hot tea in large swallows.

"No. He *just* got away from me."

"I meant on your phone."

"My phone?" he asked, looking around him like he didn't understand how that word worked in the sentence she'd just constructed.

"You don't have a picture of your dog on your phone?" she questioned as she shoved a quarter of a sliced bagel in her mouth.

"W-well, it's not my dog! I never said he was my dog," the man insisted, quite passionately.

"Fine then," Jenna said, washing the remains of her bagel down with the last of her tea. "So it's not your dog."

"It's a friend's dog."

"Then you'd better hurry up and find him," she said, crumpling up the paper her bagel had been served in and shoving it in her empty disposable tea cup. She tossed them in the garbage bin next to the bench and stood up.

"You're sure you can't help me?" the man pleaded a second time.

"I think you should call your friend, or literally any other human being you know, and ask them for their help," she said in a snarky tone and stepped away from him.

As she walked away, she glanced over her shoulder three times. Twice as she looked both ways before crossing the street, and once when she was a little further down the block. The man was standing exactly where she'd left him. At least, he wasn't following her.

She shook her head. She shouldn't have been so nice to him. She should have told him exactly what she thought, that the line about the missing dog was a cliche line child molesters used to bait children into their vehicles. It was not a reasonable pickup line, but maybe he'd have a debriefing with a friend who could explain how epically he had failed. Hopefully, that would not happen to her or any other woman again, ever.

Jenna Fairchild looked very normal. As a matter of fact, she was better than normal. She had blondish hair, gray eyes, a sunny smile, and an open disposition. Not only that, but she took pride in herself and her appearance, which meant she knew how to sculpt her eyebrows properly, and how to do her hair, which was almost always done up in a high messy bun. If she wore her hair down, a hat usually crowned the top of her head. Her favorite hat was a man's fedora that had belonged to her grandfather that he had worn after the second world war. When her hair hung loose, it was almost down to her waist and fell in the kind of curls messy buns created.

The styles she adopted were important because Jenna always had to have something covering the crown of her head. She had a terrible secret under the curls of her messy bun, a mass that was always a little too close to her forehead to be really fashionable. Jenna only got away with it because she was so stylish otherwise with dangling earrings and a perfectly matched scarf. She was also terrifically grouchy when questioned about her bun. No one was going to ask her to change her style twice.

When she wore a hat, flirtatious men would often try to tip it. Even women would try to steal it to try it on, but Jenna had sorted out that problem long ago and wore a hat pin. A pair of holes had to be pierced into the precious fedora in order to accomplish it, but it was well worth it. It had been her grandfather himself who punctured the stiff felt, gifting her a hat pin that had belonged to her grandmother.

Because her grandfather, the last of her relatives as far as she was concerned, had known her terrible secret. He had been in on it.

She had to hide the black onyx tiara that was permanently affixed to the top of her head. It was unlike any tiara any woman wore because it had no gems, and symmetry that belonged in higher-level math classes than just a collection of intricately placed triangles. It was shaped like a large black wave moving to oppose a smaller one. They seemed like they were moving toward each other, like a black beak about to snap shut, but they never moved.

When Jenna was little, she wore a headband to cover it—always in the wrong place—always too high off her head.

And she could never take it off.

Jenna had never had a real boyfriend. If she had someone that close to her, they would expect the kind of intimacy where she would have to be bareheaded. And she couldn't be. The waves that made up the tiara were sharp on the underside. It wasn't completely unfathomable that a man could tangle his hand in her hair and cut himself in the process. Any time a man got anywhere near such a thing, images of his blood running down her forehead and between her eyes flooded her mind. In bad, accidental fantasies, he cut his finger clean off.

Jenna could not allow that, so anytime a man showed interest in her, she blew him off.

Though if she was being honest, she wasn't overly tempted by the men that came her way. What was wrong with them was a little difficult to place. Was it that they weren't good-looking enough? Yes, but if they had been more interesting to her, their looks would have mattered less. Whatever was wrong with the men wasn't obvious. Jenna admitted she was picky, which was why none of her blind dates turned into anything more, and why she never met a man who made her want to let her hair down.

Waiting for the perfect man never got boring to Jenna.

In the meantime, she led a well-organized, perfectly pleasing life. She had a great apartment, cool friends, vacations, an excellent job, and a cat if that counted for anything. Everyone she knew reassured her that it didn't. She disagreed.

