

# MS. BITCH- THE PREQUEL



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## BEFORE



Today was *the* day. The day she'd never spent too much time dreaming about, but had always assumed she'd partake in at least once in her life.

Tess rolled over in the hotel bed, the sheet soft and cool against her skin, and propped herself on her elbow to study her fiancé's face. At thirty, Gabe Campbell was handsome in a guy-next-door kind of way, with soulful eyes, a quirky smile, and was the life of every party. Tess had been drawn into his gravitational force since the moment she'd met him, and he'd decided she was going to be his next girlfriend. It had happened so quickly – from single to living together – that Tess had barely had time to think. She loved it, though. It was nice to be the center of someone's universe.

For once she hadn't felt so alone.

"Hey babe," Gabe said, blinking awake with a smile at her touch. "We're getting married today."

"That we are," Tess said, smiling down at him, though her stomach twisted. Just nerves, she told herself. Getting

married in New Orleans had been something they'd looked forward to for months now and was a destination wedding dream-come-true for the both of them.

When they'd come to New Orleans together three years ago, it had been their first trip together as a couple. Tess had a deep love for travel, and was slowly introducing Gabe to her passion for exploring new places. Never one for expanding much outside his comfort zone, Gabe had stuck to trips to his family cabin in the northern woods of Wisconsin, or an occasional road trip to see one of his favorite bands play. He'd never even been on a plane, something which had surprised Tess when he'd first told her. She'd held his hand as the plane touched down on the runway, soothing the nervous tapping of his knee against hers.

Gabe's eyes had lit up when he'd first stepped into the French Quarter where music and mayhem called to him. He'd loved the messiness of it all, as the French Quarter didn't try to be pretentious. Instead, like a sultry burlesque dancer, the city put her wares on display and insisted that people take her as she was. And take her, they did. Gabe and Tess had stormed the French Quarter, eating and drinking their way through the town, and reveling in all the secrets the city had to share. From ghost tours, steamboat rides, to tiny jazz bands tucked into tiny jazz bars, they tried it all. It had been a perfect weekend – silly and fun and decadent – and they'd come home even more excited to plan their next trip.

From that weekend forward, Tess had begun to look to a future with Gabe. Sure, they had their moments – what couple didn't – but she thought they'd be able to figure out

their problems and take on the world together. And really, just because Gabe had never met a bar he didn't like, didn't mean his drinking was all that bad. They lived in a state known for corner bars and long cold winters where there wasn't much else to do but have a few cocktails.

When he'd gotten down on one knee and proposed, Tess had said yes, *of course* she would marry him. And now the day had finally come, one which they'd planned with giddy expectation for months now.

That's all it was – just nerves – Tess thought. She studied her soon-to-be husband. Neither of them particularly enjoyed being the center of attention, and yet they'd ended up having one hundred people RSVP to their destination wedding. This whole week she'd been managing last-minute details all while traveling and trying to stay organized.

"I'm just going to shower and then off to meet my brothers," Gabe said, striding naked from the bed to the bathroom. "I have to be out of here by when?"

"Um, what time is it now?"

"It's seven-thirty."

"Hair and make-up is coming at eight."

"Why so early?"

"They are doing all the girls and some family. They just need time."

"Guess I'll just hit up a bar with my brothers then."

Tess opened her mouth to say something and then shut it, closing her eyes for a moment and taking a deep breath. Rolling from the bed she began to put the room to order, making sure that the lavish suite would be suitable for her friends that would be joining her to get ready.

"Today is going to be so much fun," Tess said, when Gabe came out wrapped in a towel, "I can't wait for the second line."

"I know! Our own parade! It's going to be badass." Gabe did a little shimmy across the hotel room to the closet and pulled out his clothes. "None of our friends back home have had a wedding like this. Ours is going to be one everyone talks about for ages." Gabe loved nothing more than being better than other people.

"Well, it's New Orleans. It's going to be a fun weekend no matter what. But to give everyone a chance to be in a parade? Yeah, that's pretty damn cool."

"It would have been better if we hadn't had to put up with all the hassle that came with planning it. Especially from Vicki," Gabe said, referring to her sister. Tess wondered what hassle he'd dealt with, as he literally only had to pick up his tux and show up at the wedding day. Vicki had told Gabe that wedding planning was a woman's job, and he'd taken that and run with it. Frankly all Gabe cared about was having a big party and making sure *their* wedding was the best. Vicki had been the one to complain about all the details.

Not to mention she didn't want Tess to marry Gabe.

"I think that's probably just normal with planning weddings. Everyone wants a say." Tess shrugged.

"Well, she certainly had hers. Hopefully she'll back off now," Gabe shrugged as he zipped up his suit bag and walked across the room. Sliding his lips over hers, he held her close for a moment. "Next time I see you, you'll be Mrs. Campbell."

"Eeek! Crazy." Tess laughed and waved goodbye to

him, her stomach flipping in knots. Whether it was nervousness over being the center of attention or because she was actually getting married, she wasn't feeling that well. Finding Advil, Tess took it with a cup of coffee while she stared out the window at the street below. By the time the knock sounded on the door – Tess was ready to face the day.

Voices crashed through the room and in moments it was a blur of faces, chatter, and platters of food arriving. Soon enough, the makeup girls had set up stations and Tess waited patiently for her turn. She was going last, so as not to mess her makeup up, and now she sat quietly in the corner of the couch.

