

A LOVE IN THE SPOTLIGHT NOVEL

the
NATURE

of

LOVE



Toni Shiloh

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To the Author and Finisher of my faith.

One

Drilling a hole in the middle of a person's femur was my least favorite thing to do. Not because I wasn't capable. Technology had made a way for me to drill a precise hole exactly where I needed to insert a metal rod and screws to repair the midshaft femoral break. However, I couldn't do anything to stop the intense pain this sweet woman would feel when she woke up. A broken femur was one of the hardest injuries to overcome. Couple that with the woman's occupation—an Olympic ski jumper—and she'd have an uphill battle.

I would do everything in my power to ensure she'd return to the slopes.

"Ready for the rod," I murmured, now that the sound of the drill had stopped overtaking the classical music floating through the operating room speakers.

I'd been listening to classical composers in the OR since the very first time I'd scrubbed in on a surgery. One of my med school professors had insisted that listening to the music while learning would guarantee a good grade. I played it while studying, when learning new procedures, and in the operating room. Classical music represented my career. On

the other hand, my at-home playlist consisted of '70s music that would help me unwind from the long day of surgeries.

“Rod,” the second-year student replied.

I slid the rod right down the middle of the femur and into the broken piece. Next, I inserted the screws to ensure a close bond to allow the healing process to begin. I gestured for the fourth-year resident to suture the incision. “Close up, Dr. Bryner.”

“Yes, Dr. Kennedy.”

I walked out of the operating room, breathing a sigh of relief that nothing had gone wrong. Besides working here, I was on call at the nation’s Olympic sports injury clinic up in Vail, so I’d done this procedure multiple times before. But I still couldn’t perform one of these surgeries without my gut twisting like a gymnast during a floor routine.

I removed my surgical gown, placing it into the dirty bin, then washed up before heading into the hall. A glance at my smartwatch told me I’d have about thirty minutes to look at my email and answer any phone calls that were urgent before I clocked out.

Today had been a good day.

“Have a good evening, Dr. Kennedy,” Nurse Jones said as she passed me.

“You too.” My throat constricted.

Whenever I interacted with my colleagues, my mouth dried out. My throat seemed to get tighter as my mind grappled for words. What should I say to them? Did they expect more than simple small talk? I’d heard whispers behind my back. Most of my colleagues found me stuck up and abrasive. Just because I didn’t share what I did on the weekend or gossip about the other hospital workers didn’t mean that I was silently judging them.

I simply had no idea how to respond.

You’d think a world-class doctor would be able to navigate

the basics of small talk, but I didn't earn my accolades by making friends. No, I obtained my status by working my tail off until the only person I knew, *really* knew, was my baby sister. And even that relationship had changed. Not that we were at odds, but she'd built a life separate from me. One that I had to get weekly phone call updates on because she lived in Kentucky, and I was happy in Colorado.

Or at least satisfied.

After making the last follow-up call of the day, I turned off my office computer, grabbed my purse, and headed to the employee parking lot. I'd already changed from scrubs into jeans and a sweater. My peacoat would give added protection against the cold temps October had brought. Though the calendar said fall, the freshly fallen snow spoke of something else. Regardless, I was here for it.

I started my white Range Rover, inhaling the scent of the leather seats. Turning on the seat warmer, I took a moment to settle in, letting the weight of today's surgeries fall from me. Now wasn't the time to analyze what had gone right or wrong, but to simply empty my mind.

My stomach rumbled, and I glanced at the dashboard. 6:07 *p.m.* Time for some dinner. I was ravenous and knew just the place to grab a bite.

Colorado Springs could be walkable, depending on where you lived. It just so happened that my work (Peak University Hospital), my home (right on West Pikes Peak Avenue in Old Colorado City), and food (a stop at Skirted Heifer was a must) were all within four miles of each other. I could be at the hospital in a jiffy by car, but on my off days a car wasn't necessary unless I wanted to stay warm.