Her cat's name was Charm. She was a white long-haired fuzzy thing with deep blue eyes. People who visited Jenna's apartment loved Charm until they tried to touch her and then the furry little monster would try to claw their faces off. Charm did not like anyone but Jenna, which made her feel like her cat's undying love for her ought to have meant more in the estimation of others.

Besides, the cat was excellent company while she waited for the unthinkable to happen.

Jenna had always believed that office romances were completely out of line. Couldn't you find anyone to date besides the guys you worked with? Sheesh! Take up a hobby! She had never seen a man who was worth breaking her rules over until Armen Tagart started doing a radio show.

She heard him talking over the radio before she saw him. What was that accent? Where did he come from? Intrigued, she left her cubicle in the advertising department and hurried over to the sound booths.

Behind glass, there he was.

He was so attractive to her that even though they hadn't yet spoken, she felt as if she were in danger. He was brown. His hair was brown like coffee beans. His eyes were brown like dark chocolate, and his skin was slightly avocado in its brownness. Altogether, he looked sweet, bitter, and healthy. The bone structure and muscle groups under all that brown didn't disappoint.

She felt undone just looking at him, just listening to him. Like her carefully plotted life would shortly be ruined.

He glanced up from the white paper page he had been reading from and looked directly at her. His voice didn't miss a beat in the announcement he was cheerfully making, but his eyes and his hand acknowledged her. He searched her eyes as he let his fingers slide down the length of a pencil only to flip it upside down and slide his fingers down it again. More than anything, it was a gesture showing impatience. It was the fidgety way a person moves when they're on an important phone call, but can't wait for it to end.

Jenna smiled.

He had white teeth. He had shaved that morning. His hands were clean and looked very much like any woman in the world wouldn't have minded him placing one of them on the small of her back to guide her into a room.

He looked like a man who had been made just for her.

She went back to her desk with the little smile still on her face.

Chapter Two

Calamity Looks like Kismet

The scene where Jenna was introduced to Armen was the opposite of a meet-cute. All that happened was that he was ushered into the bullpen and everyone stood up while the boss yelled all their names at him, finishing with, "Armen, this is everyone."

Never in a hurry to rush anything, Jenna sat back down without stepping forward with her coworkers to make a more positive first impression. Besides, she had never had to pursue a man in her life. Even if they worked together, why would she need to do anything differently?

Contrary to what was best for Jenna's personal development, Armen approached her the next day at the office fridge and introduced himself again.

"Yeah. I met you yesterday," she drawled as she hunted through a basket for a pack of artificial sugar.

"Well, it's good to meet you," he said in deep mellow tones. "You're famous."

He was about to retreat to the sound booths when Jenna spun around to face him. "What do you mean, I'm famous?"

"Oh, you know," he said after he cleared his throat. "I've been told so much about you."

Jenna was annoyed and looked it. "What could anyone around here have told you about me?"

He looked amused instead of embarrassed, which inflamed Jenna's annoyance into peevishness. "Oh, you know, just that you're perfect," he said, giving her a studying glance that suggested she was far from it.

"Who, may I ask, gossips about perfection?" she questioned in a clipped tone.

"Who doesn't?" Armen asked with a wicked smirk.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say something about how he could use some work himself, but when she looked for something about him to use as a barb, she couldn't find anything. Everything about the way he was groomed and styled was above average. Another person might have made something up to twit him about, but Jenna was not a liar or a bully.

Instead, all the irritation and upheaval left her features. A corner of her mouth made a jump toward the ceiling, "Maybe you could teach me how to be perfect sometime."

"You'll accomplish it better if you smile," he said, with a charming grin of his own before leaving her gawking in front of the microwave.

It was then that Armen did something no other man had ever done to Jenna. He left her alone. She had assumed that his leaving the kitchen was only a temporary retreat, and he would be back to invite her out for lunch or a drink.

A week later, he was still behind glass, doing his radio show without taking more than a professional interest in her, or anyone. He was one of those men who came to work, and then, just worked? Was he married? Did he already have someone special in his life? Was that the reason he was so aloof? Jenna did not have the pluck to ask her coworkers questions about him. She simply kept her ears open and waited for the information to trickle in.

It soon did.

No girlfriend. No wife. No significant other. Not even a roommate.

Apparently, he lived on a boat he kept in the bay and was particularly fond of stargazing. It had been his idea to incorporate information about what celestial activities were happening on clear nights along with the weather forecast.

