

A SHIVER

THE EPILOGUE

ON THE RIVER

MJ MAC

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The Epilogue*



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ON THE RIVER
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A KENNEDY REEVES MYSTERY

MJ MAC

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For those of us who need to know what happened

Sunny Dayz Cruise Line



THE SOLEIL

SIX MONTHS LATER

Stepping through the Vantage Point Lounge door leading to the deck, Kennedy saw the orange ember from a cigar glowing from a shadowed hand hanging over the railing. The silhouetted figure turned when he heard the hinge squeak and, upon seeing who had come out to join him, rewarded Kennedy with a smile that gleamed in the darkness.

“The morning twilight,” his accented voice said, waving the cigar at the skyline beginning to lighten. It’s my favorite time of day. It holds the mystery of the night before, the hope of the coming morning, and the promise of new beginnings and endless possibilities.”

Kennedy’s gaze was drawn to the purplish-blue sky. The fingernail of the moon’s beam was fading with the stars that were winking out one by one. In a few minutes, the sun, about to make its grand entrance, would kiss the horizon, ushering in a new day. The tranquility held in the moment was not lost on her. While the *Helio*’s staff and crew were already bustling about for a day of disembarkation and embarkation duties, the passengers on board were still snug in their beds, clinging to the last dregs of their vacation. The reality of life, jealous and impatiently waiting at the bottom of the gangway, would welcome them home with a fierce embrace, callously pushing aside the memories of their recent carefree life, leaving behind only fleeting memories and a handful of photographs, and at four o’clock, a new group of vacationers full of the promise of sun, endless tropical drinks, and ocean breezes would board for their turn.

In addition to preparing for another cruise, this one containing the excitement of finding out who would become the first Ms. Casual Living, a small army of men and women were scheduled to board the *Helio* to complete the final round of installations of furniture and other items for the ship’s recent renovation. This focused team would work quickly and efficiently, having less than ten hours to complete their tasks and depart before embarkation began.

“I love this time as well,” Kennedy finally said, inhaling. The wafting familiar fumes of the cigar gave her a sense of security. “Until New Orleans, I allowed life to get in the way.” A half-hearted smile crossed her lips. “I was too busy running around doing my job and making sure everyone else was happy before taking the time to appreciate the small moments.”

She turned to look at the man holding the cigar, her gaze traveling from the snowy white cuffs peeking out of his tailored dark suit to his forearms resting on the metal railing as he looked out at the water. The fading moonlight’s glow highlighted the silver streaks at his temples. His calmness mirrored hers.

“But now I’m learning to make the time,” she exhaled. Her mind swam back to New Orleans. Some days, it seemed like it had only been the blink of an eye since she was there. On other days, it felt like a decade ago. The city had been a catalyst for her, helping her choose to make her favorite time of day a priority and leading her to this moment on the deck of the *Helio*.

* * * *

“So I believe I heard your door close rather late last night, and there were whispers in the hallway far too early this morning,” Mila mused and switched over to her theatrical Polish accent as she and Kennedy walked through the Soleil’s lobby. “The Mysterious Madame Mila has felt a shift in the winds.”

“Nope.” Kennedy shrugged. “Only a breeze. I was out early this morning enjoying the quiet of dawn,” she said innocently, a hint of a smirk playing at the corner of her lip. She saw one of Mila’s brown eyebrows arch while the other stayed straight. Although she had tried several times, it was a trick she could never emulate—her own brows would only go up together in solidarity.

Mila’s hands danced around an imaginary crystal ball as she walked. “Hmmm, I see you on the deck of a ship. The sun is rising, and you are standing beside a dark-haired, handsome man...suave with impeccable manners and a penchant for bourbon and cigars. I believe this man has an accent.”

“Wow, your crystal ball is better than our security cameras, and it has sound,” Kennedy retorted, stepping through the doorway and outside into the humid air.

“So, these whispers I heard,” Mila continued dramatically, “is there something you wish to share with Madame Mila?”