I slid into an empty parking spot, then climbed out of my Rover. A cool breeze fluttered the trees, and I peered up into the clear sky. The sky was making its way to sunset, but I

didn't care that I'd missed the sunshine by being in the OR all day. It was enough to feel the breeze on my face and know I had a show to binge when I got home.

I made my way to the front door just as a man reached for the handle. I paused, and he stared at me, a hesitant look on his handsome face.

"Um, would you like to go in first?" he asked in a smooth tenor.

For some reason, the question made tiny goose bumps pebble my arms. Was it the thoughtful request or the tone of his voice?

"If you don't mind."

"Please." He gestured me forward.

I walked ahead of him, conscious of his stare behind me. *Don't be ridiculous. He's not staring.* But I wanted to.

I wanted to turn around and stare at his warm blue eyes once more. I'd never seen a Black man with eyes that particular shade, unless you counted the movie star Michael Ealy. Now that I thought of it, the guy behind me had similar features, but he was more handsome in my opinion.

Erykah, what's gotten into you?

I didn't stare at men. I didn't note their voices or their eye color, and I certainly didn't try to talk to them. I was the woman who couldn't carry a conversation in a bucket.

Ignoring his presence, I placed my order for a naked heifer, adding my favorite toppings—this girl couldn't live without bacon, guac, and pepper jack on her burger—and requested a side of fries with their handcrafted soda.

I moved on, finding a spot to wait in the dining area. A spot that earned me a portrait view of the man's face. His beard was on the scraggly side, as if he'd just come down from camping in the mountains and enjoying all that Colorado had to offer. Or maybe that was his style.

He wore a black beanie and black-frame glasses. He looked studious but masculine at the same time. I watched as he placed his order and then scanned the area as if searching for someone. Shock coursed through me when his gaze landed on mine. A small smile lifted his full lips, and he walked to my table.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hello.” I straightened in my seat.

“May I sit for a moment?”

I nodded, not sure what else to do.

“So I don’t normally do this.”

“Order food?”

He chuckled. “Sit at a stranger’s table.”

“Then why mine?” I winced inwardly. Had that sounded rude?

“Because you ordered your burger just like I order mine.”

Okay, a little surprising but considering the odds—not that I knew them—not totally stunning. “And that made you want to sit here?”

“It made me want to introduce myself.”

“Fair enough.” I held out my hand. “Erykah Kennedy.”

“Christian Gamble, but my friends call me Chris.”

“Nice to meet you, Christian.”

His eyes twinkled. I wasn’t sure if I’d said something funny, or if he was just one of those happy guys.

“What do you do, Erykah?”

I swallowed. *Here it goes.* When I’d encountered similar lines of questioning with men in the past, they often got defensive when I said I was a surgeon. Or they treated me as if it was so cute I tried to be more than just a homemaker.

My shoulders tensed. “I’m an orthopedic surgeon.” My breath caught in my chest as I waited for his reaction.

He let out a low whistle. “So you’re unbelievably smart and talented.”

“Uh . . .” Why were my cheeks heating? “I am.” It was the one thing in life I was sure about. The rest was freestyling. Remembering niceties, I replied, “What do you do?”

“Official title: wildlife conservationist.”

“Unofficial?” I asked, curiosity piqued.

“Animal wrangler.”

My lips curved upward. “What kinds of animals?”

“Whichever are in-house.”

“Erykah,” an employee called out.

“Oh, um, my order’s ready.”

“I hope you enjoy that burger,” Christian said.

“You too.” I stood, fidgeting with my purse strap. Was I supposed to say anything more? Invite him to dine with me even though I had placed a to-go order?

I opened my mouth, then promptly shut it and headed for the counter. Sitting at my table didn’t mean anything. I’d go home, eat my dinner, and watch another episode of *Nadiya Bakes*. Her accent soothed me, and in another life, I imagined myself baking everything she did.

As I grabbed my food, I glanced over at Christian Gamble one last time, marking every single feature of his face in my mind. A sigh tore from my lips as I pushed the door open and headed to my car.

Erykah Kennedy, you are a coward.