Other than that, no more information about him was forthcoming. Jenna waited, but three weeks went by with nothing new surfacing.

She was on the verge of forgetting all about him when she once again met him in front of the microwave.

He kept looking in the fridge and closing it again.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"My lunch is gone," he admitted sourly.

"Someone took it?"

"Maybe 'gone' is the wrong word. My lunch is not in the fridge and instead, it's on the counter... back at my place."

"There's a really nice Asian fusion restaurant around the corner if you have time to nip out."

"I don't," he admitted, even more sourly.

"Are you dying? Do you want me to fetch something for you?" Jenna offered when she wouldn't normally. Skipping a meal was not one of the things Jenna would normally have classified as a hardship. It was just that he looked so dismayed, so she wondered if he had missed breakfast, and what if that was compounded by having missed dinner the night before? She found herself suddenly worried sick that he was wasting away in front of her.

"Would you?" he asked with the most beautiful smile following the words. "I have to do a segment with Miles in ten minutes, but I should be finished with that in about an hour."

"Fine. I'll get you something. I assume you like noodles," she said dryly.

"I love them," Armen said, just as Miles stuck his head around the corner and waved him back.

Jenna went to her desk and phoned the Asian fusion place. She was about to order noodles for both of them, but then backtracked and canceled the meal for her. She had not forgotten her lunch that morning. Besides, he didn't want to eat with her. He just needed to eat something. It was a humanitarian mission, not a date.

Forty minutes after their conversation, Jenna popped down to the restaurant and picked up the Vietnamese noodles. Traversing through the office, she set the foam container along with the chopsticks on Armen's desk. The first time she placed them, she had stuck the receipt between the lid and the chopsticks, hoping that he would realize it would be good manners to pay her back, but then suddenly, she didn't want to be paid back.

She pocketed the receipt and returned to her desk, where she reluctantly gnawed on a carrot she had not cut into sticks before including it in her lunch. Now she understood why Bugs Bunny always had half a carrot. It was the food accessory that never went away.

She was awakened from her stupor by Armen as he wheeled an office chair into her cubicle. He had his noodles in hand. "I see you haven't finished eating," he commented. "Mind if I join you?"

She nodded to him and he took his seat.

"Thank you for this," he said as he opened the lid.

She smiled. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a man eat like he enjoyed it. Most of the men she went out with were so afraid of making a mistake that they made *all* the mistakes. Armen obviously didn't care if he had a noodle trailing from his mouth and ate like he meant it.

"Are you just eating that little carrot?" he asked when his mouth was empty.

It was so big around that she could just barely touch her middle finger and thumb around the circumference when she held it. "Little?" she replied.

"Okay, it could obviously feed a starving village. Why are you eating that instead of this?"

"I didn't forget my lunch. Besides, I have other things," she conceded and showed him the lunch box she had brought with her. It had tiny little compartments with fruit, meat, cheese, and crackers.

"So again, what's with the carrot?"

She dropped it on her desk. "I'm trying to lose weight, so carrot first, lunch afterward."

"If you can eat anything after that carrot!" he laughed.

"That's sort of the point."

"I think leaving the carrot on the desk is a mistake. I think you should stuff it in your bun. I bet you could hide all kinds of stuff in there and no one would be the wiser. It's so big, you could have a black hole hidden in there."

Normally, a comment like that would have thrown Jenna into a rage. She did not enjoy it when thoughtless men made jokes about her bun. Surprisingly, a rage did not seem to be on the menu. Armen had not meant anything by it. He was merely flirting with her and looking for a logical opening. Five seconds ago, he had been talking about the carrot.

"I hide stuff in there all the time," she laughed back.

"Like what?"

"All my secrets," she said evasively.

"I'd love to know all your secrets. They sound as inviting as a trail of gummy bears in the woods," he commented pleasantly. He cleared his throat and continued, "I want to repay you for this food. You didn't have to do this for me. I was dying and I want to show my appreciation. What sorts of favors, gifts, or shameless plugs on the radio tug at your heartstrings?"

"You don't have to do anything," she scoffed.

"Let me give you a list of things I can do. I'm good at getting new bands on the radio," he said with an eyebrow wriggle.

She laughed. "I don't have a band."

"Then, your little sister's band."

"I'm an only child."

"Okay, that's out. I could take you stargazing on my boat."