Kennedy didn’t reply but turned her head over her shoulder to look at Mila instead. Her slow smile and dancing eyes spoke volumes, causing her best friend’s to widen in response. Stopping in her tracks, Mila dropped her hammy tone and touched Kennedy’s forearm to stop her from moving forward. “Are you two back together? He told you everything?”

Kennedy shook her head up and down quickly. “He did. No more secrets, and,” she paused, “we might come back to New Orleans. Just the two of us.”

“That’s pretty fast,” Mila said, and Kennedy heard a note of hesitancy in her friend’s tone.

Kennedy raised her shoulders, continuing her descent to the asphalt. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

“Are we ready?” Franklin’s booming voice startled them, and they saw Bert, Rosemary, Ano, Mer, and Tony behind him. He frowned, looking around. “Where’s Ismael?”

“He grabbed a cab half an hour ago to catch his flight,” Mila answered over her shoulder. “The *Malina* begins her cruises in two weeks. I’m catching an early flight tomorrow to go back to Alaska after we see the changes to the *Helio*.”

Kennedy could hear people calling out to one another on the pier as the city slowly came to life. “It’s a shame we won’t be here long enough to explore more, but our flight leaves at one.”

“But some of us are coming back later,” Mila smirked, rolling her eyes at the others and bumping Kennedy’s hip with her own. “With someone else we all know but isn’t here right now.”

“Mila!” Kennedy said with exasperation, her eyes bugging out as color flooded her face.

Mila shrugged. “You didn’t say it was top secret, and let’s face it, everyone would have found out eventually. Franklin already told us he saw you coming out of Omar’s cabin early yesterday morning.”

“We were talking!”

“Sure you were,” Franklin chuckled.

Tony began shaking his hands in excitement, and Kennedy was suddenly engulfed between Bert and Franklin, who made a sandwich of her, forcing her to jump up and down with them. “Are you kidding me?” Tony asked with an earsplitting grin, jumping in time with them. “You two are back together?”

“I always knew it,” Rosemary said smugly, pulling her hair back to show her elephant earrings. “I’ve been wearing these since he stepped on board five months ago, and Franklin’s been throwing so many shoes over the side that there are no more left in lost and found.”

Extricating herself from the smothering hug, Kennedy stooped to retrieve her clipboard lying on the asphalt and cleared her throat. “Now, our ride to meet the carriage will pick us up in fifteen minutes on the other side of the terminal. Omar said he would call me when he finished—”

“With beignets?” Rosemary interrupted.

Kennedy nodded. “I have the promise of a fresh box for us to devour. Then we’ll return to grab our bags from the terminal and meet the vans I’ve arranged to take us to the airport. We’ll be back in Port Canaveral in time to discover what’s new on the *Helio* before indulging in a celebratory dinner with Chef Michèle and meeting the new beverage manager.”

“Do we know anything about him?” Tony asked.

“Her is all I know.” Kennedy grinned.

“Great,” Ano grumbled, “and I get to go right back to working with Monsieur Cranky Pants.”

Tony gave him a sympathetic pat on the back. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m sure he’ll have me serving and clearing between bites of food.”

Despite their weekly pestering, Alfred had been tight-lipped about the changes to the *Helio*, only telling them the new look was bold and exciting.

Franklin chuckled. “Can you imagine if they tried to do anything bold or exciting in the galley? I can just see Michèle guarding the doors, his arms crossed with a cleaver in each hand, daring anyone to enter his inner sanctum.”

“Wearing his foot-high, pristine, pleated white hat and chasing them around the kitchen with his tenderizer if they managed to breach the doors,” Tony grinned.

Ano smirked. “His nostrils flaring and screaming at them in French.”

“I wonder if fire would come out of them? I’m convinced he’s related to Godzilla,” Bert offered.

“No, that was Kennedy’s mother, remember?” Rosemary interjected.

“At least now I know what t’es chiant and dégénééré mean,” Franklin said. “And now I’ve got a few choice words to say back to our temperamental executive chef when he starts yelling at me.”

“Is that the captain?” Mila interrupted, holding her hand up to block the sun’s glare. Any evidence of the storm from the night before had been erased, replaced by a picture postcard sky.