“I'm leaving after this,” Vicki said, ducking her head and glaring at the hair stylist who was wielding a bobby pin in the air.

“Why?” Tess wondered. Vicki, her only family in the room, was meant to spend the day helping her get ready.

“Your aunt is throwing a brunch for everyone, so I'm going to go,” Vicki said, standing and patting the simple chic French twist the stylist had tucked her blonde hair into. “I'll see you at the hotel for pictures.”

“Oh, well, okay. Tell everyone I said hello,” Tess said to Vicki's back as she retreated through the door. Mae, her maid-of-honor met her eyes across the room and shook her head in annoyance.

Tess rolled her eyes and then smiled at Mae who came to crouch by her side.

“Hey, are you okay? You're pretty quiet today.”

“Yeah, I'm fine I guess. I just have an upset stomach. Must be nerves.”

“Are you nervous about getting married or just the day?”

“I think just the day. Being the center of attention. I don’t know. I’m sure that’s all it is. A lot of planning all coming to a head.”

“If you want to call it off, you can, you know.” Mae’s eyes were serious in her pretty face.

“Mae! No, I don’t. God, could you imagine? He already had a meltdown when I pretended to call it off at the airport.”

As a joke, Tess had pulled Gabe aside before they checked in for their flight and told him she couldn’t marry him. She’d done it only to distract him from his cousin – who had previously been unable to attend their wedding – sneaking up behind him in the airport as a surprise. She hadn’t expected the sheer terror on Gabe’s face, nor the fact that he would sweat completely through his jacket. Obviously, the man loved her.

And wasn’t that just what she needed? Tess had been looking for someone to love her – to start a family with – for years. Ever since she’d lost her parents, it felt like she had an aching void in her life that she hadn’t known how to fill. Until Gabe came along with his constant attention and charming words. It had been kind of like being run over with a steamroller, and since that time he’d consumed her life.

“Tess, are you ready?” The makeup artist called to her and Tess turned to Mae.

“Yes, I’m ready.”

The day flashed by in a blur of moments. She met Gabe for their first look on the rooftop balcony of the hotel



overlooking New Orleans. The photographer had followed them up there to capture the moment, but all Tess had eyes for was Gabe.

He climbed the stairs to the balcony and when his eyes found her, waiting in her wedding dress, her hair done *just so* – her heart fell when a grimace crossed his face. He must have seen it in her look, because he quickly grinned widely at her and strode across the roof-deck to hug her close.

“You don’t like the dress,” Tess whispered in his ear.

“It wasn’t something I expected you to choose,” Gabe admitted, before pulling back and smiling widely at the photographer. Tess glanced down at her dress. Maybe he was right. At the time, she’d thought the white satin V-neck gown with sequins at the waist and antique sequin detailing down the back would fit the vibe of New Orleans. Now, she realized she’d missed the mark and should have chosen something more her. Biting back her disappointment, she smiled for the camera as Gabe pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“Don’t worry, babe, you look lovely. Really,” Gabe promised, “You didn’t say anything about how I look.”

Conscious of the photographer, Tess stepped back and looked Gabe up and down before letting out a long wolf whistle. His delighted grin said it all and he pushed his shoulders back for the photographer. Ever aware of his looks, Gabe posed with confidence as Tess mustered up the courage to walk out in front of a crowd in a dress her soon-to-be husband clearly didn’t like.

The first look pictures complete, they met up with their bridal party who sent up cheers when they arrived in the

gleaming lobby. Champagne was popped, and Tess gratefully accept her glass of liquid courage, the bubbles pinging their way down her throat to her knotted stomach. The group cheerfully wound their way through the quarter, taking pictures as they went, until they landed at the hotel where Tess and Gabe would marry in an outdoor courtyard.

Time stood still, as Gabe left her. Music swelled, and everyone began their walk. Mae turned and shot Tess a questioning look. Tess shook her head no, and then yes, and then pasted the brightest smile she could muster on her face. Deciding to believe her, Mae looked forward and made her way down the aisle on the arm of Gabe's brother. Thirty minutes later, she'd vowed before everyone to trust, honor, and love the man who stood before her. The moment slowed, as she looked into his eyes, and every ounce of Tess willed this marriage to work.

At the very least, to prove Vicki wrong.

Despite her misgivings, Tess laughed as one of New Orleans's best brass bands struck a raucous celebratory tune as they spilled out onto Bourbon Street. Following the band, the wedding party led their guests in a parade that stopped time. Second line parades were a notorious New Orleans's tradition, and the music from the band had people running out from the restaurants and stores to cheer. Finally, Tess felt the tension that that had plagued her all day ease. She laughed, twisting her parasol high in the air, and danced down the street holding Gabe's hand.

"As I give you my hand to hold, so I give you my life to keep."

The vow flashed through her mind as Gabe grabbed

her and twirled so that her dress fanned out around her. Surprising her, he dipped Tess in the street and kissed her to the onlookers' cheers.

This was the man she loved. Certain that this was the start of their new life, Tess kissed him back, hopeful that the best was yet to come.



# MS. BITCH



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*Believe it or not  
I made up a few things  
And there's some I forgot  
But the life and the telling  
Are both real to me  
And they run like the rain  
All the way to the sea...  
– Jimmy Buffett*

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