

Unedited excerpt from *The First Move* by Jennifer Lohmann

“They love each other so much. Isn’t it beautiful?”

The Ex. Renia knew it was him before she turned around. It wasn’t her photographic sixth sense, but some pull on her emotions when he started talking.

“It is. Is it hard to be here?” Normally she wouldn’t discuss the couple with a guest, but he’d asked her first.

His mouth curved up and he looked like he was about to shift his weight from foot to foot when something glued him to the floor. He didn’t smile, but he didn’t scowl either. She wasn’t sure what the expression on his face meant. “I suppose you must be used to emotion at a wedding.”

She turned back to the room, ignoring his non-answer. How he felt about Cathy and Richard wasn’t her business anyway. “They aren’t always this perfect.”

An unfortunate side effect of her career was that Renia no longer believed in the magic of weddings. She still believed in love, but not the perfect white dress and dance with dad that made all the guests cry.

“No?” The Ex raised an eyebrow. “And what are they always like?”

“Oh, I’ve seen a drunk priest or two.”

His short laugh indicated he knew her answer was a blow-off. She’d been to weddings where the brides were crying as their mothers talked them into a marriage when they should have mimicked a white dove, flying for freedom outside the church instead of caging themselves with the man standing at the altar. There had also been several nearly-puking-with-nerve grooms, too many creepy uncles to count, and one memorable wedding with a lipstick-stained wedding dress the bride wore down the aisle. She didn’t tell those stories because one didn’t stay in the wedding business by spreading stories to guests.

“Any good Bridezilla stories?” the Ex asked.

“Not that I share with strangers.”

“Strangers?” Her head snapped back to face him at his wry tone. The corner of the Ex’s mouth was cocked up and he’d raised an eyebrow at her. She didn’t know what the little noise he made in the back of his throat was about. “Well then, I’m Miles Brislenn.”

“I’m working.” She ignored his outstretched hand.

“No time for a dance?”

What was it with this family and trying to treat her like a guest at the wedding? “Still working.” Renia smiled because this was a wedding, she was the paid help, and he was the guest. Her job was to capture beautiful moments on camera, even if she had to force them. Someone else was responsible for making sure Ex behaved.

“Cathy won’t mind,” he insisted.

“But I will.”

“Mind dancing with me? You don’t know me well enough to know if you’d mind dancing with me.”

There was that mocking half-smile again. She didn’t think he was mocking her, but laughing at a joke where the punch line involved him. A joke she didn’t know.

“Cathy wouldn’t mind. In fact, I think she’d even encourage it, but that doesn’t mean I will. She’s paying me to take pictures, not dance.”

For the first time since she’d taken his picture before the ceremony, the Ex looked serious. With his boyish, teasing smile purged from his face, his intensity unnerved her.

He looked at her like he could tunnel into her life and excavate her secrets. With no more secrets rammed inside, what would keep her back straight?

“You’re right. Cathy is getting the wedding she deserved. The wedding I denied her. No matter how happy she would be to see you dancing, to see me dancing, I wouldn’t want her wedding album to be anything short of perfect because I asked you to dance.”

“I’ll get back to taking pictures again.” She needed to be away from him and the prickly awareness she felt in his presence.

“So this entire time while you were putting me off with ‘still working,’ you were lying?”

That maddening smile was back and only a flashing neon sign emblazoned with ten thousand dollars kept her from swinging her camera at him and knocking out teeth. Retreat was the better part of sanity, her pocketbook and reputation.

“Wait.” He grabbed her arm with a warm, firm grip. “Do you do photography besides weddings?”

She stared at his hand, but it refused to catch fire. He didn’t give any indication he felt the burn at all.

“Yes.” She wasn’t stupid enough to turn down business. Again with that pocketbook. “If you’re interested, send me an email or come to my studio. I’m working here. For your ex-wife.”

He didn’t let go, even when she pulled. “Monday.”

“I won’t be in.” She yanked harder this time, but his fingers were some type of bizarre Chinese finger trap.

“Vacation?”

She raised an eyebrow at his hand still holding onto her arm. “None of your business.”

“More information you don’t share with strangers,” he said, the mocking now in his voice, instead of his smile.

Renia contemplated her options. Everyone was too busy admiring the bride and groom to see what she did. “Do I know you?”

He sighed. “No, Rey, you never knew me.”

She wrenched her arm again and, when he let go, she had to take a step back to keep her balance. “Then I don’t expect to talk with you again unless you have business with my studio.”

It wasn’t until later than night, when she was curled up on her couch reading, that she realized he’d called her “Rey,” a name she’d not gone by since high school. Even her family rarely called her that.

The Ex might not need to ferret out her secrets. He might already know them.