Kennedy squinted. “Looks like he has a couple of people with him.” She rolled her eyes. “More suits.”

“Wonder what they want.” Franklin cocked his hip as he stared at the entourage coming closer.

“Loose ends, more than likely,” Kennedy said, stifling a yawn. “It’s been a parade of people in the last couple of hours.”

Minutes later, the captain, flanked by the two men, approached the curious group. “Kennedy, I’m afraid these gentlemen need to speak with you,” he said, his brow furrowed in consternation.

Dressed identically in dark pants, white button-down shirts, and navy windbreakers, the only difference between their poker faces and clothes was the color and patterns on their ties.

“To me?” Kennedy knit her eyebrows together. “I gave my formal statement last night, and our director of security is with Agent Briner this morning.” She grinned at the two men. “I’ve been promised a box of beignets for my hard work solving what happened during our cruise. Agent Briner told Mr. Meier there was a bakery near the office.”

The captain looked ill at ease. “Kennedy, let’s go inside where you can speak with these gentlemen privately.” He motioned to the boat’s entrance.

Furrows appeared across Kennedy’s forehead. “No, it’s fine.” She turned her eyes to the two men whose faces were glued to an imaginary spot across her shoulder. “How may I help you?”

* * * *

The murmur of voices floating out as the door opened and the piercing squawk of several seagulls in search of their morning feast jolted Kennedy back into the present. She felt the cold metal railing under her fingers, a stark contrast to the warmth of the hand that slid across it to take hers.

A horseshoe of people gathered behind her, their shadows etched into the wall of tinted glass behind them as rays from the first line of amber light appeared on the horizon. Kennedy heard the faintest sound of gurgling, followed by the soothing perfume of something both sweet and spicy. “Can someone give me a hand?” Luke Harris, the *Helio*’s former beverage manager, asked in a whisper, his voice barely audible over the lapping of the waves against the ship’s body.

“I will,” the accented voice said, removing his hand from Kennedy’s with a gentle squeeze. A minute later, he handed her a shot glass. The brown liquid wasn’t cold but warm between her fingers and, oddly enough, a comforting presence.

“Are we all here?” Franklin’s strangled voice asked from where he stood behind Kennedy.

A flash of memory surged through Kennedy, and she was back on the pier in New Orleans. One of the agents, a tall man whose thin body frame and horseshoe of hair reminded her of Ismaeel, finally slid his eyes over to meet hers. “Ma’am,” he cleared his throat, “we’re here about Mr. Meier.” His hazel eyes looked at her solemnly. “He never made it to Agent Briner’s office.”

Kennedy could still feel the weight of Franklin’s hand on her shoulder and Mila grabbing her fingers as the others formed a protective wall around her. “What do you mean?” Her voice sounded odd to her—high and hollow. She tried to swallow, but with her mouth suddenly dry, there was nothing to go down. “I saw him leave early this morning. He and Agent Briner had a meeting scheduled for seven o’clock...” Kennedy’s words trailed off.

The tall man looked down at his feet and then up at Kennedy. “Yes, ma’am, they did, which is how we were able to get here so quickly. Agent Briner is still at the scene.” His choice of words sounded strange to her as if he were talking about an act in a musical. She looked over his shoulder, focusing on the yellow lines tying the *Soleil* to the enormous metal cleats on the pier.

“Ma’am, Mr. Meier walked in on a robbery taking place at the bakery near Agent Briner’s office, and in trying to save the life of the clerk, Mr. Meier was fatally shot. I’m sorry for your loss.”

She turned around, her gaze lingering on the faces surrounding her, and, straightening her shoulders, Kennedy turned back to face the sun slowly creeping up—the rising yellow ball of fire now flooding the once dark sky into a kaleidoscope of oranges that faded into shades of pink and then light blue.