She looked around the office blankly, looking for somewhere to hide her discomfort. She was so shaken that for the first time since she started working at that office, she did not notice the discoloration on the ceiling which always irked her perfectionist leanings. Was there a reason to say no?

They did not work in the same department. Check.

Neither one of them had authority over the other. Check.

There couldn't be any of the normal office romance objections. Check.

Besides, it was just stargazing in the bay, not sex in the sound booth. She added a check after that one for good measure.

"I guess we could do that," she said slowly after she checked all the boxes in her head.

"Then, tomorrow at nine. I'll take you out on the ocean. You'll look perfect, and I'll try my best to keep up," he said cheerfully.

He tossed his empty container in the garbage, saluted, and wheeled his chair back to his corner.

Jenna was breathless as he disappeared from view. The fluttering in her heart surprised her. Who knew what other surprises were waiting for her?

Jenna went home that night and went through her clothes. She was not the kind of girl who needed to go shopping because she had just been asked on a date by the man of her dreams. All of Jenna's clothes were already awesome. It came from meticulous planning all year round. She put together an outfit from her closet with accessories and shoes. Then she put them together in a garment bag and hung them on a hook for her date with Armen.

Armen asked her to meet him at a cafe near the bay. He said he would meet her there and walk down to the boat with her. He didn't want her to get lost, so he would escort her, saying marinas could be hard to navigate if you weren't used to them.

The outfit came out of the closet. It was a pink and white horizontal striped shirt with a gather above one shoulder. It had the added benefit of doubling as a dress due to its length, so she paired charcoal leggings with it. She wore light brown boots that looked pink, only because there was pink near them. She wore a blush-pink ribbon in her bun, which was a slightly more extravagant design than the usual messy bun she wore. This one incorporated a thick braid.

She went to meet him and her breath caught when she saw him on the other side of the glass through the coffee shop window. Without a doubt, he was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen and when she stepped through that door to join him, her life would be forever changed. He was the exact person to make her throw everything out the window.

Armen got to his feet when Jenna entered.

"I already ordered for you," he said with a sly grin. "We've got a lot of sailing to do if we're going to make it to the right place by the time the sun sets."

Jenna smiled. "What did you order for me?"

"Apple cider."

"Sounds perfect."

"It's going to be more perfect once we're out on the water. Even in the summer, it can get chilly." He placed the warm cup in her hand and offered her his arm.

With a blush as golden as the sunset, she took it.

Together, they left the cafe and walked the tree-lined sidewalk until the ocean came into view.

"Where did you learn how to sail?" she asked.

"It's not a sailboat," he replied.

"You said 'sailing' earlier."

"I probably did. It has a better sound to it than boating. The thing is, I'm not good at everything I try to do, and learning how to manage all those knots and pulleys was not happening on such short notice, so I got a boat with a motor instead. The ocean can be really unpredictable and sailing against ocean tides or being pushed along by them is too much for me. I need to be where I'm supposed to be when I'm supposed to be there."

She was about to ask him a question about that when he continued.

"Do you see that boat with the blue stripe down the side?" he asked, pointing.

Yes, she could see it. It was one of the larger boats parked there. It was no small wonder he could live there. It looked perfectly comfortable and she felt this sensation of luxury pass over her. Like she was being treated better by Armen than she had been by any other man. He was taking her on a sunset cruise to watch starlight. Suddenly she felt like she'd never seen either of those things before.

He jumped onto the boat first and delicately lifted her aboard to join him. Efficiently, he moved around the vessel, untying ropes and taking his place behind the wheel in a way that struck her as a hundred times more masterful than the way a man looked when he drove a car.

She was about to do something daring. Daring for her. She was about to come up behind him and rest her elbow on his shoulder when he turned around and took her out of the cabin and onto the deck.

"The real show is out here," he said, seating her in the front and covering her lap with a blanket.

He left her and a minute later the engine was running and they were fast leaving land behind them.

Soon they were out of the bay with the mountains surrounding them and onto the fiery mirror of the ocean. Jenna sipped her cider and watched the changing colors of the tilting light reflecting on the clouds, the emerging stars, and an inexplicable feeling of wonder and adventure enveloped her. It suddenly occurred to her that she had not experienced a feeling like she was exactly where she needed to be in a very long time.

She glanced back at Armen with the sun making half his face bright and half his face dark. He looked very confident in the way he piloted the ship. Trustworthy even.

