

THE SECOND MRS. STROM

By Kaira Rouda

Chapter One

Paris, 9:30 p.m.

Paul

There she is, the Iron Lady, the sparkling centerpiece of Paris, the Eiffel Tower. She makes my heart flutter with excitement, or maybe it's the anticipation of the evening ahead. I turn toward my date, my beautiful young wife, Cecilia, to be sure she's sharing my enthusiasm. I want this night to be the best night ever.

"That's our pillar, Pilier Est," I say, pointing to the base of the tower. The structure is held erect by four such pillars, but only one, the east entrance, is for those with dinner reservations up above. "VIP for us, darling."

"How special," she says. She's wearing a red dress that complements her figure, and a big smile. Her blonde hair sparkles in the twinkling lights of the tower like fireworks on the Fourth of July. She squeezes my hand as a huge group of tourists descend on us like a swarm of flies.

"Shoo," I say, walking through the middle of the group, using my elbows when I need to. We have places to be. These people are just aimlessly milling about, headphones in, listening to their tour guide, clueless. I have half a mind to confront their tour leader, the one holding the red flag and clogging up my passage.

We finally plow through the last of the heedless, drifting tourists and reach the restaurant's check-in center. I've read all about Madame Brasserie, the elegant setting, the panoramic views of the city from the first floor of the tower, 190 feet up. Everything on the menu is supposed to be amazing, created by a famous chef. But with my sensitivity to the food over here, well, we'll see if I can enjoy my meal. I pull out the email I printed before we left home and hand it to the woman behind the reception desk.

"*Bonsoir*. Welcome," she says as she examines my paperwork. She's elegant, VIP, just like us. Her very demeanor makes me glad I chose this spot for our final evening.

"Paul, they need to have you empty your pockets so we can go through security," Cecilia says slightly impatiently, as if she has said it before, and perhaps she has.

I smile and toss my pocket contents into the plastic dish next to Cecilia's. Her phone is face up. Evan Dorsey is calling and his photo pops onto my wife's screen: his smug, too-white smile, his rippling blond hair, his plastic-surgery-perfect nose. He looks like every other actor wannabe in

LA, truth be told. How unacceptable for him to bother us tonight. Cecilia is ahead of me, already through the metal detector. I grab her phone, answer it.

“Stop calling my wife on our last evening in Paris for our anniversary,” I say. “Do you not have any manners?”

“Paul, is that you? I need to speak with Cecilia,” Evan says. I hang up on him. I imagine his snooty face, pinched with self-importance, as he rushes around some event venue in Miami Beach, acting like he’s somebody, much like he does when he’s catering events at our home in Malibu. He has quite an air about him, but he’s not an heir. Ha. He’s a servant. He serves food to important people. There is quite a difference in the hierarchy of life, as you no doubt understand. There are the servers, and the servees. My wife will not be a server.

“Monsieur, s’il vous plaît?” The security guard is motioning for me to walk through. I toss Cecilia’s phone back into the bucket. As I go through the security scanner, I notice Cecilia waiting on the other side, hand on hip.

She won’t be pleased about my little phone chat with Evan. I’m certain of that.

“Paul, do not answer my phone,” Cecilia says with an edge to her voice as she grabs her phone out of the security tray. “Did you speak to Evan?”

“Just trying to help,” I say, enchanted by the view from under the tower. “Wow, look up at that beautiful sight.”

Cecilia can’t help but follow my gaze. The tower is enchanting, despite the throngs.

“It is lovely, Paul, but I’m not sure I can handle going up there. I’m afraid of heights,” Cecilia says.

A ping of anger throbs at my temples. She will not ruin my plans. “Darling, you’ve never told me that before. But not to worry, the restaurant is on the first platform. You’ll be fine. After dinner, we’ll head to the top. Once you’ve gotten acclimated.”

Cecilia’s face scrunches as she looks up at the tower. “We’ll see.”

Yes, we will. She’ll do exactly as I’ve planned. No more taking phone calls from random men, no more spending money without my permission, no more oppositional behavior. We’re celebrating our first anniversary, not our twentieth. Life should be good, and easy. We are in Paris, for heaven’s sake. But you know what they say, vacations won’t help you escape your problems, especially not if you bring them along with you. I look at Cecilia and I wonder what she’s thinking.

“Ok, I’ll try it. But just up to the restaurant. No higher,” she says.

I chuckle. "Sure," I say to appease her, and wrap my arm around her waist to escort her to the elevator.

But I'm lying. We will go to the top of the tower tonight. It's part of the plan.