

## *Kevin in the Kitchen*

“It’s not that difficult,” Beth said.

“For you, maybe,” Kevin grumbled. “You’ve been doing this since God was a child.”

With the patience of a saint, Beth had been demonstrating how to flute the edge of a piecrust. Prior to their session, Kevin had watched numerous videos on the technique and walked into the kitchen of First African Methodist Episcopal church feeling pretty cocky. Until Beth handed him a mini piecrust so small, he could hold three of them in the palm of his hand. His pile of discarded pastries far exceeded his completed pile.

“Couldn’t you give me something simpler?”

Beth continued to press the tines of a tiny fork in a crisscross pattern on the edge of one of the many piecrusts lined up in front of her. “There’s not much simpler than this.”

“If not simpler, how about bigger?” Since starting with Grand Gestures, he had spent most of his time working with the Beckett sisters on planning and overseeing events. He’d done some bartending and serving, but so far, his work in the kitchen had been limited to chopping vegetables, and he wanted to do more.

The usually soft-spoken Beth demanded perfection from her staff and would not send any food item out of her kitchen without personally inspecting and tasting it. She stepped away from the prep area to look over the event’s menu. “I think you picked the wrong day to be my assistant. The event is a tea; every item we serve will be small. Okay, hang on, how do you feel about lemon curd?”

“Spread it on a scone and it’s divine. Why?”

“Excellent.” Beth picked up an index card and handed it to him. “Here’s the recipe. All the ingredients are over there.” She waved at a counter stacked with flats of eggs and bags of lemons.

“How much am I making?”

“About a gallon.”

Kevin gathered and arranged his ingredients according to Beth’s meticulously detailed instructions. He searched out measuring cups and spoons, the zester, and a whisk and went into the pantry to choose the right size of pot to use. Working with clients to plan the perfect party for a celebration was enjoyable, and he loved seeing their satisfied smiles when an event went off perfectly. It was certainly more fun than sitting at a desk and pushing paper at Duncan Properties. He’d happily set aside his corporate wardrobe for what Jane referred to as their party uniform of black slacks and gray-button down. His fashion sense hadn’t entirely gone out the window though; today, he wore designer jeans and a snug white T-shirt under the apron he’d donned.

He grabbed a pot and returned to the kitchen in time to hear Beth's exclamation. "You've got to be kidding me!"

She stood with her hands fisted on her hips, glaring at an impeccably dressed man with his hands raised in surrender.

"I understand your frustration and apologize profusely for the late notice." The man handed Beth a folded piece of paper, saying, "Here are the specifics."

Kevin hurried over. "What's wrong?" he asked while looking at the newcomer. There was a frisson of electricity as their eyes locked and under other circumstances, Kevin would have taken the time to explore it, but now his attention was focused on his business partner.

She slumped against the counter and rubbed her temples. "They've added another table of eight, and all of them have dietary restrictions."

"Seriously?" Kevin took the paper from Beth's unresisting hand and studied it. "Organically raised produce only, no food can be touched by a metal surface, and they want to know the caloric breakdown of each item? These aren't dietary restrictions. These are demands from food snobs." He balled up the paper and tossed it onto the counter. "Hang on for a second. Let me look over the contract." He pulled out his phone and stabbed at the buttons.

Three major retailers in the city had combined forces to put on a fashion show and tea benefitting a local Autism organization. Some of the organization's members would be part of the models. The event was a huge feather in Grand Gestures' cap with a lot of moving parts, and Jane, Beth, and Kevin had put everything else on the back burner to concentrate on it.

"Ah ha! 'Attendance numbers will be locked forty-eight hours before the date of the event.'" He smiled triumphantly. He knew the contract inside out and was pretty sure adding guests with "dietary restrictions" less than twenty-four hours before the event was not included.

"Yes, but we kept one table open for just such a situation. The numbers aren't changing. You're still preparing food for the same number of guests. These guests are just ..." The man couldn't meet Kevin's eye.

"More demanding? Who are they? And who are you, by the way?"

"I'm Tommy Federov. When I called Jane to tell her about the request, she told me to come and speak with Beth directly." He smiled at Beth then turned back to Kevin. "And you are?"

"Kevin Armstrong." He accepted Tommy's extended hand. Was there a gleam in his eye? Kevin gave himself a mental headslap. Now was not the time for flirting. However, the fine-boned man had very fine features.

"Are these people important? Never mind. No one's important enough to cater to these ridiculous demands." Kevin swung his gaze from Tommy to Beth. "Can we even accommodate them?"

Beth gestured at the food spread out before her. “We’ve got vegetarian options, vegan options, and gluten-free options. Plus, everything is nut free, and we do use locally sourced organic produce.

“But there are six dishes for each person. We’d have to start from scratch because most of my utensils are metal. And then do the caloric breakdown.” She shook her head. “We just don’t have the time for that.”

“You might not, but I do.” Tommy crossed his arms and cocked a hip.

Beth and Kevin gaped at each other and then at Tommy. He removed his jacket and hung it on a hook on the back of the door. Rolling up his sleeves, he said, “I’ve got tons of experience working in a catering kitchen and the time to do the math. You have the ingredients, and I’m assuming I can find utensils and baking pans that are non-metallic?” At Beth’s nod, he continued, “Instead of doing individual quiches, I’ll make two big ones in glass pie plates. I’ll inform the guests that an extra chef will be hired exclusively for their table. Then I’ll name a ridiculous price to satisfy their ridiculous demands. Sound good?”

“How ridiculous?” asked Beth.

Kevin sucked in a breath at the amount. “And that money would go to the Autism organization?” “Yep.” Tommy popped the P. “Shall I call the table host?”

Beth held up a hand. “Just to confirm. You would do all the prep work and the cooking, make up the platters for the table and do the calorie count?”

“I’ll even pull out my calligraphy pen to handwrite the numbers on a menu card.”

“You’re willing to go through an awful lot of work when you can simply find a polite way to say hell-no to these idiots,” Kevin said.

“True.” Tommy bobbed his head from side to side. “But this gives me an excuse to turn off my phone for a few hours and earn a hefty donation for my organization.”

“Your organization?” Beth looked up from pulling out recipe cards from her stack of paperwork.

“I’m on the board. I have an autistic brother, and this organization was a Godsend to my parents when he was younger. So am I making that phone call?”

“Go for it,” Kevin said. He turned to Beth when Tommy walked a few feet away to make the call. “Is this something that normally happens?”

Beth laughed. “We’ve certainly had our fair share of stupid requests. But that’s not my department. Jane usually takes care of them. I’m surprised she didn’t do so today.”

As a smiling Tommy walked toward them, Kevin murmured, “I’m glad she didn’t.”