Then he cut the engine, grabbed a blanket of his own, and joined her in the front of the boat.

"Are you having a good time?" he asked as he sat next to her with his blanket folded on his lap.

She nodded comfortably. "This is already such a good date, but I can't help but wonder if you have anything else planned."

"Of course I do," he said pleasantly.

"Like what?"

"Anything you want."

That comment made Jenna suspicious. He sounded like the man who was looking for the missing dog in the park—like he would have said anything to get Jenna to go with him. She pushed off the thought. She was being paranoid and it had to stop. But when she saw Armen's face, looking unexpectedly anxious to please, she had the feeling again. To cover it, she asked, "Why don't you tell me more about yourself? How long have you lived on a boat?"

"About three weeks. I started living aboard *The Windstorm* when I came to Victoria," he explained.

Jenna squinted. Had that been the name on the side of the boat? She felt like it wasn't. Hadn't it had a woman's name like *The Lucia*? Or *The Margaret*? It was too late for Jenna to check then. She couldn't very well swing her whole body over the edge to see what was written on the side of the boat. Nor could she challenge him on the name of his own boat.

"Why did you buy it?" she asked, keeping to her line of questioning.

He didn't answer but looked her up and down. "It's getting darker," he said cryptically. "Tell me something. Are you as attracted to me as I am to you?"

Her heart hit a hitch, but she managed to nod.

"Are you aware that I can't place a finger on you until you place a finger on me?" he challenged.

She wrinkled her nose. What was he saying?

"I can't do more than offer you my arm. If you want to get involved with me, you have to make the first move," he said, tilting his nose to the side and offering her his lips.

Jenna placed one arm over her stomach, scratched her ear with her opposite hand, and took a cleansing breath. She hesitated, waiting to answer, toying with her options. "So you are giving me all the power on this date?"

"All of it!" he confirmed. "I can't bring you to this remote location and let you think that I'm not making any moves on you because I don't want to. I'm being courteous."

She stifled a laugh. Though it was not a kind laugh. It was an annoyed laugh. He wanted her to make the first move and he asked for it using those words? She laughed to prevent herself from rolling her eyes.

He made amends with the smile he gave her that was without question the most adorable one she had ever seen in her life. He was using his eyes to persuade her to kiss him and it was a far better tactic than using his words.

Jenna burst out laughing. She wasn't sure if she even remembered the last time she had made out with a guy. She was always thinking about bloody fingers and severed tendons.

Well, not tonight, even if he was acting like he deserved her affection just because he had taken her out. It was presumptuous, but... she was in the right place at the right time.

She kissed him, and his kiss was so warm that it made her forget her fears, who she was, and how to stay seated.

They fell on the floor.

She would have gone on kissing him if an alarm on his phone hadn't gone off. It was the worst sound she'd ever heard and she practically jumped off him in her hurry to escape the blaring noise.

He retrieved his phone from his back pocket and silenced it.

"What was that?" she gasped.

"My virgin alert," he replied. "Good thing I shut it off," he said, reaching for her.

"Don't joke. I need an explanation as to why your phone, or anyone's phone, would ever make that sound. No one ignores their phone enough to warrant *that* sound."

"It was to remind me of a celestial event that is going to take place in a minute," he said, looking up at the near-black sky. "It would be a pity if we sailed all the way out here only to miss it."

"Okay," Jenna said, steadying her breath before wrapping herself up in the blanket and looking up at the sky. "What are we looking for?"

He settled as close to her as was humanly possible and pointed up. "We should see color."

At that exact moment, Jenna did see something. It was like the twinkle of a satellite, a slightly off-color point of light moving across the sky quickly when it suddenly turned and fell toward them. It got larger and larger like a crimson comet descending with a sparkling tail behind it. As it got closer it stopped looking like a comet. The shape and style were more like fireworks.

"Did you do this?" she asked, feeling like she'd never seen anything more beautiful.

He didn't reply. He just looked up into the sky with a look that could only be described as the opposite of wonder. His expression caught her attention more than what was happening in the air above them. When his eyes met hers, it was obvious that he knew a lot more about what was happening than she did, and he did not savor the phenomenon.

When she looked up again, she saw other lights—white lights. The thing had a shape and control over its movement. It was hovering.

She felt the prick of a needle in her arm.

Armen caught her as she fell forward.

Her last thought was that whatever was above them... it did not look like a flying saucer.

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