



BY FRANCES
MENSAH WILLIAMS

Lucky Ship

This was going to be a momentous day. Mia had important news, and Lee had plans too...

The oven timer pinged. Mia carefully removed the salmon fillets from the oven and took a deep breath, trying to contain her almost unbearable excitement. The potatoes, browned and crisped to perfection, nestled under their tin foil blanket, while sprigs of lightly seasoned broccoli stood ready for a quick toss in hot oil.

“Lee! Dinner’s almost ready!”

Calling from the bottom of the stairs, she tried to keep her tone light. Lee was quick to take offence if he thought she sounded... what did he call it? Oh, yes, hectoring. She didn’t want him annoyed tonight. Not when she’d splashed out on this expensive meal and had incredible news to share.

“I’ll be down in a minute!”

He sounded impatient, but at least he was on his way. Mia touched the slip of paper in her jeans pocket for reassurance before skipping back to the kitchen to start on the broccoli.

Singing along to the Whitney Houston track playing on the radio, Mia tried to focus on the vegetables. Lee liked his broccoli to have some bite and would be irritated if she let them get too soft.

Remind me again why you want to marry this man? She stirred the food and ignored the caustic voice in her head.

The sound of thundering footsteps on the stairs sent Mia’s already racing heart into overdrive. How would he take the news? she wondered, pushing an errant black braid behind her ear with agitated fingers.

Lee strolled in as she was scooping the sautéed broccoli onto plates, and she glanced up with a smile. He was tall, the outlines of his muscular physique clearly visible under the navy polo shirt and loose tracksuit bottoms. Fresh from his shower, she could almost taste the lemon of his cologne.

Even after seven years together, Mia struggled to believe that Lee had chosen her. Not that she was bad looking, exactly. Average height, brown skin, wide dark eyes, and a curvy body which, he claimed, had instantly attracted his attention. But there was no denying that Lee’s sculpted

tawny features, twinkling hazel eyes, perfect white-toothpaste smile, and gym-honed body put him in another league altogether. *And doesn’t he know it!*

“Something smells good!” The impatient tone now sounded genial. “Table set, is it?”

Mia nodded, wondering why he bothered asking when neither of them remembered the last time he had laid the table. But, too elated to comment, she smiled and picked up the plates of food.

“All set, hon. Can you bring the roast potatoes through?”

The crockery jostled for space on the small dining table next to the bay window in their front room. Between Mia’s meagre salary and Lee’s erratic income as a freelance contractor, finding the money for a bigger place had so far proved impossible. Paying her share of the rent for their tiny cottage left just enough to cover her transport into work and the food shopping. Although Lee paid the rapidly rising energy bills, between his gym fees and the string of failed business deals he continually speculated on, they barely scraped by.

“Have some faith, Mia. This time my lucky ship will come in. Once this deal goes through...”

But that was then, Mia reminded herself happily, as she took her seat. She’d dreamed of this day for years. *Things will have to change now.*

Impatient for Lee to finish his food, Mia shifted restlessly in her chair. The paper was burning a hole in her pocket, and she stroked her tummy gently, suddenly nauseous from anticipation.

OK, Mia, it’s time. She inhaled deeply, but Lee jumped in before she could speak.

“Erm, look, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you...” His voice tailed off with uncharacteristic uncertainty, and Mia frowned.

“What is it?”

“Soo... the thing is, I need you to take out a loan.”

She stared at him blankly. “A loan?”

“Yeah.” The look of naked pleading in his eyes would put a spaniel to shame.

“Why would I need a loan?”

Lee shrugged. “Simon and his cousin have cut me in on a deal, and I promised I’d get my share to them by the end of the month. I just need five grand.”

“Five thousand pounds! I’m lucky if I’ve got five pounds left at the end of the month! You promised you’d stop doing these deals! You agreed we’d save every spare penny so we can get married and—”

“Give it a rest, Mia!” He cut her short, the pleading look now a hard stare that made it clear they both knew who was boss. “We’ve been together for seven bloody years! What’s the big deal about a wedding? Living together is exactly the same as being married!”

Mia felt the tears burning through from the back of her eyes to spill down her cheeks, and she flinched as Lee pounded his fist on the table.

“Why are you crying? Look, it’s just a loan and this deal’s a sure bet.”

“How many times have I heard that before?” she sniffed, refusing to drop her gaze when he frowned at her tone.

