



Love By Chance

Kacy Cross

THE GENTEEL GALLERY CROWD WANDERED through the maze of stark-white walls viewing the artwork, their conversation muted and indiscernible. Claire didn't have to hear their comments about the paintings. The only thing she cared about was whether they liked her desserts, and judging by the low inventory on every tray, they did.

The gallery director, a high-strung woman by the name of Brenda Chang, jetted over, her straight dark hair swinging wildly. She surveyed the table as if trying to gauge whether there were enough to last—and there were, thank you, because the caterer knew how to do her job—then nodded at Claire.

“I wish the event was as big a hit as your desserts. I'll gain five pounds if I don't watch myself,” Brenda said.

Claire smiled at the compliment. “Well, I’m glad you like them. I also have a restaurant downto—”

“Hold that thought.”

Brenda darted after one of the patrons, an elderly lady encrusted with diamonds. Too bad Brenda hadn’t motioned the woman in this direction. Claire’s bakery could use a wealthy fan or two.

She glanced past Brenda, her gaze landing on the man behind her. A sudden jolt rocked her spine. The same jolt she’d gotten before, but this time she *knew* she recognized him.

Time slid to a stop, and the people, the artwork, the chatter, all of it, faded as he walked toward her, his gaze similarly fastened on her. There was practically music playing in her head. Okay, well, there really *was* music piping from the sound system, but somehow he made it a whole other kind of moment, one full of magic and fairytale glitter.

“Hi,” he murmured, and his voice...

Oh, yes, his voice was amazing and deep and it thrilled through her, raising goosebumps in its wake.

“Hi.”

How she got that out around the huge, sudden lump in her throat, she’d never know.

It’s the guy. The one from Crate and Barrel.

And here he was in the flesh, talking to her and even better-looking in the low gallery light in a crisp suit that looked *amazing* on him. She might have to find a way to surreptitiously fan herself, because *wow*.

“So, how’s your night going?” he asked.

“Good.” Fabulous, she wasn’t squeaking out her answers like a squirrel with stage fright.

He held out a hand. “I’m Eric.”

“Claire.”

She shook his hand, and everything inside her collided in a mess of destiny, squishy-girl feelings that only happened when you met someone worth squishing over, and a giddy sense of wonder. Providence had finally smiled down on her. This was a moment she’d remember for a long time.

To wrap everything up in a big, solid bow, he seemed to have come to the fundraiser alone and didn’t seem to be in any hurry to go elsewhere.

“Are you an art aficionado?” he asked with a nod toward the wall behind that held a very ugly Robachaux painting from what appeared to be the artist’s messy finger-paint period, inexplicably titled “Eggplant with No Fur.”

“Do I lose points if I say the jury is still out?”

Eric’s smile came slowly but it was worth it, like waiting for the sun to break out from behind the clouds. The intensity of it washed over her. She’d always been a rain girl—had to be, to live in this town—but all at once, she became a huge fan of Eric’s warm rays.

“Actually, I’ve been glancing around and I gotta say...” He leaned in, wafting her with a heavy dose of masculinity she couldn’t help but react to, and murmured, “You’re wise to withhold judgement until you’ve seen all of it. Want to walk around with me and let’s decide together?”

She couldn't help it. She shivered. The good kind, the kind full of anticipation, like when you knew the wrapped box in front of you held the present you'd longed for, but you hadn't opened it yet because wanting it was too much fun.

Unfortunately, she wasn't a guest. "I can't. I'm the caterer, so I'm kind of stuck here. I can circulate with trays, but my time is limited."

Which was exactly the way she wanted it. The tiny ping of disappointment had no place in the middle of a gig that had bought her and Marco a new oven.

His intense gaze never wavered from hers. "I'll wait."

Really? Like, how long? Until the event was done? "That might be a while. At least until all of the desserts are gone."

"Well. That sounds like a challenge."