Picking up Omar’s father’s hand from the cool metal railing, Kennedy held it tightly, feeling the weight of their shared grief. Over the last six months, she had mourned his son—the man she loved and had hoped to start anew with. The promises of tomorrow, as well as its hopes and dreams with him, were now like the stars that had once been shining above—gone in the blink of an eye. Her memories of Omar had become like worn leather-bound books. She fingered their spines, making peace with each one, remembering the good times: his rich laughter filling the air, the way his eyes danced with mirth when he was feeling mischievous, the lint that seemed to resist the urge to land on his immaculate suits, and, she chuckled inwardly, the flashing of his eyes and grinding of his teeth when he was annoyed with her.

Kennedy raised her glass to the sun’s yellow beams. “To our friend and colleague, Omar Meier, gone but never forgotten in our hearts, may he rest in peace.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Sniffle sniffle. I'm not crying. You're crying. I just need a tissue because my allergies are acting up. That's why my eyes are all red and my nose is stuffy.

I know none of us saw this coming, and please don't hate me. I had to do it. I promise there will be a happily ever after for Kennedy, and it just might surprise you. So much so that by the end of the series, you might even reread the books to find the little clues I planted here and there.

Speaking of which, I need to get started on book six so you won't stay mad at me. Maybe I've even piqued your curiosity.

Stay tuned. Xoxo, MJ Mac.

www.mjmacauthor.com

OTHER BOOKS BY MJ MAC

[A Boat for a Goat](#)

A Kennedy Reeves Mystery Book 1

Kennedy Reeves, cruise director for the *Helio*, has been called back to work after being on land for the last year. Everything looks shipshape until the consultant hired by the corporate office arrives, and he has a very different course charted.

[A Cruise for Sous](#)

A Kennedy Reeves Mystery Book 2

Secrets and scandal are the spices of this cruise when Classic Style Network chooses the *Helio* as the location for a cut-throat cooking competition, and it's up to Kennedy to keep things from boiling over between the passengers, competitors, and a nosy writer.

[A Heist on the Ice](#)

A Kennedy Reeves Mystery Book 3

Kennedy is asked to help on a VIP cruise to Alaska, but the welcome she receives is as icy as the surrounding waters. And while Kennedy and the passengers are taking in Alaska's dazzling beauty, someone else is busy pocketing other sparkling things.

[A Sleaze on the Seas](#)

Kennedy Reeves Mystery Book 4

Q: Why won't sharks attack lawyers?

A: Professional courtesy

Have you ever had one of those horrible weeks at work? Cruise director Kennedy Reeves is in the middle of one. After an epic sail-away party, the passengers look like the walking dead the following day. Are they hungover or something more sinister? There's also an attorney conference with a very special meeting planner and a dead body in the hot tub. The lawyers haven't sued anyone in a week, and while they are enjoying the legalese cocktails (recipes included) at the pool bar, their teeth are beginning to gnash. Kick back with a Subpoena Colada and join Kennedy while she navigates the crystal blue waters of the Caribbean in a cozy cruise culinary mystery you can sink your teeth into.

A Shiver on the River
A Kennedy Reeves Mystery Book 5

Cruise Director Kennedy Reeves has her hands full. The man who disappeared from her life over a year ago is back without so much as a “How do you do?” and to top things off, he, Kennedy, and the team are sent to work on the cruise line’s newest acquisition, the *Soleil*, for a mystery writers and fan club trip down the Mississippi River with the reigning queen of mysteries, Jill Drake, and her closest competitor, Blake Duncan. But like a craftily worded mystery made to keep fans guessing until the end, there’s a skeleton hidden in plain sight—a secret that could result in murder.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Before embarking on a writing career, MJ Mac was a “Jill of all trades” in corporate America for forty years. A master juggler in her three-inch heels and lipstick, she pulled the ropes from behind the curtain to seamlessly make magic happen. In 2021, a story about a cruise director, her coworkers, and their zany passengers began formulating in her head. Then came the day she traded in the corporate world of useless meetings, meetings about meetings, high heels and suits for the sand, flip flops, and a sarong to pursue writing full-time, and five books later, she hasn’t looked back. MJ and the Hubster (her biggest supporter next to their adorable dog Elvis) are living their best life on the beach, where she spends her time plotting what drama Kennedy will find next.