She didn’t care any more if she sounded hectoring. Lee was ruining the evening she had so carefully planned by making it crystal clear that he had no interest in what mattered to her.

She couldn’t bear another Christmas with Mum’s references to buying a hat or Uncle Lloyd bellowing, after one glass of rum too many, “When’s that boy going to make an honest woman out of you?”

But this wasn’t just about Mum or her tactless relatives. She wanted marriage and children. Tonight’s news was meant to be the start of a new life for them.

Lee must have remembered that he needed her help because his tone unexpectedly softened.



“Babe, I’d take the loan out myself but my credit’s shot and—”

“I know,” she muttered bitterly. Wasn’t she the one who dealt with phone calls from creditors and demanding bailiffs, negotiating repayment schedules with money they didn’t have while Lee swore yet again that this would be the last time?

“Have some faith, Mia. This time my lucky ship will come in. Once this deal goes through, I’ll be making at least ten times what I put in.”

Lee obviously had no qualms about ruining her credit since they both knew he’d never make that money back, thought Mia. The crumpled slip in her pocket burned against her thigh, and she bit her lips hard to seal the words bursting to escape.

No, Mia, don’t say it. Think!

She took a deep breath. “If I get you the money, will you promise we can get married and have a baby like we’ve talked about?”

Lee looked at her for a long moment and then grinned, his expression transforming chameleon-like from truculent to seductive.

“Yeah, of course, babe. I promise.” His even, perfect white teeth sparkled, and when he leaned across the small space between them to kiss her cheek, the lemony scent of his cologne filled her nostrils. He raised a questioning eyebrow as Mia, for once not melting at this demonstration of affection, stared back.

“I mean it, Mia. You know I’m not

bothered about getting married but if that’s what you want, then—” he shrugged in resignation — “fair enough. Once the deal goes through, we can go down the registry or whatever.” He hesitated. “But let’s give the whole kids thing a couple more years, yeah? Once my lucky ship comes in...”

She let the familiar refrain wash over her and then scrutinised his confidently smug expression. She had no trouble reading his mind. *Good old Mia, she’ll do whatever I want.*

Picking up her discarded fork, she prodded the dried stem of broccoli on her plate. Her earlier excitement had vanished, and now all she felt was tired. Tired of waiting for Lee’s lucky ship, tired of handling the fallout from his endless get-rich-quick schemes, of sacrificing her money instead of joining the girls for Friday evening drinks or even buying herself a decent lipstick.

She was tired of putting her dreams on hold, and tired of Lee’s broken promises. Most of all... she was tired of Lee.

The realisation hit her with a jolt of such intense clarity that she almost gasped aloud. Lee would never really be ready for the responsibility of marriage and family life, and now Mia knew beyond a shadow of doubt that it was over. Deep down, she’d known for ages, but had been too scared to face the truth.

But now, knowing what lay in store, the fear evaporated, and she felt a surge of strength crackle along the length of her spine. *You’ll be fine, Mia.*

She pushed her chair back and stood up to carry the plates to the kitchen, marvelling at how calmly she was reacting to the prospect of life without Lee. Seven years was a long time, but she was only thirty-two and it was never too late to start afresh, was it? Especially now.

Lee was still in the living room, and she could hear his deep voice punctuated by his unselfconsciously booming laugh. No doubt on the phone to Simon to say he’d sorted out the money for the deal.

Mia shook her head and scraped the food scraps into the bin before dumping the plates in the sink. She gazed out at the patch of overgrown lawn Lee had promised to mow two weeks ago.

It doesn’t matter now.


Turning, Mia leaned against the sink and slipped a hand into her pocket to extract the slip of paper. She stared at it, once again feeling the elation from earlier that day when she’d finally sat down to check the numbers on her one indulgence — her weekly lottery ticket.

In a flash, Lee’s words echoed through her mind. *Living together is exactly the same as being married!*

Mia smiled. *No, Lee, it really isn’t. Since we’re not married, I don’t owe you a single penny of this!*

But, she decided, she would give Lee his five thousand pounds. After all, they had been together for seven years and it would make only the tiniest dent in her ten-million-pound winnings.

What was that proverb she’d once read? *When your ship comes in, make sure you’re not at the airport.* Well, Lee would have to keep waiting for his lucky ship; he’d missed the boat on this one.

And she — Mia’s smile widened. She had a new life to start. 

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